

THE STORIES OF ABRAHAM

BRIEF BIBLE STUDIES

by

W. E. McCumber

THE ABRAHAM NARRATIVES—BACKGROUND

Genesis 1-11.

The Bible tells a special story. It contains a unique history. My high school and college history textbooks scarcely mentioned God, the Bible, Jesus Christ or the Christian faith. Brief paragraphs and briefer footnotes were about all they had to say on these subjects. The Bible, to the contrary, tells the story of God as the creator and redeemer of the world and its human inhabitants. Its history is what theologians and exegetes call “salvation history.”

Salvation history largely begins with Abraham, and that makes the Abraham cycle of stories highly significant for our study.

Few persons are more important in this unique history than Abraham. He first appears in Scripture as Abram but God changes his name to Abraham. The name “Abram” means “exalted father.” Abraham means “father of many.” From his loins came individuals and nations that dominate the story Scripture tells. His descendants produced the Bible. From him descended the savior, our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom the Bible bears witness. Abraham is, therefore, the spiritual father of all who believe in Jesus, and they are found in all races and nations and countries of the world.

The first eleven chapters of the Bible furnish a background for the Abraham narratives.

These chapters begin with a poetic and symbolic account of the creation of the heavens and the earth by the one true, living and eternal God. They focus on the creation of man--male and female--in the image of God. They move quickly to relate the fall of man and woman into sin, bringing disaster upon themselves and their

environment. They portray God as a willing redeemer and reluctant judge who does not abandon his spoiled handiwork, but begins to reclaim it through persons sovereignly chosen to serve his redemptive purpose. Abraham will be one such chosen servant and will father a chosen nation.

The background chapters tell of the rapid multiplication of people and of their swift descent into increasing violence and wickedness. Upon them God brings the judgment of the flood, sparing only Noah and his family. The blessings of God are constantly threatened by human sin but preserved and continued by divine grace. Abraham, walking with God, will encounter such threats and be sustained by that grace.

Within the background chapters, along with genealogical information, is found the “table of nations.” This is highly significant because God’s redemptive purpose is global in its scope. It embraces the whole of Adam’s fallen race. It is for the sake of all nations that one man, Abraham, is chosen to become the father of that one nation, Israel, which, in the course of its checkered history, furnishes Christ and the Bible to the world.

Chapter 11, therefore, closes with “the account of Terah,” which is the “family tree” of this remarkable pioneer of faith, Abraham.

There are important messages for us in these background chapters.

The stories of the fall and the flood trumpet the truth that rebellion against God issues in judgment upon men. The creator of the world is holy and demands that his people be holy. He will not

tolerate evil, but he will act in self-giving love to change wicked hearts and redirect human lives.

Though his judgments are terribly severe, God's mercy triumphs over judgment and through judgment to make redemption possible. He seeks at infinite cost to himself to restore the fellowship that sin disrupts and thus prevent the eternal ruin that sin deserves. He is the God who sends the flood, but who sets a rainbow in the sky to renew hope in the midst of despair. He is the God who shatters the arrogant tower of Babel but summons a pioneer to teach the scattered nations the language of faith and love.

God meets fallen mankind not only with punishment but with promises. Those promises never fail, however stubbornly opposed, and regardless of the time that elapses between promise and fulfillment. Centuries pass between Adam and Abraham, but God remains faithful to his reclamation project. He is a patient and forbearing God.

A final and statistical word about Abraham: The name Abram appears in Scripture 60 times, 58 of them in Genesis. The name Abraham appears 230 times, 158 times in the Old Testament, and 72 times in the New Testament. Genesis contains the name 117 times. Obviously, Abraham is an important figure in the biblical story. He is associated with major events, major persons and major doctrines in both Testaments. Besides all this, he is called "friend of God," and that is reason enough to investigate his place in the Bible's message to us. That we, as Christians, are called "children of Abraham" adds significance to the studies we shall explore together.

2. ABRAM BEGINS HIS JOURNEY OF FAITH

Genesis 12:1-9.

God had huge plans for the whole world. They started with one man, one man who dared to obey the summons that would separate him from all that he had known and prized, one man with faith and courage to journey with the one true God through all that was false and ruinous.

Whatever future Abram had envisioned for himself, it was scrapped for the future to which God called him, a future that would unfold a step at a time. He was not given a road map with a marked route and a circled destination. He was commanded to "Leave" and "go." The brief and simple story of his first steps does not even hint at the difference his journey would make to the history of the whole human race.

The story introduces the sacrifices made to journey with the Lord.

First of all, *Abram had to leave the ancestral home.* The Lord said, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you." We will learn as the story unfolds that family was important to this pioneer of faith. To be wrenched from the scenes and friends he had known and loved from childhood was a costly obedience. He forsook the familiar for the unknown, something never easy for anyone to do. A lot of uprooting took place when Abram and his family turned their backs on Ur of the Chaldees.

Abram had to assume the patriarchal obligations. He became responsible for "his wife, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired." They were

under his care. They looked to him for provision and protection. He would be their guide and defender. With them he would share what he was learning about the living God, for his religious choices and decisions would be made for the entire household. His shoulders carried a lot of weight, as did his heart, for his mistakes and failures would involve the entire group of dependants. To be a lonely trailblazer is easier than being the leader of a caravan of pilgrims.

Abram followed divine guidance through alien territory. "They set out for the land of Canaan," a place hitherto unknown to them. "They arrived there," not to find vacant land waiting to be possessed and exploited, but to find the land occupied by others who would dispute their right to settle there--"the Canaanites were in the land."

The story records, also, the promises that sustained the sojourner.

His only assurance was supplied by the promises God made. He did not reach Canaan boasting, "I will..." He arrived in Canaan, braced along the trail by the Lord declaring, "I will..." Four times the Lord makes promises that fortify the patriarch's faith: (1) "I will show you [the land]." (2) "I will make your name great." (3) "I will bless those who bless you." (4) "I will give this land." The word of the Lord is spangled with promises suited to each situation faced by those who obey his commands.

Abram would be mentioned centuries later in the New Testament as a man who was "fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised." There are times when all that any child of God has to inform and inspire him are the promises of God. That

is enough, for "no word from God is without power." He never fails to keep his word

The story stresses the obedience of faith.

When you understand the meaning of faith in Holy Scripture, you will agree with the commentator who said, "faith and obedience are synonymous." If we really believe the Lord we will obey his commands. We will journey at his directions. Disobedience is a sure mark of disbelief.

Abram obeyed marching orders. God said, "Leave...and go..." and we read, "So Abram left, as the Lord had told him." No argument, no negotiation, no conditions, but simple and prompt obedience to the command of God--that is true faith.

Abram erected worship centers. Twice in this brief story we read that "he built an altar to the Lord." Worship sustained his faith. Worship enhanced his faith. In his communion with the Lord he became increasingly confident of the veracity and fidelity of God as the covenant-maker and covenant-keeper. A life without altars will soon be a life without faith. A life with altars will survive every assault upon faith.

Like Abram, we are marching toward a promised land. Our journey is one of faith, of faith nourished and supported by the word of the Lord. We will reach the goal, not because we are strong and capable and aggressive but because our Lord says, "I will show.... I will make.... I will bless.... I will give...."

3. FEAR, FAITH AND FOLLY

Genesis 12:10-20.

Abram went to Egypt to escape a famine in Canaan. Canaan was the land chosen by God to be Abram's earthly home. Now circumstances chase him into a foreign land. What does that tell us about God, Abram and faith? It tells us that God doesn't give heaven on earth. It tells us that serving God doesn't guarantee constant good times. It tells us that faith will be tested, not to inform God about us but to inform us about God and ourselves.

In this story we see fear as the failure of faith.

Abram is rightly honored as a man of faith, indeed, as a model for faith. All human role models are flawed, however. In this instance Abram's faith yielded to fear. Fearing for his life he urged Sarai to identify herself as his sister, not as his wife. She was his half-sister so this was a half-truth. Half-truths, it has been said, become whole lies. Abram's motive was self-serving. He sought to create a false impression. Those factors made the scheming a lie.

Fear sapped his faith. He was afraid that Sarai's beauty could lead to his death. He didn't trust God to keep him both honest and alive. He could not bring himself to prefer death to living a lie. The scheme he concocted blew up in his face. Pharaoh, who was a god to his people, added Sarai to his harem. The true God brought judgment on the false god, afflicting him and his household with "serious diseases." Pharaoh learned that he was being punished for possessing Abram's wife.

Radical problems call for radical solutions. Pharaoh summoned Abram, chewed him out for the deception he had practiced, and said, “Take her and go.” The eviction notice was carried out immediately. Abram and Sarai and their entire household were hustled out of Egypt.

We are often advised, rightly so, to guard our weak points. Abram’s failure teaches us to guard our strong points. His forte was faith and at that point he lost spiritual victory. The enemy will probe for an entry into our lives at every point. That’s why the apostle exhorts, “So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall” (1 Cor. 10:12).

In this story we see, also, folly as the fruit of fear.

When fear dominates our thinking we seldom think straight. What went wrong in Abram’s life?

Abram built no altar to the Lord in Egypt. We have just been told twice that he built altars to the Lord in Canaan. Nothing is said of an altar in Egypt. Our strength to stand for God in the hardest places comes from our communion with him in all places. Why no altar in Egypt? Did Abram fear to offend Pharaoh and his devotees? Did he fear persecution for being different? We aren’t told, but the lesson is easy to grasp--keep altars built or faith will fail.

Abram acted upon his knowledge of men, not his knowledge of God. He apparently knew that Pharaoh had a reputation for adding attractive women to his harem. He knew that certain Egyptians, eager to score points with Pharaoh, would report the beauty of this Sarai-come-lately. He should have known that God was sovereign over Pharaoh and Egypt. He should have known that God was able

to protect and defend him in all places. He should have known that God would fulfill the covenant with him that required him to become the father of many offspring. Instead of acting on what he knew of God, he acted upon what he knew of men. Instead of acting upon what he knew that nourished faith, he acted upon what he knew that spawned and nourished fear. Psychology triumphed over theology to Abram's defeat and hurt.

What Abram risked was greater than what he protected. He risked his faith, his wife's character, and his relationship with God to protect his life. He acted upon the adage, "Self-preservation is the first law of nature." There are higher values than mortal life. Life at any cost is a foolish principle. Better to die in faith than to live in sin. Better to die at peace with God than to live at peace with the enemies of God. Our lives are not our greatest assets. Our greatest asset is fellowship with God. "To live is Christ and to die is gain," said Paul (Phi. 1:21). Paul wrote that, knowing that his service to Christ might cost him his life. Gaining eternal life in a better world is more important than staying alive in this world.

God mercifully rescued what he might have justly abandoned. God worked in mercy and might to spare Sarai's virtue and to secure Abram's life. Through judgment he conditioned Pharaoh to act with mercy. Egypt's ruler might easily have sentenced Abram to death and retained Sarai in his harem. But heaven's ruler intervened, and Abram beat a hasty retreat from Egypt with life and goods intact. When Pharaoh's men "sent him on his way" he took with him Sarai and "everything he had." In fact, he left richer than he came, for Abram had been "treated well" for Sarai's sake. Pharaoh had given

him herds of cattle and numbers of servants and did not demand their return. He had enough wealth of his own and he certainly had enough of Abram. “Take her and go” was expanded to “Take everything you have and go.”

God is gracious. Abram failed him but he didn't fail Abram. He did not abandon the man who had apparently forgotten him. He rescued Abram and brought him from Egypt a wiser and wealthier man.

This God revealed himself in Jesus Christ. This God rescued us from sin and guilt and death. He is the God whose mercy became our salvation when his justice could have meant our destruction. He is worthy of our faith at all times and in all places and with all company. Don't let fear destroy faith.

4. THE MARCH OF FAITH RENEWED

Genesis 13:1-9, 14-18.

The hot breath of an irate Pharaoh blew Abram out of Egypt and back to Canaan. He had gone to Egypt to escape famine. He left Egypt to escape punishment. He was now an older, wiser and

richer man. Fortunately, we can learn from our failures and wrongs. Anticipating the patriarch's next adventures, Scripture says, "Lot went with him." Three events follow Abraham's return.

A devotion was restored.

Coming to Bethel, "where he had first built an altar," Abram "called on the name of the Lord." As we noted in our last study, there was no mention of altars and prayers in Egypt.

Abram was now "very wealthy." His perishable assets were "livestock and silver and gold." God prospered him, for every good gift is from God, as James tells us. Abram also counted his wealth in imperishable assets, in altars and communion with God.

To be rich in things but not serve God is simply a way of fattening oneself for slaughter. To be rich in things and to serve God is to value personal relationships above perishable assets.

This is important to remember for wealth breeds problems.

A dispute was resolved.

Wealth had become an occasion for strife. Abram's herdsmen quarreled with Lot's herdsmen. The area did not provide sufficient pasture for all the livestock. Abram wisely proposed separation. Space could be a contributor to peace. Parting could be a means of staying united. Abram therefore said to Lot, "Let's part company. If you go to the left, I'll go to the right; if you go to the right, I'll go to the left."

Abram displayed a humble spirit in granting Lot first choice. He could certainly, and justly, have claimed that right as the older man and the clan patriarch. Perhaps the fact that Lot did not demur, but quickly chose the "well watered" plain of the Jordan River tells us

something about his character also. Abram is shown to be unselfish, more concerned for peace than for profit.

Quarreling never solves our problems. Clamoring for our rights never solves our problems. Only a love that defers to others will keep intact our personal relationships. When I read this ancient story I recall the words of an old professor at whose feet I sat and from whose head and heart I learned. He used to tell us, “Little children, if you can't get along, just get along down the road.” Choose peace even if it requires space. Your earthly goods are not as important as your human relationships.

A destiny was reaffirmed.

After Lot departed the Lord arrived. He told Abram to lift up his eyes and look in all directions, and promised: “All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever.” He renewed the promise of progeny and place. Then the Lord commanded, “Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you.” That walk would be a symbolic way of taking possession of the land, of claiming the promise of God.

Abram “moved his tents” and pitched them “near the great trees of Mamre at Hebron.” Canaan would be his home, but only as a resident alien. His real home would be the immediate presence of God in heaven, as the author of Hebrews tells us in the chapter that extols the faith of the patriarchs. We are reminded that nothing given us by God in this world exceeds in glory what awaits us in the world to come. We pick spots and make homes, but we remain pilgrims in search of the eternal city.

The story closes with the words, “he built an altar to the Lord.” That is an expression of Abram's highest priority. Nothing is worth having or worth keeping that does not allow us to continue our communion with the Lord.

Tally your assets. Are they bringing you close to the Lord? Are they bridges and not barriers to fellowship with other persons? We have three basic relationships in life--to God, to people, and to things. That should be the order they take in our value system. That should be the order they take in our priority scales. If you would keep the order intact, don't neglect the altar.

5. ABRAM, A FREEDOM FIGHTER

Genesis 14:8-16.

Five kings, with their armies, fought a battle with four kings and their armies. That sounds like a huge engagement, but these were kings of city-states and small armies. For the losers the battle was certainly big enough and the results were bad enough. Some fell into tar pits and some fled to the hills.

The victorious armies looted the conquered cities, including Sodom. Among the captives taken were Lot and his family. News of Sodom's fall and Lot's capture reached Abram. With a force of 318 men, "born in his household" and trained for warfare, the patriarch pursued the coalition army, "routed them," and recovered the prisoners and the loot.

Lot was a good man in a bad place.

"He was living in Sodom." With his family *he had moved from "near Sodom" to "in Sodom."* Near would have been close enough; in proved to be his ruin. When a good man lives in a bad place he shares the misfortunes that befall the area.

Lots of preachers have pilloried Lot for living in Sodom. Often he has been painted as a villain who got what he deserved. But if we dismiss the barking of homiletic hounds and listen to Scripture, he was in Sodom but Sodom was not in him. Second Peter 2 describes him as a "righteous man," who was "distressed by the filthy lives of lawless men." What he saw and heard "day after day" in that wicked city "tormented...his righteous soul" (vv. 7-8).

Jesus did not pray that his disciples would be taken out of the world, but that the world would be taken out of them. Christians are to be in the world but not of the world. That was Lot's exact situation --in Sodom but not of Sodom. The difference should invite our sympathy, not our judgment.

Lot shared the troubles of Sodom but not its sins. The invaders took him and his family captive. Later, when the judgment of God fell upon the city, Lot was rescued by divine intervention before the end came.

All of us live in bad places. The New Jerusalem will come down from heaven; it hasn't been built upon the earth. There are no cities, towns or villages in the world that evil has not polluted. Some wickedness in our environment is inescapable, but all wickedness in our hearts is curable. We can live in the world as witnesses to Christ without partaking of the world's defiance of God.

Abram was a good man on a bad chase.

Abram "went in pursuit" of Lot's captors. He fell upon them like an avenging angel, "routed" the warriors and "recovered" the people and the possessions that had been seized.

Abram desired peace but waged war. He and Lot had separated in order to prevent quarreling among their herdsman. He had given Lot first choice of directions and pastures; he was a man of peace. But he was a realist. He knew that wickedness abounded and that evil men might assault his family or attempt to rustle his herds at any time. Accordingly, he had chosen and trained many of his servants to fight when a scrap became necessary.

"It takes two to tango" is a popular saying. It takes two to have peace, also. No matter how much one may desire peace, a belligerent person in the family or the neighborhood can disrupt and even destroy peace. Just as God allows what he cannot approve, so in this world good people can find themselves in bad situations, not of their choice but of another's instigation. "Make love, not war" is a motto I embrace, but I know that sometimes the eager lover must become the reluctant warrior.

Abram accepted isolation but rejected indifference. For the sake of peace he could live apart from his nephew, but could not be

aloof toward his nephew. A lesser man might have said, "Let him fight his own battles. I didn't get him into the mess; I won't get him out." Abram's distance from Lot was spatial but not relational. He was quick to respond to Lot's trouble with whatever help he could muster.

God is like that. He "inhabits eternity," but he is concerned about earth. He is above us but chooses to be involved with us. He comes as a deliverer to those who are captives of sin. His resources are adequate for our rescue.

Abram was a leader of troops, not just a sender of troops. He did not send his men into danger while he remained in safety. He led them in the pursuit of and attack on Lot's captors. He didn't point the direction and say, "Go get them." He rode at the head of his commando unit, saying, "Let's go get them."

And God is like that, too. He didn't send angels to rescue sinners. He came, in the person of the eternal Son, the Word made flesh, and personally occupied the field of battle. He was wounded for our transgressions. He died for our sins. He rose again for our salvation. His costly personal involvement made possible our freedom and life.

Jesus commanded His disciples to "go and make disciples of all nations," and promised, "surely I am with you always." Wherever we go in his work we find that he got there first. He doesn't merely send; he leads.

A man like Abram is worth knowing and emulating. A Lord like Jesus is worth following and serving.

6. ABRAM, A HUMBLE AND GRACIOUS VICTOR

Genesis 14:17-24.

Returning from battle, cheered by the rescued captives and enriched with the recovered spoil, Abram is confronted by two kings, one the unnamed king of Sodom, the other Melchizedek, the king-priest of Salem.

The first has been forgotten. The second appears briefly and disappears quickly, but his name gains permanence in connection with Jesus Christ, who is called “a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.”

Both kings offer Abram a blessing. He accepts that offered by the king of Salem, but refuses that offered by the king of Sodom. These incidents are the focus of our study today.

The blessing Abram accepted was conferred by a priest-king called Melchizedek.

Melchizedek blessed God as the invisible creator and conqueror. He calls him “God Most High,” and “Creator of heaven and earth.” Some have read into the first title a recognition of other but lesser gods. This is decidedly unlikely. Abram speaks of God in the same way (v. 22), and Abram was certainly a radical monotheist. The tone of the passage favors seeing Melchizedek as a Canaanite who, unlike his neighbors, clung to the truth of one, true living God--a truth as old as Eden and as long as history.

The blessing spoken by Melchizedek honors God as the source of Abram's victory. It was God Most High who delivered Abram's enemies into his hands. The sovereignty of God over history is implied. Had God so willed, Abram and his allies could have been

losers and not winners of the battle. Superior manpower and firepower do not always assure victory. God's will determines the outcome of battle.

Melchizedek blessed Abram as the visible instrument of God's victory. God does his work on earth through people. To him belongs the glory for every good achievement. This does not tarnish or diminish the faith and courage of Abram, however. To be used of God is the highest of human honors, and the faithful and valiant leader deserved to be blessed. Abram sought the blessing of God and as a consequence received the blessing of man.

Abram responded to the blessing by giving “a tenth of everything” to the king-priest. “Everything” refers to that portion of the spoils of battle that Abram controlled. His allies had some of the spoils as their just reward. The warriors had eaten some of the recovered foodstuff. The rest of the loot was under the authority of Abram, and he chose to tithe it.

The blessing Abram refused was offered by the king of Sodom.

He said to Abram, “Give me the people and keep the goods for yourself.” He knew that the people were alive only because of Abram, and he valued them above the goods that were recovered. Self-interest may have motivated him to some degree, for what is a king without a kingdom? A kingdom is more than a land to control; it is a people to govern. With the citizens returned, the goods could be replaced.

Character is revealed by what one gives and keeps, and Abram's character is shown to be highly commendable.

He refused for himself what he allowed to others. He acknowledged the right of his allies to keep spoil for themselves, saying, "Let them have their share." But he refused to keep anything for his personal gain, denying the king of Sodom any possibility of boasting that he had made Abram rich. He did not want the king to "call in a favor" during some future situation, a favor that might compromise Abram's loyalty to the God Most High who had given him the victory. Abram felt so strongly about the preservation of his spiritual independence that he had taken an oath to refuse "even a thread or the thong of a sandal."

In all of this, *Abram honored the divine deliverer and the human helpers.* He recognized God as the source of his victory, and he recognized his allies and servants as agents through whom God had worked to produce the victory. He gave to each the honor due them, but he kept his priorities well ordered.

This passage of Scripture was undoubtedly recorded and preserved to set Abram's character and conduct before us as worthy of imitation. But it was also recorded and preserved to introduce Melchizedek who would re-appear in the New Testament as a type of Christ, the King-Priest of our faith. As our high priest he offered himself as an atoning sacrifice. As our king he receives our homage, visibly expressed, among other ways, in our tithing.

7. REVELATION AND RESPONSE

Genesis 15:1-6.

“The word of the Lord came to Abram.... And Abram said...”
God met with a man and they conversed. How simple to record, how wonderful to experience! Person-to-person encounters determine our histories, both individually and as societies. When one of the persons is God, the words have ultimate value, for they affect life's ultimate relationship. What we say to each other expresses our character and affects our behavior for good or ill. What God says and how we respond determines character and behavior and destiny.

God spoke and Abram responded. That is revelation in a nutshell. Words disclose hearts. God and people make themselves known by what they say and why they say it. You can eavesdrop on a thousand ordinary conversations to little or no profit. But when God is speaking to someone, what you overhear has power to change your own life. Let's listen to the speaking God and to the responding man.

The speaking God initiated the encounter.

“The word of the Lord came to Abram.” Abram didn't ask for the meeting. He didn't request or demand an appointment with God. God can access our lives with or without our consent, confronting us and speaking to us when he wills. Sometimes God remains silent when we want him to speak. Sometimes God speaks when we don't wish to hear his voice. He doesn't raise his hand for permission to raise his voice. He speaks to us when he pleases and what he pleases, whether we welcome the intrusion or not. God never quits

being God even when we are trying to play god with our own or others' lives.

The speaking God chose the transmitter.

“The word of the Lord came...in a vision.” What happens in a vision is very real to the one having the vision, but nothing is seen or heard by any bystanders. God may speak to us in visions or in dreams or in events that involves us as participants or witnesses. He speaks to us most frequently in the context of Bible reading and worship. He is wondrously versatile and totally sovereign. He chooses the medium of revelation, for he knows the best approach to a person at any given time and place and situation in that person's life. Have you ever said the right thing but at the wrong time? God doesn't have that problem, for his wisdom and knowledge are perfect.

The speaking God made a promise.

“Your reward will be very great” (as the footnote translates). God doesn't always make promises. Sometimes he makes demands, and sometimes he poses questions, and sometimes he utters threats. He suits the content of his words to our needs. His first words to Abram on this occasion were, “Do not be afraid, Abram.” Abram was living by faith, not by sight. He had fought a battle to rescue some hostages. He had learned that living for God could be dangerous and costly at times. God speaks to reassure him, calling Abram by name to intensify his words as a personal and helpful message.

God spoke a promise of protection: “I am your shield.” A fellow doesn't need a shield unless something life-threatening is being swung or slung in his direction. When life becomes a battlefield he

needs a shield large enough and strong enough to assure maximum protection. God himself was Abram's shield--and protection doesn't get any bigger than that! Of course, naming himself as a shield not only promised protection but also implied future battles.

God spoke a promise of progeny: “So shall your offspring be.” God had earlier promised to bring nations from the loins of Abram. The patriarch was aging; years were piling up fast, and he didn't have one child, much less a progeny. God repeats the promise, and in the vision leads him outdoors to view the star-studded desert sky. “Count them!” God challenged. “So shall your offspring be.”

That's our God! He does things in an epic fashion. He is no two-bit player, no insignificant spear-holder at the side of the stage. He's the producer and the director and the star. He knows what the future holds, for he creates the future according to his own will and wisdom. You can bank on his promises.

The responding man recognized God's sovereignty.

“What can you give me?” His question was an admission of his own inability to bring about the purpose of God for his life. He wasn't childless by choice. He had tried, on the human level, to bring God's promise to reality. He realizes that only the wisdom and power of God can convert prophecy into history. Abram was saying, “I've done what I can and nothing has happened. If things are going to change it's up to you.”

The responding man questioned God's timing.

“I remain childless...” Abram's “what” contained an unspoken “when.” He was reminding God that the clock was ticking. He was getting on in years. His wife was no spring chicken. The time for

child-bearing was disappearing into the past that so quickly swallows up the present. “A son coming from your own body will be your heir,” God said. And Abram looked at that body, which passing time had imprinted with wear and wrinkles, and lamented, “I remain childless”--an indirect way of saying, “Lord, get cracking. Your window of opportunity is shrinking.”

The responding man believed God's word.

“Abram believed the Lord.” He didn't believe because he felt virile and capable. He didn't believe because the stars suddenly aligned themselves to form glittering letters that spelled “Isaac” in the heavens. He had no sign within himself or within his circumstances to cling to. He had only the word of God, but that was enough.

He believed the Promiser, and therefore expected the fulfillment of the promise. A person's word is never any better than his character, and Abram's God was the Holy One who cannot lie and cannot be fooled by nature's quirks or men's evil. The promise was sure because the promiser was the speaking God.

God “credited it to him as righteousness.” Abram is the first person of whom this is said. God accepted Abram, not on the basis of Abram's works, but on the basis of his faith. We have learned from the apostle Paul that all who are saved by faith in Jesus Christ are children of Abraham. We are not acceptable to God on the basis of our good deeds. We do not earn his favor by what we do for him. We are saved by what he does for us. God gave his Son, and the Son gave his life to atone for our sins. When we believe in Jesus, we are justified by faith and adopted into the family of God. We become heirs with father Abram to all of the blessings promised to believers.

We live centuries this side of the promise made to Abram. We know how it was fulfilled. We are beneficiaries of that fulfillment. The offspring of that ancient patriarch brought to the world the Bible and the savior and thus the church. We are the children of believing Abram, and heirs with him of “great and precious promises.” Let this old story from Genesis strengthen your faith and hope.

8. GOD CONFIRMS HIS COVENANT

Genesis 15:7-21.

“On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram.” The Lord initiated and Abram responded. That is the essence of grace. God was the donor, and Abram the donee. He gives and we receive. He promises and we accept. That is all we can do, for we have nothing to give that is not already his. We are left with nothing to say but “Thanks.” Our only other option is base ingratitude, a form of rebellion that is self-destructive.

God appears as the land-giver.

That's what Abram and his promised descendants needed, and that's what they got. They needed land on which to settle, on which to raise their families and their food.

Land grants are the prerogative of landowners. Giving away another's land doesn't make you a benefactor; it makes you a thief. God doesn't give away another's land. “The earth is the Lord's.” He made it and he owns it; every square inch of land and water in the universe is his. As the creator-owner of all the earth, he has a perfect right to decide who will live where. He can give or take land as he wills.

Centuries ago he gave a small portion of the globe to the descendants of Abraham who were from the line of Isaac. That land is still theirs by right, and unbelievers and rebels can only dispute its title.

God has made enough for everybody. All nations could live sufficiently and peaceably were it not for human greed. Lust for power, for prestige and for property drives men to hate and fight and

destroy one another in order to possess land. They do not occupy what they have seized as stewards of God but as masters of people.

The land that God gave had to be possessed. Because divine ownership was not recognized, human possession was contested. Israel occupied the land only by driving out the numerous “ites” listed in verses 19-21.

God has covenanted to give his “better country” to all who believe in him.

The enemies of God, however, will contest our journey to that inheritance. None of us will reach heaven without a fight. That heaven is ours by grace and not by works does not mean that we can receive it without wounds and scars. What God gives we must possess, and possession is never the end-term of a free and easy passage.

God appears as the sign-giver.

Abram cried, “How can I know that I will gain possession of it?” God answered the question by confirming his covenant with a mysterious sign.

A sacrifice was offered. The Lord requested a sacrifice of animals and birds. Abram brought them and killed them. He cut the animals into halves and laid the halves in opposite rows. The birds, uncut, were laid likewise.

That sacrifice was carefully guarded. As hours passed birds of prey came to feast upon the carcasses, but “Abram drove them away.” How long he stood guard, how frequently and stubbornly they returned, we are not told. As night fell the weary patriarch fell asleep, and the Lord visited his dreams to inform him that centuries would

pass before his descendants would possess the promised land. He would die in peace and be buried with honor before the land would be occupied and possessed by his progeny.

The sacrifice was then signally honored. “A smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces” of slain animals and birds. That strange firepot and torch were symbols of the presence of God who often made his presence known by a fire-sign. The God who had made the promise, who had granted the land, now confirmed his covenant with a chosen sign.

A clue to the meaning of all this is supplied for us in the prophecy of Jeremiah. In a message of judgment to apostate Israel the Lord said, “The men who have violated my covenant and have not fulfilled the terms of the covenant they made before me, I will treat like the calf they cut in two and then walked between its pieces” (34:18). When men “cut” a covenant and walked between the halves of the sacrificed animals, it was their way of saying, “We will keep our word or perish as did these sacrifices.”

God himself moved between the pieces of the sacrifice Abram made. God makes his holy honor the pledge of his promise. No greater sign, no greater confirmation could be asked or given.

Like all stories of divine-human encounters and transactions, this one is most significant for what it tells us about God. He is the creator of earth with a right to locate people where he wills. He is a unilateral covenant-maker; he has no equals, no peers, only subjects. His character confirms his word, and he will faithfully fulfill every promise he makes. He can predict the future, for all things are

present to him who exists both in time and beyond time. God is worthy of our allegiance, our submission and our adoration.

9. ABRAM ACTS IN UNBELIEF

Genesis 16:1-10, 13-15.

Abram is remembered as a man of faith. Here we see him at his worst, acting in unbelief. Scripture portrays only one man whose faith was perfect--"the man Christ Jesus." Abram, acting "out of character," reminds us that we can fail at the point of our strength as well as at the points of our weakness.

A foolish man is seen in this story.

Abram was foolish because he listened to an unbelieving wife. Poor Sarai was childless and she blamed the Lord. Alluding to a social custom of those days, she urges Abram to "sleep" with her maidservant. Any child resulting from that arrangement would be Abram's legal heir. Surrogate motherhood was not unusual.

Instead of trusting God to enable Sarai to have a child, "Abram agreed to what Sarai said." Doing what your wife requests--or demands--isn't always wrong. Sometimes it's wise. If the request arises out of unbelief, however, compliance is foolish. It can only lead to trouble.

Abram was foolish because he took an unnecessary wife. "Sarai his wife took her Egyptian maidservant Hagar and gave her to [Abram] to be his wife." Hagar had probably become Sarai's maid during the time that she and Abram had lived in Egypt--the first time that Abram's trust in the Lord had failed. As a result of this "secondary" marriage Abram had a son, but he also had big trouble. One wife can create enough problems for any man to handle. He surely doesn't need additional wives.

A frightened woman is viewed in this story, also.

When Abram consummated the marriage Hagar became pregnant. At a time and place when childbearing was the chief mark of a wife's success, the pregnant servant became bloated with pride and “despised” her mistress.

Hagar angered the person she should have appeased. Sarai was swift to resent the superiority complex of Hagar. She blamed Abram for the whole explosive situation, saying to him, “You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering!” Instead of defusing the situation Abram made it worse by saying, in effect, “She's your servant. Treat her as you wish.” Given Hagar's pride and Sarai's fury, that advice was an invitation to disaster. Sarai abused her freedom, her authority and her maidservant. Finding the mistreatment unbearable, Hagar “fled from her.”

Hagar used her feet when she should have used her head. We do not solve our problems by fleeing from them but by facing up to them. The abused woman worsened her circumstances by her flight. Traveling alone in her condition, she was extremely vulnerable. Judging from the place where the angel of the Lord found Hagar, she was trying to get back home to Egypt. Quite likely, she would never have made it.

A faithful God now enters the story. “The angel of the Lord found Hagar.” This is the first appearance of an angel in the Bible. “The angel of the Lord” is mentioned 58 times and seems to be no ordinary “messenger” but the message-sender himself--the Lord in a specially chosen method of contact with one of his creatures. Hagar called him “the God who sees me.”

The Lord rescued the runaway. This is his major activity in the entire biblical record--seeking and saving the strayed sheep. He directs her to return to her mistress and submit to her. That would be safer and wiser than any ill-conceived future into which the frightened woman was flinging herself. The Lord then promised her a son, and enlarged the promise to include descendants "too numerous to count."

The Lord continued to bless the unbelieving and undeserving recipients of his covenant. He is a patient and forgiving God. He did not abandon them to their folly. He did not "call off" the future he had promised them. The next chapter will tell how the Lord appeared to Abram to renew the covenant and to name Sarai as the mother of the son through whom the covenant would be extended and ultimately fulfilled.

We can all rejoice that God is faithful when we are not, that his wisdom triumphs over our folly, and that whatever he plans for us is better than any life we could devise for ourselves.

Hagar named the spring where the Lord found her and spoke to her Beer Lahai Roi, which means, "well of the living God who sees me." She returned to Sarai, bore the child of Abram, and became in time the mother of a vast progeny. Abram named his son "Ishmael," which means "God hears." Like all stories in Scripture, the main character in this one is not a foolish or a frightened person but the faithful God.

10. GOD RENEWS HIS COVENANT

Genesis 17:1-8.

Time passes and promises remain unfulfilled. Faith is sorely tested. God understands the effect of such circumstances. He expects Abram to wait in faith, but not in silence. He appears again to him, speaks again to him, renewing the covenant, repeating his promises, and shoring up the patriarch's faith.

We have an edge on Abram. Our Bibles keep the promises of God's "better country" before us, constantly renewing our confidence and courage.

When "the Lord appeared to Abram" we are told--"When Abram was ninety-nine years old." *Why* the Lord appeared to him we may infer--to renew the covenant earlier made with him. *How* the Lord appeared to him we are not told, and speculation is useless. The Lord has limitless resources for all he pleases to do. He can find ways and means to confront and address us.

God issued a radical command.

"Be blameless." The KJV reads, "be thou perfect." "Perfect" was too much for modern translators and "blameless" was chosen instead. Either word is enough to alert and alarm us. What a command to issue to an old man--or to a young one! Live in such a way that you do not arouse the anger of God by sharing the sins of your neighbors--that is the weight of the moral imperative issued here.

God prefaced the command with a self-affirmation: "I am God Almighty." In effect, these words tell us that *God enables what he*

commands. Left to his own resources Abram could not be blameless, nor can anyone. But the man who walks with God is not limited by his own meager wisdom and strength. God is our sufficiency. The Hebrew phrase is “El Shaddai,” the name of God as one who supplies strength to his people. When he commands us, his words convey the power for our obedience if they are heard in faith. That is why the apostle Paul testifies, “I can do everything through him who gives me strength.” No circumstances can defeat the man or woman who draws strength from the Almighty. We may be opposed by mighty forces, but God alone is almighty. That is why John defies the antichrist, and reminds Christians that “the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.”

Abram was further comforted by the words, “walk before me.” *God judges what he commands and enables*. He does not tell Abram to be blameless before his wife, or his children, or his servants, or his neighbors or his enemies. God says “before me,” and he alone is competent to judge because he alone possesses perfect knowledge and wisdom. In moral issues, intention is vital, not just performance. Evil men can do good things from selfish motives. Good men can do wrong and damaging things with pure intentions. When our hearts are pure our heads are still faulty. We speak and act from incomplete knowledge and imperfect foresight, and sometimes we mean well but things turn out badly. People can only judge from external perspectives, but God knows the heart.

God issued a renewed covenant.

He repeats *the promise of a progeny*. “You will be the father of many nations.” To further encourage Abram's faith he gives the

patriarch a new name. “Your name will be Abraham.” Abram means “exalted father.” Abraham means “father of many.” His progeny will include nations and kings. Abraham is to look to the Almighty God, not to his own aging body or even to his faith. The promise is secured, not by human ability but by divine authority.

God repeats *the promise of a country*. “The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you.” The exact boundaries of “the whole land of Canaan” are not described here, but Abraham likely knew them. Later, when the people of Israel were poised at the border of Canaan, God said to Joshua, “I will give you every place where you set your foot,” and then stated the explicit boundaries. Emphasis, however, was on possession, not on acreage. The promises of God must be possessed, must be claimed boldly and fully by a believing people.

We are promised what Hebrews calls “a better country.” Heaven is not handed to the lazy, cowardly or indifferent, however. It is the inheritance of those who walk with God by faith through all opposing circumstances.

God also repeats the promise *the promise of loyalty*, saying, “I will be their God.” He earlier pledges to be “your God and the God of your descendants.” God pledges his fidelity to the covenant, just as he demands their fidelity to the covenant. Even when Israel broke the covenant, God remained faithful to his word. He will never default his promises to us. If we are not close to God, he is not the one who created the distance.

This ancient story has lessons for modern believers. It reminds us that God acts in time and space; God makes history. It reminds us that God is the guarantor of our moral and spiritual triumphs. It reminds us that the God who is our savior will also be our judge.

11. A LAUGHING MATTER

Genesis 17:15-22; 18:10-15.

Frequently, it seems, “the Lord appeared” to Abraham and chatted with him. Abraham was to figure largely in the Lord’s plans for the whole world. But more than that, the Lord must have enjoyed the patriarch’s company. I can’t think of anything better than to be a person God likes to visit with.

These two patches of Scripture, drawn from chapters 17 and 18 of Genesis, have laughter as their common motif.

Abraham’s laughter is recorded in chapter 17.

God had decided to “bless” Sarah with a son. That son would be a gift from God to Abraham, and the matter was firmly settled. “I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her.”

On the occasion of this promise God also changed her name from Sarai to Sarah. Actually, both names mean “princess” (some say “heroine”). More than anything, the change in name commemorates the radical change in their lives that would occur when Abraham and Sarah became parents of a promised son.

Abraham responded by falling facedown and laughing. That he and Sarah should have a son at their ages was humanly preposterous, indeed humanly impossible. Was his laughter an expression of doubt or of delight? Commentators are divided in opinion. Some think Abraham’s faith wavered, at least momentarily. Others reject the notion. Those who deny that he doubted are influenced by two special considerations. One, the Lord does not rebuke him, as he did Sarah when she laughed. Two, a comment of

Paul in his letter to the Romans seems to preclude any doubt on the old patriarch's part. The apostle wrote:

Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, "So shall your offspring be." Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead--since he was about a hundred years old--and that Sarah's womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised (Rom. 4:18-21).

At face value this does not leave any room for even a momentary experience of doubt. Accordingly, the laughter and the words that followed are understood as an expression of sheer delight in the irony and glory of the promise.

But if Abraham didn't doubt, even for a moment, why did he appeal to God to accept Ishmael as the covenant heir? He seemed to believe that the surrogate motherhood Sarah had arranged could suffice to fulfill the covenant God initiated.

At any rate, if he had a flicker of doubt Abraham quickly recovered a strong and unwavering faith and the doubt was never counted against him. Abraham voiced a legitimate and loving concern for his son Ishmael. And the Lord assured his friend Abraham that the lad would have a splendid future. The Lord would bless Ishmael by making him the father of many, including rulers, and the progenitor of "a great nation."

The matter was settled, and God named the child that Sarah would bear "Isaac," which means laughter. Some think the name was

intended to keep the parents reminded of their laughter, and others think it points to the prospect of a happy childhood for the promised son. In any case, it reminds us that when we honor and serve God, believing his word, he will give us plenty to laugh about. Life with him will be crowned with joy.

Sarah's laughter is recorded in chapter 18.

Once again "the Lord appeared to Abraham," and this time the appearance took the visible form of three visitors whom Abraham perceived as men. Two of them are later identified as "angels." Abraham accorded them the usual elaborate and courteous hospitality of an eastern sheik. As they converse one of them is identified as "the Lord." All of this serves to remind us that the Lord can assume any form he desires, or that our need requires, in order to make known his will and to enlist our obedient cooperation with his will.

The Lord told Abraham that within a year Sarah would birth a son. Sarah, as any woman might have done, stood behind the tent door eavesdropping on the conversation. "Advanced in years" and "past the age of childbearing," she laughed to herself in unbelief. She was "worn out" and her husband was "old." Having a child was a sheer physical impossibility. Her laughter seems to have been a compound of disappointment and derision.

The Lord hears what we never speak aloud. He knows what is on our minds and in our hearts. He therefore challenged Abraham with two questions: "Why did Sarah laugh?" "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" He wasn't seeking information; he was rebuking Sarah's

unbelief and confirming Abraham's faith. "I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son."

Frightened by this rebuke, Sarah worsened her folly by denying her laughter. "I did not laugh." She had not laughed aloud, but the Lord heard what Abraham could not. At this point he spoke to her directly, contradicting her lie with his truth: "Yes, you did laugh."

Nothing is too hard for the Lord. If he says, "Your wife will have a son," you might as well get a cradle ready. What he promises, he delivers. True faith is grounded upon promises, not upon possibilities. True faith is not believing that anything can happen. Faith is believing that whatever God promises will happen.

12. ABRAHAM'S INTERCESSION

Genesis 18:16-33.

When Abraham's mysterious guests departed, he "walked along with them" for a while. We are loath to say goodbye to visitors whose presence has blessed us. At some unspecified point on the trail the Lord disclosed his intention concerning Sodom and Gomorrah, two desperately wicked cities. The announcement of that coming judgment prompted Abraham to boldly intercede for any righteous persons who were living in those corrupt places.

The Lord revealed his intention to Abraham.

He does not "hide from Abraham" what he will do, nor does he hide from us the reason why he did it. The fate of the whole world is involved in the Lord's relationship to Abraham. "All nations on earth will be blessed through him." That makes Abraham a significant person for us to study.

The Lord intended to make Abraham a source of blessing. Abraham was chosen, with his descendants, to live before the Lord "doing what is right and just." Such a lifestyle would express their fidelity to God's covenant. By so living they would become the instruments of his intended blessings for all the earth.

Looking back through history we can see clearly the major benefits conferred upon all nations through the chosen one. The descendants of faithful Abraham gave us our savior and our Bible. Through Jesus, one man's obedience to God created the possibility of everyone's salvation. The inspired book that bears witness to Christ--the book that we call the Bible--conveys that good news to us.

The Lord intended to make Sodom and Gomorrah examples of his wrath. Their evil had become so great that judgment could no longer be withheld. Their sins cried out for punishment.

Setting an example for human judges and for human executioners of justice, the Lord says, “I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me.” Investigation, careful and personal, precedes the imposition and the execution of a righteous sentence. The divine judge thus assures Abraham of the righteousness of his intention for the cities under indictment.

By this disclosure of his intention in both its “what” and “why”, the Lord makes it clear that the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah is to be a warning to Abraham and his descendants. Divine blessings will not save if they are not allowed to create and sustain a holy lifestyle. “The wages of sin is death.”

Disclosure of God’s intention is followed by Abraham’s intercession.

With boldness and humility, a rare combination of traits, the patriarch pleads for any righteous persons who are living among the doomed wicked.

The ground of his pleading is significant. Abraham does not beseech mercy for the righteous on the basis of his own or their moral deserts. He grounds intercession upon God himself as “the Judge of all the earth” who will not “sweep away the righteous with the wicked.” He affirms that the Lord will “do right.” As for himself, he is “nothing but dust and ashes,” and can make no claim upon divine mercy on the basis of his own character.

Abraham does not dispute the right of God to be our judge and to “sweep away” the wicked. He cannot reconcile in his own mind, however, any divine action that arbitrarily ignores moral distinctions in the objects of ultimate judgment. The gods of the nations were capricious and arbitrary but not the God who had chosen and called him.

The persistence of his pleading is stressed. Six times Abraham voices the same petition, each time reducing the number of righteous persons who might be found in those cities. He starts with fifty and ends with ten. Some have criticized Abraham for stopping at that point, but who of us would have reached that point? Prayer itself is rare; how much scarcer is persistence in prayer? We should be mimics and not critics of the ancient intercessor.

The Lord responds favorably to persistent intercession that arises out of compassion for others. He does not reward the persistence that flows from a perverse and obstinate spirit. True intercession recognizes God’s righteous character. It does not express man’s rebellious will. True intercession does not judge the judge.

We are challenged and cautioned by this story. It vividly reminds us of the ultimate doom of evil. We live in a moral universe, created by and accountable to a holy God. His character demands the overthrow and punishment of evildoers. His mercy extends to all who will live in the world as his people, his witnesses. Those who have received mercy should persistently pray for the hallowing of the Lord’s name and the salvation of earth’s lost.

13. ABRAHAM FAILS AND SUCCEEDS

Genesis 20:1-18.

In this story we see Abraham at his worst and at his best; at his worst as he deceives others, at his best when he prays for others. The story is similar to that in chapter 12, when Abraham practiced an identical deception in Egypt that landed Sarah in Pharaoh's harem. However, the dissimilarities are as significant as the similarities. What we have here is not a story reworked but a misdeed repeated.

Abraham moved from Hebron to Gerar. Precisely when and why, we are not told. In quest of grazing land is a likely guess, but no guess is needed where no details are afforded. God tells us as much as we really need to know in all parts of his word. He does not provide the Bible to satisfy our curiosity but to save our souls.

This is a story of a plot that failed.

To keep someone from killing him to get his wife, Abraham passed her off as his sister. He feared the men who did not fear God, and this betrayed him into doing wrong. The plot backfired when Sarah was added to the king's harem and Abraham was left alone. Customs of that time and place allowed a king to take any unmarried woman he desired from among his citizens and from resident aliens. That Sarah was attractive to him at her age and stage in life testifies to her beauty and personality.

Abraham's deception was *a folly repeated*. He had pulled the same stunt in Egypt some years earlier with almost tragic consequences. The Lord intervened to save both him and his wife. He should have known better than to try that scheme again. He should have learned that God was all the protection he had and

needed. But who of us can judge the ancient patriarch? Who has not ignored lessons? Who has not repeated sins?

God is merciful and once again we see *a tragedy averted*. A patient Lord bailed out the foolish man by speaking to Abimelech “in a dream.” Ours is a speaking God, and he has many ways of confronting us with his word. Here his message is a reprimand and a warning. The warning had powerful shock value: “You are as good as dead...because you have taken...a married woman.” Taking the wrong woman has been the downfall and death of many a man.

Abimelech protested his innocence. He had acted in ignorance of Sarah’s married status. He had taken at face value the words of Abraham: “She is my sister.” His wrong had been done “with a clear conscience and clean hands.” When information is partial and “ignorance is bliss,” we can have right intentions and still do wrong things.

God affirmed the truth of Abimelech’s protest, and said, “That is why I have kept you from sinning against me. That is why I did not let you touch her.” Given the woman’s beauty and the king’s lust, a hands-off policy could only be enforced for a limited time. Therefore, the Lord intervened directly with his message of threatened judgment. God’s disclosure also explained a judgment already in process--“The Lord had closed up every womb in Abimelech’s household.” The Lord had denied to every woman in the palace the power to conceive children.

The tragedy averted was coupled with *a remedy provided*. The Lord commanded Abimelech to return Sarah to her husband, and assured the frightened king that Abraham would pray for him and he

would live. If the proposed remedy were rejected, the consequences would be fatal: “You may be sure that you and all yours will die.” God makes no idle boasts or empty threats. What he says he will do. Abimelech was convinced and met with his officials “early the next morning.” When he shared his dream, they shared his fears.

Abraham was summoned and charged with having placed king and kingdom in dire jeopardy. He had wronged the innocent and the king slapped his ears with a big “Why?” “What was your reason for doing this?”

Abraham offered a pitiful defense. He had not been wronged, but he feared that someone might bump him off to get his wife. He protested that the brother-sister claim was true, for he and Sarah had different mothers but the same father. He admitted that he had set in place this protective strategy from the time God called him to a wandering life.

This is also a story of a prayer that prevailed.

God had called Abraham “a prophet.” This is the first appearance of the word “prophet” in Scripture. A prophet was a man who spoke to the people for God. Now he speaks to God for the people. He becomes a mediator, an intercessor, and his prayer was answered. “Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech, his wife and his slave girls so they could have children again.” God listened to the man who had so often listened to him.

Abraham made *intercession* and Abimelech made *reparation*. Before we are told that Abraham prayed, we are informed that Abimelech paid. He gave both livestock and servants to Abraham, and invited him to live wherever he pleased in that land of Gerar. He

also gave the patriarch “a thousand shekels of silver” as reparation for having taken Sarah, whom he now gladly returned to her “brother.”

The financial reparation does not mean that Abimelech purchased God’s forgiveness or Abraham’s friendship. The king was not buying his way out of a bad scrape; he was expressing gratitude for mercy received and for disaster averted.

Here are some lessons for us from this episode in the life of Abraham: The strongest are sometimes weak. God’s grace avails to prevent sin and to forgive sin. A believer’s true identity and security are found in a right relationship to God. Prayer prevails when commanded and directed by God. God exercises sovereign power over life and death. God’s judgments are righteous and his mercies are abundant.

14. THE PROMISED SON IS BORN

Genesis 21:1-7.

Sooner or later the promises of God are fulfilled. “Sooner or later” is our human perspective. God has no “sooner or later.” Things happen just when he wills them to happen. He hangs no calendar on his wall. He wears no watch on his wrist. He is not ahead of time or on time or behind time. Time is his creation. He controls time; time does not control him.

We are not God and we do reckon with time; we even contend with time. Abraham and Sarah must have thought and maybe said, “At last, at last, at last!” The birth of Isaac was a witness to the faithfulness of God.

This patch of Scripture records a promise fulfilled.

The God who made the promise brought it to fulfillment just when and as he planned. “The Lord was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah what he had promised.”

Little Isaac’s first cry could be translated, *God’s word is dependable*. It may have sounded like “Waaah!” to the parents, but it was a testimony to the veracity of God who made a covenant with Abraham, a covenant that would persist through generations of people and centuries of time.

The birth of Isaac confirmed *God’s sovereignty over time*. Earlier both Abraham and Sarah had said, “It’s too late.” They were too old to have a son. God, to their way of thinking, had allowed the right time to elapse, indeed, the only time to elapse. The window of opportunity had closed, with the glass scratched, the paint crinkled, and the wood deteriorated. But the God who had promised that son

was the ruler of time and nature and humanity. That tiny “bundle of bliss” was a living declaration of his divine sovereignty.

This patch of Scripture records also a command obeyed.

Abraham gave the name “Isaac” to the son Sarah bore him. “When his son Isaac was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him, as God commanded him.” God himself had decided the baby’s name and God himself had commanded the circumcision of Abraham’s male descendants as “the sign of the covenant” (17:9, 19). The patriarch was obeying orders.

Abraham’s obedience was *the obedience of faith*. It was not the grudging response of a man who felt coerced, but the grateful response of a man who believed God and felt privileged to be the servant of a divine purpose that would embrace the whole world. When we believe we obey. Disobedience to God is always a manifestation of unbelief.

The obedience of faith embraced *the covenant of grace*. Grace is not only God’s favor, it is God’s favor shown at God’s initiative. Grace creates faith and faith responds to grace. It was God who made the covenant. Abraham was a party to it, but not the author or even the co-author of it. The covenant was not a divine response to human merit but to helpless need. God made a covenant that provided for the salvation of sinners who, apart from divine mercy, would be justly doomed to eternal destruction. “The Lord was gracious to Sarah,” and in fulfilling the covenant with Abraham the Lord was gracious to the whole world.

This patch of Scripture also records a happiness shared.

Sarah cuddled the baby in her arms and said, "God has brought me laughter." Anyone who has raised children knows they occasion a lot of laughter. The things they do and say are often delightful and sometimes hilarious. Sarah was voicing, however, the sheer joy of becoming a mother. In her culture that was every woman's dream. Now, long after the biological clock has ceased to tick, the miracle of conception and birth had occurred. "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age." How like a woman to refer to her husband but not herself as old, yet she was ninety!

Laughter was recognized as a divine gift. "God has brought me laughter." All laughter is not divine in origin. The world laughs at much that is profane and smutty and obscene. Over-indulgence in booze has resulted in lots of laughter. Some are evil enough to laugh when their victims are suffering. Yes, laughter can be diabolical and maniacal. But serving God will bring pure joy into any person's life--laughter created by answered prayer and by unexpected blessings.

Laughter was also recognized as a human contagion. Sarah exclaimed, "Everyone who hears about this will laugh with me." When a believer cries, "Rejoice with me!" the response of others is immediate and genuine. What gladdens one heart also makes happy the hearts of family and friends. Laughter is contagious.

God is gracious. God is truthful. He makes time and nature his servants. He keeps covenant with his people. He brings gladness to the lives of those who believe and obey him. These are some of the lessons driven home by this incident in the lives of Abraham and Sarah.

15. WHEN THE LAUGHTER DIED

Genesis 21: 8-21.

When Isaac was weaned Abraham “held a great feast.” His immense joy needed this appropriate outlet. The child whose name meant laughter was the centerpiece of merriment. Food and fun abounded.

The folly of Ishmael killed Sarah’s joy.

He was “mocking” his tiny half-brother. Ishmael was not having fun at the celebration. He was making fun of the child whose safe passage through the dangers of infancy occasioned the feast. The bare fact is stated but details are not supplied.

The fury of Sarah threatened Ishmael’s life.

Abraham pitched a party but Sarah pitched a fit. Ishmael’s folly resulted in Sarah’s fury. In his mockery she perceived a threat to the future of her son. In jealous rage she demanded that Abraham dismiss Hagar and Ishmael from the household. “Get rid of that slave woman and her son.” Her anger would not permit her to speak their names. “That woman’s son,” she vowed, “will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac.”

“That woman’s son” had been Sarah’s idea in the first place. When she thought God had forgotten his promise to give her a son, she told Abraham to take Hagar as a secondary wife and produce a son and heir through the slave woman. Now she is a mother bent on the ruthless protection of her own child from future trouble. She was capable of being mean and merciless when she was provoked. At the same time, she must be credited with concern to protect the

covenant that God had made with Abraham, a covenant to be fulfilled through Isaac and his descendants.

Abraham had done as Sarah wished before, but he wasn't willing to take this cruel and drastic step. After all, Ishmael was his firstborn son, and he loved the boy he had been training toward manhood. Sarah's vicious demand "greatly distressed" Abraham. This is the only place where the Hebrew word translated here as "distressed" is qualified by the word "greatly." Commentators refer to Abraham's reaction as an explosion of anger. Sarah thought God's promises concerning Isaac required the removal of Ishmael. Abraham thought God's promises concerning Ishmael required his retention in the household.

The faithfulness of God secured everyone's future.

At this point in the story God intervenes. Indeed, his faithfulness is the main thrust of the story. God uses some wretched human stuff to carry forward his plans.

God first overcomes the reluctance of Abraham to carry out Sarah's harsh demand. In a rare passage God tells the patriarch to obey his wife: "Listen to whatever Sarah tells you, because it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." Evidently God himself, to whom the future is present, perceived Ishmael as a threat to the covenant. Nevertheless, he assured Abraham that the boy would become the progenitor of a great nation also.

His anger defused by the divine promise, Abraham consented to the dismissal of Hagar and Ishmael. Early the next morning, when travel would be easiest in that desert area, he loaded her with provisions of food and water, and "sent her off with the boy." The

Hebrew word translated “sent off” is used of divorces, and by this action Abraham was, in effect, divorcing the slave-wife Hagar.

How lonely and helpless she must have felt as she “wandered” in the desert. The term is used also of straying animals and indicates that Hagar was lost. The food and water had been consumed but need and thirst remained. Weak and weary, she placed her boy under a bush for whatever shade it provided, and then “sat down nearby.” “Nearby” is defined as “a bowshot away.” The heart-broken mother could not bear to hear the lad’s tortured moans for water or to watch him slowly and painfully die. What energy remained in her was spent in sobbing.

The God who reassured Abraham now rescues Hagar and Ishmael. “God heard the boy crying.” Ishmael would have been sixteen or seventeen years old at this time, and his “crying” is understood by scholars as prayer for divine mercy and help. In response, “the angel of the Lord” calls to Hagar “from heaven” and hushes her fears. God repeats a promise earlier made twice to Abraham but not to Hagar: “I will make him into a great nation.” Without knowing it, Hagar had stopped close to a life-saving well. When she thought death was short breaths away, life had been a few steps away. Grief blinds. Tears blind. The God who wipes away tears enables us to discover the resources for survival and even triumph. Hagar joyfully filled the water-skin and gave Ishmael a strength-renewing drink. With God’s promises and provision to sustain them, their journey was renewed.

The story jumps ahead to a brief summary paragraph. We are told that God was with the growing lad, that he came to manhood in

the desert as a skilled archer, and that his mother obtained a wife for him from her native Egypt.

God has plans for every life. God has provisions for every life. God has purposes that give meaning to every life. He works in and with and through and around our human foibles and failures. He guides his children to their divinely appointed destination. He sees us wherever we are. He hears us whenever we pray. He sustains us whatever our circumstances. The faithfulness of God is the heart of every true story and the hope of every true believer.

16. A SOJOURNER'S COVENANT

Genesis 21:22-34.

The treaty at Beersheba seems like an odd conclusion to this portion of Genesis. Evidently, the writer wanted to emphasize the fact that Abraham did not possess the promised land, nor was the promised child born in the promised land. Abraham lived as a sojourner, a resident alien dwelling in tents. The incident recorded here assures us that God can take care of his pilgrim people until they finally possess their inheritance.

Our attention is first drawn to a conclusion.

Abimelech had kept an eye on Abraham and concluded, "God is with you in everything you do." If you want God for an ally you don't make an enemy of his people. Abimelech sought a treaty that would assure reciprocal kindness between his people and Abraham's household.

That Abimelech, accompanied by General Phicol, initiated the proposed covenant shows respect for the wealth and power of Abraham. This would be a covenant between equals, between friends, not between a conqueror and his reluctant subjects. This speaks volumes for the measure of divine blessings that he had watched Abraham receive. He thus petitions Abraham to swear before God to treat him and his children and his descendants with "the same kindness" he had shown the patriarch. He wanted God's friend to be his friend.

Our attention is drawn next to a complaint.

Abraham readily agreed, for he was a peace-loving man, as we observed in his dealings with his nephew Lot. But before a covenant

would be “cut,” Abraham felt compelled to register one complaint. “Abimelech’s servants had seized” a well that Abraham had dug for his own people and herds. In desert country few things are more important than water sources. Abimelech expressed surprise, claiming that he had been ignorant of the incident, and somewhat gently chided Abraham for not having informed him. Abraham’s continued right to the well is implied as a covenant promise.

Our attention is drawn finally to a covenant.

When the complaint was resolved the two leaders proceeded to “cut” the covenant. Since it was taking place on Abraham’s “turf” he provided the animals to be slaughtered. The seven ewe lambs served also as a witness that Abraham had dug the well.

Mutual kindness was promised under oath, and then Abimelech and Phicol “returned to the land of the Philistines.” The site of the covenant-making was named Beersheba. The Hebrew term incorporates both the idea of swearing and the number seven.

The well served as a memorial of the covenant. Abraham also “planted a tamarisk tree” at the covenant site. The tamarisk normally lives a long time, so it was highly suitable as an additional memorial of the covenant made with the king of Gerar. Some scholars have called it a “holy tree” and have even declared it an object of worship. They import that notion into the text; they do not export it from the text. Abraham was not a tree-hugger or a tree worshiper. Abraham “called upon the name of the Lord, the Eternal God.” He worshiped the creator, not a creature.

We too are pilgrims and strangers in the world. We can learn from this ancient incident that God will faithfully care for us as we

journey onward to heaven. We should live quietly and peaceably with all people, insofar as that is possible. This does not mean that we surrender all our rights without voicing a protest or seeking redress. It does mean that we do not resort to violent means or criminal actions in order to retain what God has given us.

17. THE REJECTED SACRIFICE

Genesis 22:1-19.

The testing of Abraham's faith by the command to slay Isaac is the most dramatic of all the stories about Abraham contained in Scripture. There is much about it hard to understand--but that's true of nearly all the biblical stories. For this reason they serve to test our faith.

A servant tested commences the story.

The testing of a servant's loyalty is the master's right. Those who bring moral objections to this story assume the right to question God's rights. Well, he is patient and doesn't slap them down. On the other hand, he also refuses to change his ways to accommodate their notions of right and wrong. God insists upon being God and is neither amused nor threatened by our attempts to play God. I find it interesting that some who challenge the right of God to demand the sacrifice of Isaac in worship concede the right of political and military leaders to sacrifice thousands of young men in war. Go figure.

God called the patriarch by name and commanded him to take Isaac to a distant mountain and sacrifice him as "a burnt offering." Abraham recognized the voice of God. He didn't dismiss the command as a wild imagination arising from his own disturbed mind. He didn't say, "This cannot possibly be God's voice making such a demand of me." He knew that God had indeed spoken and his options were two--obey or disobey.

God said, "your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love..." This added enormous weight to the horror of the thought. Isaac was not Abraham's only son, biologically speaking. There was Ishmael

also. But Isaac was the only son through whom the covenant with Abraham was to be furthered and fulfilled. He was born late in Abraham's life, and the years that passed after God promised the son and before the son was born had tested Abraham's faith constantly. Now the greatest test of all was imposed--the child of miracle, the child of promise, was to be slain by the father's own hand. You cannot imagine a test of faith harder than that.

Abraham took the lad and two servants and headed for the distant mountain where the sacrifice was to be made. Having to travel three days before the sacrifice could take place added enormously to the agonizing struggle that was going on in Abraham's heart. When something awful has to be done, the sooner the better. Thinking about it for days can only increase the misery exponentially. When Abraham "saw the place in the distance" he left his servants and his donkey and he and Isaac walked on together. Listen to Abraham's words to the servants, "I and the boy ... will worship and then *we* will come back to you." That plural pronoun "we" is a grand statement of faith. Abraham believed that God would fulfill his covenant promises through Isaac even if it required bringing Isaac back from death. In the words of Paul, Abraham was "fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised" (Rom.4:21). The author of Hebrews tells us that Abraham was willing to sacrifice Isaac at the command of God because "Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead..." (Heb.1:17-19).

Even such strong faith, however, could not diminish the grief of hearing Isaac ask, "Father.... where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Speaking more wisely than he knew at the time, Abraham

replied, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” Not even at that late moment could he bring himself to say, “Son, you are the lamb.”

A sacrifice rejected climaxes the story.

On the mountain top an altar was built and the wood arranged. Then an unprotesting Isaac was bound and laid atop that wood. Abraham “took the knife to slay his son,” and precisely at that moment Isaac became a sacrifice rejected. “The angel of the Lord,” that mysterious messenger who keeps getting confused with the Lord himself in the ancient record, “called out to him from heaven.” Heaven is within calling distance of a man who lives by obedient trust in God. Abraham is forbidden to slay the boy, and the voice continues: “Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.”

This is language accommodated to our human limitations. Of course God already knew the measure of Abraham’s faith. Faith, as Paul would later teach, is “the gift of God.” God knows the size and value of all his gifts. This test was not to teach God but to teach Abraham--and Isaac, too, indirectly. Abraham learned anew that God would keep his covenant. Abraham learned that God rejected human sacrifice even in symbolic rituals. Abraham learned that God doesn’t make the life of faith easy but he does make it possible.

A substitute provided closes the story.

Abraham suddenly spotted a ram caught by its horns in a thicket. He “took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son.” God had provided the sacrifice in a way that Abraham could not have anticipated but for which he was forever grateful. He

called that place of worship “The Lord Will Provide.” The place name became a slogan among the descendants of Abraham, a way of reminding themselves and one another of God’s fidelity to his promises and to his people.

When the worship was concluded, the angel of the Lord spoke again to renew the covenant with Abraham, a covenant that would terminate with blessing upon “all nations on earth.” That covenant has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the only Son of the Father, the Son whom the Father loves, the Son whom the Father did not spare. God’s Son was allowed to offer himself as a sacrifice for sin on the cross of Calvary. He was the one human sacrifice that God ordained and accepted. “God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood.” God’s Son died “instead” of us all. He was raised again with power to save us all from sin and to unite us with the Father forever. He is “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” The Lord has provided!

18. A LITTLE PIECE OF A LARGE PROMISE

Genesis 23:1-20.

Sarah's death is briefly told. Obviously, she was more important to her family than to the writer of Genesis. She died at age 127, having lived to see her son Isaac grow to manhood.

She is described in the Old Testament as a beautiful woman. However, the New Testament commends her for inner beauty. Outer beauty is the result of fortunate genes (or excellent plastic surgery); inner beauty is the result of right relationships, especially the relationship to God. Outer beauty is given, inner beauty is chosen.

Sarah's life had been a mixture of good and bad, as are most human lives.

The first mention of love occurs in this story.

The first mention of love in Scripture is found in God's words to Abraham concerning Isaac--"Isaac, whom you love" (22:2). The Bible doesn't say that Abraham loved Sarah. It does refer to the love of Isaac for Rebekah and of Jacob for Rachel, but not of Abraham for Sarah. However, that Abraham did love her is a rational assumption. When she died he performed the mourning rituals that were part of his culture, and there is no reason to suppose that they were empty rituals mechanically observed. His grief was real.

The first purchase of land occurs in this story.

Abraham wanted to bury Sarah in the land promised to his descendants by the Lord. He was in that land as a resident-alien, and did not have a legal claim to a single acre. Near Mamre, where he and Sarah had been promised a child, and where they had spent

happy years together, was just the right place for her grave--“the cave of Machpelah.” All but two verses of chapter 23 are filled with the story of how Abraham acquired that ground by purchase. That indicates the importance of the purchase in the mind of the writer.

The Hittites who possessed the land recognized and honored Abraham as “a mighty prince”--literally translated, “a prince of God.” They respected the fact that Abraham’s power and possessions were the result of divine blessings. His life had been an evident witness to the faithfulness of God. The sons of Heth offered “the choicest” of their tombs as a resting place for the body of Sarah. But Abraham insisted upon buying “some property.” He wanted full ownership and control of the grave site. What is borrowed or given may be taken back. What is sold confers certain inalienable rights with the title.

In a passage that emphasizes the elaborate courtesy with which such deals were made in that time and place, we are told that a Hittite named Ephron sold the cave of Machpelah to Abraham for “four hundred shekels of silver.” That was a sizable amount of money. Some scholars think Ephron inflated the value of the land and gouged Abraham, taking advantage of the patriarch’s grief and wealth and eagerness to possess that precise property. In any case, Abraham gladly met the price and took possession of the property with a number of free citizens of the Hittite nation as witnesses. There he buried Sarah, and there also would rest, in time, the bodies of Abraham, Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob and Leah.

Taking possession of this field and cave was an expression of faith on Abraham’s part. God had promised the land of Canaan to his descendants as an everlasting possession. Thus far, in his own

lifetime, Abraham had acquired no property in Canaan. The purchase of this property showed that he believed that God would keep the covenant promises made to him.

The passing years would fasten the ultimate hopes of the patriarch to “a better country,” where he could joyfully serve the Lord forever (Heb. 11:13-16). Meanwhile he continued to believe that his descendants would own and occupy the earthly inheritance as well. He was, above all else, a man who trusted God.

Think about it. Your life comes down finally to a burial plot. All you will have in this world is the ground in which your body molds into dust. You may accumulate vast acreage and immense wealth, but at death you will be as broke as any bum who was ever laid to rest in a potter’s field. Unless you have a place in the Father’s house, you will have lost everything. All that matters at last is your relationship to God.

19. SHAPING THE FUTURE

Genesis 24:1-9.

Abraham was gripped by a sobering awareness.

He was now an old man; indeed a very old man. The redundant language employed by the author of Genesis accents this fact: “Abraham was now old and well advanced in years.” Most of his life was behind him. Precious little time remained for him. He had reached the point my wife recently arrived at, the point where you quit saying, “I’m getting old,” and start saying “I am old.”

That he had not only lived long but had lived well is attested by the next words of the passage: “and the Lord had blessed him in every way.” Take your Bible and mark the sentences that begin “Blessed is...” and “Blessed are...” You will quickly realize that God’s blessed man was a man of noble character and worthy life. God loves all men and has mercy on all men, but he only blesses “in every way” those who please him by their faith and by the quality of life to which faith in God leads.

The best of men must die and the longest of lives must end. There have been just two exceptions to that rule, and those exceptions established the rule precisely. I refer, of course, to Enoch and Elijah, who were taken to God without passing through the door of death.

Abraham imposed a serious assignment.

Aware of his advanced years and of Isaac’s bachelor status, Abraham assigned a trusted servant the task of securing a wife for Isaac. “Go to my country and to my own relatives and get a wife for my son Isaac.” Abraham was concerned about the covenant God

had made with him. Through the promised son a promised nation would emerge to occupy a promised land, and a promised blessing would result to all nations of earth. Isaac needed a wife who would share his faith and help continue the fulfillment of that covenant.

For whatever reason, whether age or some other factor, Abraham would not make the trip to Nahor himself to secure a bride for Isaac. He would entrust the mission to a servant. The seriousness of the proposal is indicated by the fact that he selected his “chief servant”--“the one in charge of all that he had”--to carry out the mission. This unnamed servant had a proven record of loyally supervising and protecting Abraham’s extended family and immense wealth. Only the best man would do for this mission.

The seriousness of the assignment is seen also in the fact that Abraham put this most trusted servant under the most solemn oath: “Swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and the God of earth, that you will... get a wife for my son Isaac.” God had placed himself under oath to fulfill the covenant: “The Lord, the God of heaven...promised me on oath...‘To you and your offspring I will give the land.’” Now Abraham wants the servant under oath to carry out an assignment crucial to the covenant’s future. God had sworn by himself, for there was none higher. The servant is to swear by this same God, the God of covenant and creation.

The solemn prohibitions to which the servant swore further attest the seriousness of the mission. “Swear,” Abraham said, “that you will not get a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I am living.” Abraham was familiar with the false gods and the degraded worship of his neighbors. He did not

want Isaac tempted by a pagan wife to dishonor or desert the true and living God. Isaac's bride must be from Abraham's people who worshiped Abraham's God. The prohibition was not racially based but religiously based.

Called upon to swear such a solemn oath, the servant had a single reservation. What if the woman he found was unwilling to return with him to Canaan? If she would not come to Isaac, should he take Isaac to her? Faced with this possibility, Abraham imposed another prohibition upon the matchmaker. If the woman was unwilling to come to Isaac, the servant was released from his oath. Under no circumstances was he to take Isaac to Nahor. Abraham didn't want Isaac tempted to settle down and live outside the promised land, lest over time he forget or forsake the covenant.

Abraham expressed a strong assurance.

In countering the servant's fear Abraham expressed his faith by a strong assurance: "The Lord...will send his angel before you so that you can get a wife for my son from there." He did not share the servant's qualms. Abraham had walked with God for long years, and God had been always faithful to him. He was sure that his plan to secure the right bride for Isaac had God's approval and would prosper under God's guidance. God was even more determined than Abraham to see the covenant unfold within history.

Generations of commentators have treated this ancient story as an allegory. As Abraham sent his servant to secure a bride for Isaac, so the heavenly Father has sent the Holy Spirit into the world to secure a bride for his one and only Son, Jesus Christ. That bride is the church, comprised of those who willingly embrace the gospel's

invitation and promise. The church will be joined with Christ for eternity. The Genesis text is divinely inspired; the traditional interpretation is not. Whether we accept the interpretation or not, we can certainly and gladly assert that the church will inherit, through its union with the Son of God, “a better country” than any earthly Canaan. This glorious destiny will be for all nations the ultimate blessing of the covenant God made with Abraham.

20. EXIT ABRAHAM

Genesis 25:1-11.

The story line of Genesis transitions in this chapter from Abraham to Isaac. The Isaac cycle of stories is prefaced with the brief account of the death and burial of Abraham. Three matters concern us here.

The descendants of Abraham through Keturah are listed.

The covenant God made with Abraham will be continued through Isaac and his descendants. Before writing of them, the author introduces the children of Keturah. In Genesis, Keturah is called “a wife.” In First Chronicles, she is called “a concubine” (1:32).

Just when “Abraham took another wife, whose name was Keturah” is the subject of speculation among scholars. Some argue that the marriage followed Sarah’s death, and that Abraham in his last years was unusually vigorous and fertile. Abraham did live almost forty years after Sarah died. Other scholars contend that the writer’s information is not chronological. They believe that Abraham was probably married to Keturah prior to Sarah’s death.

The matter is not of great importance to us. What we are looking at here is another testimony to the faithfulness of God. When he changed Abram’s name to Abraham, he promised to make Abraham “the father of many nations” (17:4). Listing “the descendants of Keturah” attests the veracity of God. He keeps his word and fulfills his promises. Placing the list here gets it into the record with the least distraction from the main story line.

The disposal of Abraham’s estate follows the list of descendants.

Today men write wills and name executors who divvy up their estate assets after they die. In ancient times men distributed their assets before dying.

Abraham “gave gifts” to “the sons of his concubines,” but he gave the bulk of his estate--“everything he owned”--to Isaac. The son of a primary wife took precedence over the sons born to concubines. What we know of Abraham would incline us to believe that his gifts were generous. His major concern, however, was to endow Isaac with wealth and power as his covenant successor.

Having bestowed gifts upon the sons of his concubines, Abraham “sent them away from his son Isaac.” Abraham was doing all within his power to secure Isaac’s future. The old patriarch knew from experience that distance often contributed to peace.

The death and burial of Abraham completes his story in the Bible.

First, his age at death is given--“a hundred and seventy-five years.” This is called “a good old age” and the deceased is described as “full of years.” We would certainly agree, given our life-spans today. This again implies the faithfulness of God, for God had long before promised Abraham, “You...will go to your fathers in peace and be buried at a good old age” (15:15).

Upon his death, Scripture says, “he was gathered to his people.” Some commentators regard this as simply a way of saying he was buried with family members. We are told, however, that he was buried in the cave of Machpelah where Sarah’s body had been laid to rest. At the time of Abraham’s burial Sarah was the only other

occupant of that tomb. “Gathered to his people” points to a reunion with family members after death.

The cave and the field in which it was situated was all the land that Abraham owned and controlled in Canaan, though he had lived there for a hundred years. He died still looking forward to the inheritance of that land by the descendants of Isaac.

Abraham was buried by his two legal sons, Ishmael and Isaac. His devotion to Isaac as the child of promise and heir to the covenant never eclipsed his love for his firstborn son Ishmael. That the half-brothers shared the burial responsibilities indicates an amicable relationship between them. Nothing is sadder than quarreling relatives who intrude their disputes into a funeral service. Abraham died in peace and was buried in peace, a fitting end to the earthly sojourn of this “friend of God.”

The account closes with the words, “After Abraham’s death, God blessed his son Isaac.” Once again the fidelity of God to his covenant promises is stressed by the writer. The blessing survived the burial. God continued to work in history to bring blessing upon all nations.

Above all else, Abraham was a man of faith. His confidence was grounded in the faithfulness of God. This is the supreme lesson we take from our survey of the Abraham narratives in Scripture.

THE STORIES OF ISAAC

BY

W. E. McCumber

1. THE HANDICAPS OF ISAAC

Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob... (Matthew 1:2).

We have studied the “Abraham cycle” of stories in Genesis. Now we are going to look at the “Isaac cycle” of stories. They are fewer in number and they are quieter in tone. Abraham was pre-eminently a man of faith, but Isaac was a man of peace. He was less aggressive, less assertive, and less adventurous than his illustrious father. But he was also a vital link in history’s most important chain, and we can learn valuable lessons from what is written of him.

Though it may seem odd, I want to start from a passage in Matthew, not from one in Genesis. The passage is an excerpt from the genealogy of Jesus. “Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob...” From this snippet of Scripture I want to discuss the handicaps of Isaac.

Isaac was handicapped by the strength of his father. Isaac was the son of Abraham. It is never easy to be the child of a rich and famous father. To grow up hearing your father extolled by those who admired him, or slandered by those who hated him, can be very frustrating to a youngster.

Abraham was a trail blazer; Isaac walked in paths worn smooth by his father’s sandals. Abraham chose his occupation and built his fortune through labor, sacrifice and faith; Isaac “fell into” both the occupation and fortune without choice or struggle. Abraham trained and led servants in warfare; Isaac preferred moving to fighting. The differences between the two men may reflect Isaac’s determination to

cast his own small shadow rather than stand in his father's large shadow.

Isaac was handicapped by the weakness of his sons.

Isaac's older son, Esau, "despised his birthright," and bartered priceless authority and responsibility for the immediate gratification of sensual appetite. He valued stew above soul. Later, angry and defiant, he married pagan women to spite his grieving parents.

Isaac's younger son, Jacob, cruelly deceived him in order to gain for himself the blessing intended by Isaac for his firstborn son. Isaac bestowed his blessings by faith, according to *Hebrews*, but his faith, however sincere, was misdirected, thanks to his son's chicanery. Jacob knew what he wanted, and he would utilize whatever means were necessary to achieve his ambitions.

The man who valued peace had strife within his household, strife that was generated by the peculiar weaknesses of his sons. It is not easy to be the father of quarreling, competitive sons.

Isaac was sustained, despite his disappointing handicaps, by the faithfulness of his God.

He was less exciting than Abraham. He was less ambitious than Jacob. Their lives were more dramatic by far. But God used Isaac to further the same divine purpose furthered by Abraham and Jacob. By his grace and power, God fits rough-edged humans into his holy plans.

However we may differ from one another, we can have this in common--our faith in God. And always, the object of our faith is more important than the size of our faith. A little faith in a great God achieves more than a large faith in a puny god.

We all, like Isaac, are handicapped by flawed heritages and by personal blunders. Nevertheless, God loves us, forgives us and employs us. As he was with Isaac, so he is with us. We study Isaac, therefore, not to judge his failures but to glorify our God.

2. THE BIRTH OF ISAAC

Genesis 21:1-7.

We surveyed this passage when we studied the Abraham stories. Let us look at it again to see what the birth of Isaac tells us about God, that our faith may be enlarged.

God's promise was validated by Isaac's birth.

Verse 1 states simply, "The Lord was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah what he had promised." He promised her that she would bear a son. As years passed it seemed to her that the Lord had forgotten or forsaken his promise. Sarah had doubt that edged on cynicism as her body aged and no son was conceived.

Isaac's birth teaches us to be patient and persevering in faith. God keeps his promises. His timing may confuse us, frustrate us, and test our faith to the breaking point. He ignores our clocks and calendars. He decides the right time for his own actions. He often works in ways that surprise--or even shock--us, but he never fails to keep his word.

When he makes a promise to us, whatever intervenes between the giving and keeping of the promise, we can bank on the integrity of God.

God's power was demonstrated in Isaac's birth.

"I have borne him a son in his old age," Sarah declared. How like a woman! She mentions Abraham's old age but says nothing about her own. She was no spring chicken, she was an old hen. Abraham was a hundred and Sarah was ninety when Isaac was born.

Both are described as “well advanced in years,” and Sarah said, “I am worn out and my master is old” (Gen. 18:11-12). Humanly and naturally speaking, they were too old to make a baby. But the Lord is not bound by human resources and “natural laws.” He can bring life from death. His power is adequate for his promises.

If the Lord promises a miracle he will perform a miracle. He is the God of infinite resources and therefore of continual surprises. His power is related to high purpose, of course. Isaac was a vital link in the chain of generations that would produce at last the savior. God’s power is devoted to the purpose of salvation.

God’s pleasure was celebrated at Isaac’s birth. “God has brought me laughter,” exclaimed Sarah. Isaac means “he laughs.” While God doesn’t do miracles to entertain, his miracles bring joy to human hearts. Sarah laughed. Abraham laughed. Did God laugh with them? I think so. I believe that he takes pleasure in his works of grace. He brings us joy from the depths of his own joy.

The psalmist tells us that God laughs at the kings of earth who oppose his work (Psa. 2:4). Jesus tells us that there is rejoicing in heaven when a sinner repents (Luke 15:7, 10). God takes pleasure in giving pleasure. He enjoys being God, being “our Father in heaven.”

To recap: The story of Isaac’s birth bears to our hearts some happy lessons about the integrity of God’s promise, the invincibility of God’s power, and the immensity of God’s pleasure.

3. THE SACRIFICE OF ISAAC

Genesis 22:6-14.

We surveyed this story from the perspective of Abraham's obedient faith. We want to review it from the perspective of Isaac's role in the event. Now the accent falls, not on a father's faith in God, but upon a son's trust in his father.

Isaac's curiosity surfaced in a question.

Father and son were climbing in silence. No doubt Abraham's heart was so full of grief that he found it almost impossible to converse. Probably Isaac was subdued by his father's demeanor. But a boy's curiosity can hardly fail to break the silence-barrier, and he asked, "Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"

How old was Isaac? We are not told and guessing has not been helpful. The one thing we know is that he was old enough to carry on his shoulder the wood for the fire and climb the mountain in step with his father.

Abraham replied, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." At this point the aching heart of Abraham would not allow him to identify the sacrifice that God had commanded. His answer was truly evasive and evasively true.

Isaac's confidence is shown in his silence.

He makes no response to his father's enigmatic statement. He does not intrude upon his father's unhappy mood. Did his father's grave countenance and solemn speech cause Isaac to suspect, however dimly, that he was to be the sacrificial victim? This much is sure: Isaac's silence evidences his trust in his father's wisdom and love.

As Abraham bound the lad and laid him tenderly upon the wood, Isaac says nothing. He had seen Abraham build other altars and offer sheep upon them. He had witnessed his father's devotion to God in his home life and business life. He does not question the integrity of his father's faith and obedience to God. By his silence Isaac is expressing a similar trust in, and devotion to, his father.

Abraham's faith in God is revealed in his speech to the servants: "I and the boy... will worship and then we will come back to you" (v. 5). Isaac's faith in Abraham is revealed in his silence during the situation.

Isaac's counterpart is the heavenly Father's earthly son, Jesus. The New Testament alludes to the story in Genesis 22. Hebrews 11:17-19 declares that Abraham offered Isaac by faith, convinced that God would raise him from death in order to fulfill his covenant promises. "Figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death."

James cites the offering of Isaac as a work that "justified" and "completed" the faith of Abraham--illustrating his argument that faith without works doesn't save us. We are saved by a faith that comes to proof in actions (James 2:14-24).

Of special interest to us is Paul's statement in Romans 8:32: "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" Here is a clear echo of God's words to Abraham, "You have not withheld your son, your only son."

God legislated against human sacrifice, which was practiced by some of Israel's ancient neighbors. If he would not allow Abraham, or

any of Abraham's descendents, to sacrifice a child, why did he not spare Jesus, the beloved Son with whom he was well-pleased? The death of Isaac could not have atoned for Abraham's sins. One sin-flawed human life cannot atone for another sin-flawed human life. Sinners cannot save themselves nor can they save one another. Jesus, the sinless one, could be put to death and raised from death as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. A greater Father than Abraham offered a better son than Isaac. God provided the Son who is also "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).

Isaac was spared because he was not perfect and unblemished. Jesus was not spared because he was perfect and unblemished. Upon his death had no claim; therefore, by dying he could be our substitute and savior.

The ancient story impels us to admire Isaac for his trust and confidence, but the death of Jesus inspires us to adore him as savior and Lord. Calvary became the ultimate meaning of Abraham's name for the place of sacrifice: "The Lord Will Provide."

4. THE MARRIAGE OF ISAAC

Genesis 24:62-67.

There was no courtship, no elaborate ceremony. All is simply stated and briefly told. The groom's age is not disclosed. The bride's attire is not described. The squib recorded in Genesis doesn't sound important to those who follow the society pages of a modern newspaper. But the marriage endured and the love that bloomed so quickly lasted throughout the couple's lifetime.

Rebekah's question and the servant's answer are the only verbal elements in the story.

Whatever else was said, whatever conversation ensued between bride and groom is left unrecorded. There are no exclamations of surprise or delight. There are no declarations of intention or passion. There are no descriptions of embrace and no revelations of thought. Reading the short and straightforward paragraph is like watching a silent movie with scarcely any dubbing scrolled across the bottom of the screen.

"Who is that man in the field coming to meet us?" is Rebekah's question. "He is my master," is the servant's answer. No details of his character are given her; no tidbits from his family history are supplied. What Rebekah learns of Isaac in that moment is implied by two words--"meditate" and "master."

Isaac had gone into the field to meditate. He was a man given to quiet reflection and introspection. He was a thinker. He communed with nature and with God. He thought about life, its events and their meanings. He was more inwardly directed than outwardly directed. He was not a young man who would act rashly or

behave erratically. There was solidity and strength in his demeanor and habits. That much she could have inferred from “meditate.”

He was also a man of wealth, and therefore of importance and influence. That she could discern from “master.” The combination of words suggests a man who would make a loyal, dependable and interesting companion.

The servants report and the master’s reaction furnish the heart of the account.

“The servant told Isaac all he had done.” The details of his trip to secure a bride for Isaac are not retold. We are given them in the earlier portion of this chapter. We may safely assume, however, that nothing was omitted from his report. The guidance of God was evident throughout and must have satisfied Isaac at once. This was the young woman providentially chosen to share his life and bear his children. Providentially chosen beats emotionally chosen.

“Arranged” marriages are not the stuff of American culture. We find the idea unpleasant if not abhorrent. Even when we love and admire our mothers, we do not trust our fathers’ judgment in the selection of our wives. Ours is a much more romantic concept. Boy meets girl. Boy and girl fall deeply in love. Boy proposes and girl accepts. A wedding is staged, but only in fairy tales--and increasingly seldom in real life--do they “live happily ever after.” Our divorce rate does little to commend our concepts as superior to those of cultures where marriages are parentally arranged.

“So she became his wife and he loved her.” To us that is backwards. We would prefer, “So he loved her and she became his wife.” Love must precede the marriage to make it workable. Really?

Perhaps what finally matters is that love develops, strengthens and endures. If you need a horse and carriage and secure both and both are good it doesn't matter which you acquire first.

The marriage of Isaac turns out to be a love story. It's not the kind our youth would desire and not the kind our authors would create; nevertheless, it's a love story. And it folds into a much bigger story that expresses a much larger love--the love of God for his lost creation. Isaac and Rebekah, despite the scant "press" they receive in the Genesis record, are significant links in the story of salvation, the story of how God in his infinite grace gave to the world a savior from sin and a book to introduce that savior to his intended bride, the church. The Bible we are studying is the report of many servants who abetted the Father's quest for his Son's bride.

5. ISAAC BECOMES A FATHER

Genesis 25:19-26.

Abraham died and was buried by Isaac and Ishmael. The brothers were either at peace or observing a truce. Their descendants were mutually hostile and still are.

What scholars call “the Isaac cycle” properly begins at verse 19: “This is the account of Abraham’s son Isaac.” Almost at once we are introduced to Jacob and Esau and the story really becomes more theirs than Isaac’s. Isaac was a link in the chain, but in terms of the amount of “press” he receives he is nearly a missing link. In the furtherance of God’s work no two roles are precisely the same, but none is without significance.

Even while living, Isaac was somewhat “the late Isaac.” “Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah.” I told you that he was a passive person. “Isaac was sixty years old when Rebekah gave birth.” I told you he was not an aggressive man.

However, the twenty years that rolled by before he and Rebekah had children was a deliberate divine delay. We saw how the faith of Abraham and Sarah was tested by the long, barren years before Isaac’s birth. God had promised them a son through whom the covenant promises would be fulfilled. They had to finally believe in the suspension of natural laws before that tested faith was crowned with the joy of the child’s laughter. Now Isaac and Rebekah were undergoing a like test of faith as her womb remained fruitless.

Isaac, like his father, would not accept the frustration as final.

To their unrewarded efforts to become parents, Isaac added the strategy of prayer. “Isaac prayed to the Lord on behalf of his wife,

because she was barren. The Lord answered his prayer, and his wife Rebekah became pregnant.” God does things in response to prayer that otherwise would not happen. I don’t know why, but I don’t need to know. I do know that Scripture challenges me to a life of prayer. That I am commanded to pray and taught to pray by its pages is enough to make prayer my responsibility and resource. Let me replace “I” with “we” for prayer is not a clergy thing, it’s every Christian’s duty.

When we pray, we must guard against the too-easy assumption that God’s silences or “delays” mean that we have prayed wrongly and should suspend praying for that particular matter.

That God answered prayer did not make birth or parenting easy.

“The babies jostled each other within her.” Rebekah must have sensed a special significance to this miserable condition, for “she went to inquire of the Lord.” Many women would have simply endured the inner turmoil, or might have consulted some village granny for an explanation. Rebekah was pregnant by the mercy of God and she chose to seek the wisdom of God.

She was told (we are not told how) that two nations were represented by the twins in her womb. One would be stronger than the other. Reversing the usual order of life, the older would serve the younger. God was telling her that his purposes were sovereign and would be served, wittingly or unwittingly, by persons in competition and by nations in conflict. God delights, as the apostle Paul tells us, in choosing the weak to shame the strong, the foolish to shame the

wise, and the lowly to shame the high and mighty. He provided our salvation through a crucified Jewish carpenter.

Something of the twins' future was indicated when they were born, for the younger was grasping the heel of the firstborn.

God is sovereign, and chooses surprising ways to keep us apprised of that truth. What he can achieve with flawed instruments flashes through Scripture and history as the radiance of his glory.

6. ISAAC BECOMES WEALTHY

Genesis 26:1-22.

With Abraham dead, Isaac now becomes the covenant-partner and covenant-bearer of the Lord. In this chapter there are immediately obvious parallels between Abraham and Isaac, but the differences are equally as noticeable.

Famine prompted a journey.

As Abraham in his time, so now Isaac is forced to travel because “there was a famine in the land.” He intended to “go down into Egypt,” but the Lord “appeared” to him and forbade that destination. He was told to “Stay in this land”--Gerar, the land occupied by Philistines--and promised the presence and blessings of the Lord as the reward of his obedience. At this time the covenant promises to Abraham of numerous descendants and lands were transferred to Isaac. The father’s faith-inspired obedience is set before the son as a model that challenges emulation.

Compare God’s tribute to Abraham in verse 5 to Moses’ charge to Israel in Deuteronomy 11:1. The same words are used for the “laws” kept by Abraham and those Israel was obliged to keep. Abraham had the moral law written upon his heart before Moses received it on tablets of stone or preserved it upon pages of a scroll.

Failure prompts a deception.

Like Abraham before him, Isaac called Rebekah “my sister,” not “my wife.” He feared that her beauty might tempt a Philistine to kill him in order to possess her. He repeated the folly of his father, whose celebrated faith failed him briefly in similar circumstances.

The incident reminds us that the best of men are not always at their best.

Abimilech reprovved the deception because it might have led one of his subjects into adultery. After reprimanding Isaac the king issued orders to his people. Isaac and Rebekah were protected under the threat of death to anyone who molested them. Here a Gentile king displayed lofty moral character, reminding us that God's grace extends to unlikely persons in unlikely places.

Unlike the Abimilech who dealt with Abraham, this king did not have to be warned in a dream or threatened with death to keep him from adultery. Instead, he issued the warning and imposed the penalty himself.

Favor prompts a jealousy.

The Lord blessed Isaac with bumper crops, expanded flocks and herds, and increased numbers of servants. As a consequence, "the Philistines envied him." Tensions escalated and the king ordered Isaac to "Move away," saying, "You have become too powerful for us."

Ever the man of peace, Isaac moved away to "the Valley of Gerar," where he reopened the wells that were dug in Abraham's time but "stopped up" after Abraham died. Honoring his heritage, Isaac called them by the names Abraham had given them.

Isaac's servants dug fresh wells also, but the water they discovered was claimed by the jealous Philistines. Twice Isaac "moved on" rather than have trouble, and a third well was dug that was not contested. He had finally moved far enough to dissipate the

fears of the Philistines. He named the well “Room” saying, “Now the Lord has given us room and we will flourish in the land.”

That night the Lord visited him again and reaffirmed the covenant promises of presence, progeny and place.

The thrust of the passage, as you can readily see, is not Isaac’s faith or merit. The accent falls on the faithfulness of the Lord to keep his promises. That covenant-fidelity extends as surely to us as it did to Isaac in that ancient time. What God has promised us he will do.

7. ISAAC GETS HELPED AND HURT

Genesis 26:23-35.

Fearing Isaac's growing wealth and power, King Abimelech chased him off (v. 16). Isaac finally moved far enough to dig a well and supply his people and his flocks with water without being harassed by the Philistines. As a man of peace he was grateful for the pleasant circumstances. In tones of relief and confidence he declared, "We will flourish in the land."

The passage speaks of a source of gladness.

"The Lord appeared to him" and renewed his covenant promises first made to Abraham.

A *presence* was promised: "Do not be afraid, for I am with you." Isaac had been opposed by contentious men; now he is comforted by a gracious God. God with him would make him bigger and stronger than all opposing forces.

A *progeny* was promised: "I will bless you and will increase the number of your descendants." The only child was promised children and grandchildren, a source of joy to his heart. The Lord pledges these descendants "for the sake of my servant Abraham." This does not mean that Isaac was not also cherished by the Lord. Soon the Lord will be calling himself, "The God of Abraham and the God of Isaac."

The Lord of the covenant was the source of Isaac's gladness. In response to his appearance and assurance, "Isaac built an altar there and called on the name of the Lord." The blesser was more to him than the blessings. When we realize who he is and what he does, the Lord is our joy, not the things he bestows.

The passage speaks also of a source of greatness.

The king who chased Isaac away now looks him up, accompanied by his “personal adviser” and “the commander of his forces.” They were an imposing and prestigious trio of visitors.

Their motive was more political than social. They feared the mushrooming riches and clout that Isaac possessed. And they rightly identified the source of his greatness in their opening words: “We saw clearly that the Lord was with you.” Abimilech was a king, and Isaac was a private citizen, but it was Abimilech who took the initiative in suing for peace, not Isaac. Usually, the little dog tries to befriend the big dog, hoping to avoid a fight. Obviously, Isaac is the big dog here, as Abimilech pleads, “Let us make a treaty with you that you will do us no harm.”

Ever the peace-lover, Isaac prepared a feast for the royal delegation, and they all vowed under oath to avoid hostilities. Peace with God leads to peace with men.

8. ISAAC GETS CONNED

Genesis 27:1-29.

This portion of Scripture tells a story filled with intrigue and deception. It tells how God works in, with, around and through the infirmities and iniquities of people to achieve his purposes. It is a story of how grace triumphs over guilt.

Isaac was blinded.

He was *blinded by old age*. His eyes became “so weak that he could no longer see.” Sightless, he became a victim of his infirmity and his wife’s ingenuity. Before her twins were born the Lord informed Rebekah, “The older will serve the younger.” Did she ever share that message with Isaac? We aren’t told but it’s easy and usual to suppose she did.

Isaac was also *blinded by tradition*. Commonly, the oldest son received a “blessing” that conveyed special responsibility, authority and property upon him. Included in the blessing that Isaac wanted to bestow upon his favorite son was the covenant that God made with Abraham and renewed with Isaac. He seems, in spite of the divine purpose, to be determined to grant Esau such a blessing.

Rebekah was just as determined to foil her husband’s intentions and secure the blessing for Jacob “by hook or crook.” This is a story in which none of the characters appear in a good light.

Isaac was outwitted.

He was no match for the scheming Rebekah. She had been told that the older brother would serve the younger, and that suited her fine because Jacob had become her favorite. Lacking faith that God could work out his purpose apart from her morally dubious help,

she persuaded Jacob to deceive his father and receive the blessing while Esau was still out hunting.

She prepared one of Isaac's favorite meals and took the initiative in disguising Jacob to feel and smell like Esau. So disguised, Jacob took the food to his blind father and requested the blessing. When Isaac marveled that "Esau" was back so soon, Jacob dared to make the Lord party to his con job, saying, "The Lord your God gave me success."

The voice was Jacob's but the hands and smell seemed to be Esau's. Isaac, trusting his fingers and nose more than his ears, ate the food and conferred the blessing. Jacob had now effectively exploited the weakness of his brother and the blindness of his father, cheered on by his adoring mother.

Isaac was overruled.

The Lord intended that blessing, with the privileges and responsibilities it conveyed, for Jacob. He overruled the intention of Isaac to bestow it upon a son who had proven himself, in his materialism and marriages, to disvalue that blessing.

This does not mean that God approved the fraud perpetrated by Rebekah and Jacob. God has infinite resources for achieving his purposes. He does not require evil to achieve good. The story does remind us, however, that our great and wise God can compel even the wrongdoing of people to serve his holy will.

The blessing contained both affluence and influence. It spoke blessing upon those who blessed Jacob and curses upon those who cursed him. It forecast material riches and political power. These would prove to be hard won, but they were unfailing.

How wicked is man's heart! Jacob mixed fraud with faith, unable to believe, as did his grandfather Abraham, that what God had promised he would deliver. In his foolish pride and greed, he tried to help God along by bending the infirmities of others to his own desires. Like millions today, he expected the ends to justify the means.

How great is our God! He makes even the wrath of man to praise him. He achieves his purpose, weaving into the pattern both our good and evil. No one outwits him. No one deceives him. No one derails his intentions. The goals he sets he always reaches. The cockeyed history of humanity will end as he plans in spite of all man's political ambitions or moral compromises.

THE STORIES OF JACOB

BY

W. E. McCumber

1. JACOB FOOLS HIS FATHER

Genesis 27:1-38.

Jacob had earlier proved his cunning when he preyed upon his brother Esau's weakness to obtain his birthright (25:29-36). The next chapter in this unsavory story finds him preying upon his father Isaac's blindness to steal Esau's blessing.

This blessing was no trivial matter. Far from a pious wish it was a transfer of patriarchal rights and riches. It was reserved for the person who would become the next bearer of God's covenant with Abraham. Its recipient became the family head, both materially and spiritually.

Normally the blessing was conferred upon the eldest son. However, the Lord had already told Rebekah, before her twin sons were born, that "the older will serve the younger." For this reason, and probably in large part because she favored Jacob, she was determined that the blessing would be his "by hook or by crook."

An overheard conversation.

Isaac, old and blind and expecting to die soon, summoned Esau. Esau was an outdoorsman. He would have made an excellent model for the L. L. Bean catalogue. Isaac sent the lad, a skillful hunter, in quest of wild game for one of his favorite meals. The meal would have religious significance, too, for blessings were often conferred following a special dinner. Isaac affirmed his intention, after he had eaten, of giving Esau the patriarchal blessing "in the presence of the Lord." The Lord would be witness to the transfer of covenant-custody to Isaac's firstborn.

Food had played a major role when Esau bargained away his birthright. Now it would play a major role when Isaac wrongly bestowed his blessing. Sin often gains access to our lives through our physical appetites. Jesus was tempted to turn a stone into bread when he hungered. Unlike Esau, unlike Isaac, Jesus overcame satanic plotting by his loyalty to the word of God. In its light he discerned the will of his Father and in its strength he did that will, rejecting all compromises.

Why would Isaac seek to circumvent the will of the Lord by honoring instead a longstanding tradition? Perhaps Rebekah had never shared with Isaac what the Lord told her about the older son serving the younger. If she did, however, perhaps Isaac's faith fell victim to his love for Esau and to his respect for tradition. His age and infirmities could have been a major reason for his conduct (or misconduct) in the matter. We can only speculate and that proves useless. All we know for sure is that the plan of the aging patriarch was about to collide with the will of the Lord. That, as we know from our own lives and the lives of many others, is a common occurrence.

The conversation between Isaac and Esau was "overheard" by Rebekah, who rightly coveted the patriarchal blessing for Jacob. Before she could get her apron tied she was plotting to deceive Isaac and disappoint Esau.

An underhanded conspiracy.
Rebekah called Jacob and told him what Isaac planned to do. She then submitted a counter-plan. She would prepare the meal and Jacob would serve it, pretending to be his older brother. Evidently she was confident that she could make goat stew taste like a wild

game ragout. Probably she counted on Isaac's aged taste buds to fall for the culinary substitution. Jacob had no questions to raise about her cooking, but he told her the ruse wouldn't work because Isaac could feel the difference between the hairy hands of Esau and the smooth hands of Jacob. Angered by the attempt to deceive him, the chosen target of their plotting would then bestow a curse instead of a blessing.

Rebekah knew how to make it work. She would disguise Jacob's hands and arms with goatskin that would fool blind Isaac. She would dress Jacob in Esau's "best clothes," which would be imbued with Esau's distinctive odor and that would greatly strengthen the deception. She was confident enough, and perhaps desperate enough, to wish the curse upon herself if the plot failed. It seems that Jacob didn't argue long or logically. He found her persuasive, partly because he so strongly shared her desire that he become the family pater, priest and prophet rolled into one. People can believe easily what they covet earnestly--can't we?

The fraudulent scheme worked. Talk about chutzpah--Jacob even dared to inject the Lord's name into the deception. When he came with the steaming meal, Isaac was surprised that the hunter was already back and the meal was already cooked. Jacob brushed his father's surprise aside with an atrocious lie: "The Lord your God gave me success."

Something didn't sound right to Isaac so he called Jacob up close in order to feel his hands. He reasoned that Esau might sound like Jacob but Jacob couldn't feel like Esau. He didn't count on the clever skill of his scheming wife. His indirect search for truth gave

way to a direct question: “Are you really my son Esau?” A man willing to act a lie won’t hesitate to tell a lie, and Jacob brazenly replied, “I am.”

Content with the physical evidence, Isaac enjoyed the meal and then bestowed the blessing. He wished for Jacob the prosperity and authority that God would bestow upon the custodian of the covenant that God had made with Abraham.

Jacob went out and Esau came in. He carried a tasty meal and urged Isaac, “sit up and eat” and then “give me your blessing.” Stunned, Isaac asked, “Who are you?” “Your firstborn, Esau,” came the answer and Isaac “trembled violently.” In that awful moment he knew that he had been deceived and knew that the blessing, once bestowed, could not be retracted. Esau, “with a loud and bitter cry,” had to settle for a lesser blessing. In what almost reads as understatement, we are told that “Esau held a grudge against Jacob” and said “I will kill my brother Jacob.”

Talk about a dysfunctional family! Talk about a failed faith! This was blue ribbon jealousy, scheming and deception. God intended for Jacob to have that birthright and blessing. Don’t insult God, however, by supposing for a moment that he approved the ways and means devised by Rebekah and Jacob to secure that treasure. They didn’t trust God to work it out in righteousness and truth; they didn’t act in faith but in unbelief and falsehood. They believed that the end justifies the means. God, who is both faithful and forgiving, would prove once again that he can make even man’s sin and wrath the servants of his purpose. In doing so, he often allows what he cannot approve.

As we will see, Jacob reaped what he sowed. He would become the victim of plotting and pretense just as he had been perpetrator of them. Life boomerangs.

2. JACOB FLEES HIS BROTHER AND MEETS HIS GOD

Genesis 27:42-28:22.

“I will kill my brother.” Rebekah took Esau’s threat to kill Jacob at full face value. To protect her darling Jacob she hatched another plot. Hers was a busy mind as one deception required another. She persuaded Isaac to send Jacob away, that he might find a suitable wife from among her brother Laban’s girls. Better to marry him off than to let an angry Esau bump him off.

Isaac readily agreed, which was second nature to him. Besides being a passive man, no doubt conceding often to Rebekah, he didn’t want the heir of the Abrahamic covenant to put his faith at risk by marriage to a pagan wife with a pagan god. The plan now proposed by Rebekah sounded good to Isaac. It would certainly prove good for Jacob, though he would encounter some rough bumps in the road.

On the lam from a scam.

Jacob fled the wrath of Esau with a blessing from Isaac ringing in his ears: “May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and increase your number until you become a community of people. May he give you and your descendants the blessing given to Abraham, so that you may take possession of the land where you now live as an alien, the land God gave to Abraham.”

A wife, a family, a homeland--these were now the cherished goals of Jacob. They formed his long term plans. His short term goal was to stay alive until his brother’s fury subsided. That cooling off period would be longer and more complicated than he and his anxious mother expected. He would discover that Uncle Laban carried the family genes for shifty, selfish and scheming behavior.

In the desert with a dream.

“Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Haran.” How simply a new departure and a new direction and a new destiny were stated. He did not know what the future held but he would meet on that journey the one who held the future.

As the sun set and darkness fell Jacob called it a day and stretched out, head pillowed on a stone, to “catch some Z’s.” Running from an angry man who had sworn to kill him created a need for refreshing sleep. One’s head on a rock, however, seems like an invitation to sleep apnea and weird dreams. He dreamed of a “staircase” stretched between earth and heaven on which God’s angels were “ascending and descending.” Centuries would pass before “Charlie’s Angels” bailed people out of trouble, but God’s angels were even more effective in protecting and providing--and they were real, not fictional.

At the top of the staircase the Lord appeared, speaking some wondrous promises to the startled fugitive. The Lord’s first words were a sort of identification card: “I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac.” He was the covenant-maker whose promises of prosperity, progeny and property were first made to Abraham and then repeated to Isaac and would now be given to Jacob. That would instantly capture the attention of the schemer-dreamer.

The first promise was a gift of *property*: “I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying.” For this land Jacob had done another kind of lying! “The earth is the Lord’s.” He

has the right to give any part of the earth to any person or nation he wishes to enrich and/or protect.

The next promise was the gift of *progeny*: “Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south.” Some people’s lives spread, others sadly contract.

The third promise was the gift of a *presence*: “I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” The Lord’s presence is the proof of his promises and the power for their fulfillment.

Set in this cluster of promises was a crown jewel indeed: “All peoples of earth will be blessed through you and your offspring.” This lonely man, on the lam under a death threat, would have a global influence for good. Wow! These were words crowded with destiny beyond Jacob’s wildest dreams. We know the “offspring” who blesses the whole world--Jesus, the son of Abraham, the Son of God. Out of the one came many; out of the many came one.

Wide awake with an awesome avowal.

Jacob “awoke from his sleep” with a new understanding: “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it...How awesome is this place!” Any place where the Lord encounters people with an offer to be their God and their guide is awesome. Jacob would expect to meet the Lord, or be met by the Lord, at an altar erected by Grandfather Abraham or in the home of Father Isaac. Now he knows that any place on earth chosen by the Lord for a divine-human, life changing encounter is “Bethel”--“the house of God”

and “the gate of heaven.” The whole earth is porous to God and heaven.

Jacob turned his pillow into a pillar, a commemorative stone that marked the spot where a speaking God assured a sinning man of “goodness and love” that would “follow [him] all the days of [his] life.” Where was that place for you? For me it was an unpaved intersection in North Miami Beach, Florida one memorable Friday night over 70 years ago. The intervening decades have proved him true to his word.

The presence and promises of the Lord evoked grateful responses from Jacob. “The Lord will be my God,” he vowed. “Of all that you give me I will give you a tenth,” he pledged. Tithing is first mentioned in the adventures of Abraham and is now promised by his awestruck and thankful grandson. Has it been your response to the saving grace of God? It should be.

“Jacob continued his journey.” He is high-stepping now as a new man with a new plan. He is in partnership with the Lord. He didn’t deserve the least of God’s promised mercies and neither do we, but like him, we can live by them and thus fulfill the divine purpose for our human lives.

Yes, “Jacob continued his journey.” He had places to go, people to meet, plans to fulfill, but never would he forget Bethel. As William Hunter wrote and sang,

O sacred hour! O hallowed spot!
Where love divine first found me;
Wherever falls my distant lot,
My heart shall linger round thee.

3. JACOB MEETS HIS MATE AND MATCH

Genesis 29:1-14.

Fortified by the promise of the Lord, “I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go,” Jacob resumed his journey. It began as a journey of fear and now becomes a journey of faith. This is true of all who meet the Lord through his word and begin to serve him in gratitude for his mercy. The Hebrew text literally reads, “Jacob lifted up his feet,” using a verb that appears but once in the Old Testament. It is possible to make too much or too little of this rare expression, and the NIV translation, “Jacob continued on his journey,” is adequate.

Jacob “came to the land of the eastern peoples.” That expression would indicate the land east of the Jordan or the land northeast of Canaan, and in this case it refers to the latter. He came to where his mother had lived before she consented to return with Abraham’s servant to become Isaac’s wife.

Jacob here meets his future mate.

The venue of their meeting was a well. Often a well appears in the stories that comprise so much of the Bible. The reason is simple; in desert country the waterhole is vital to all life and a community well was common to nomads and villagers. It became what our churches were in earlier times in America--the meeting place and the mating place.

Jacob first encountered some shepherds who watered their flocks of sheep from that well. Their custom was to wait until all the sheep and shepherds arrived at the well, and then they removed the heavy stone that covered it. The water was then drawn for men and

beasts on a “first come, first served” basis. The “mouth of the well” would then be re-covered and shepherds and sheep would disperse.

Questioning them, Jacob learned to his joy that they were from Haran and knew his uncle Laban--knew enough about him to report that he was well. Even as they spoke to Jacob his cousin Rachel arrived with her father’s sheep. While she was at a distance Jacob told them to uncover the well and water their flocks. He wanted them gone when he met and conversed with Rachel. They tersely replied, “We can’t.” They were unwilling to forsake their time-honored tradition at the word of some cocky stranger.

When Rachel arrived Jacob exhibited his unusual strength by rolling away the stone himself. He might have been a “mama’s boy,” but he was no sissy. He next personally “watered his uncle’s sheep.” He was eager to court Rachel’s favor by easing the burden of her work after informing her that he was the son of her aunt Rebekah, her father’s sister. He kissed Rachel and wept with joy to announce their blood kinship. Marriage to cousins was a common practice in Jacob’s day, and he was drawn immediately to Rachel, a beautiful blossom on the family tree. On learning who this strong and emotional young man was, Rachel raced home to tell her father.

Jacob now meets his match.

On hearing the news Laban “hurried to meet him,” He “embraced him and kissed him and brought him to his home.” He may have had mixed emotions in the welcome he accorded Jacob. His father Bethuel had given his sister, Rebekah, to be the bride of Isaac, and had received a huge dowry for her. Perhaps history was repeating itself and Isaac would enrich him for consenting to a

marriage between Jacob and Rachel. Or maybe he saw this as a golden opportunity to “unload” his daughters through marriage into a wealthy family. We aren’t told, we don’t know, and speculation is needless.

Jacob told him “all these things.” Again we are somewhat frustrated by lack of details. What did “these things” include? Did he share with Uncle Laban the deception of Isaac, the flight from Esau, the plots of his mother and his encounter with the Lord at Bethel? Or did “all these things” include only his wife-seeking mission, the conversation with the shepherds, and the subsequent assistance to Rachel? We don’t know, though scholars have invested lots of time, paper and ink to write lengthy guesses.

Jacob soon learned that he had met his match as a scheming opportunist. Laban had trickery in his genes, the kind that Rebekah had exhibited in deceiving and duping Isaac. Life boomerangs. What goes around comes around. What we reap we sow. The con artist will get conned.

4. JACOB EARNS HIS WIVES

Genesis 29:14--30:24.

Jacob had to earn his wife by working seven years for her father. Although he had neither the desire nor the intention to do so, he earned a bonus wife. He wanted one and got two. The price was the same for each, seven years of hard labor. The story of how Uncle Laban tricked Jacob into marrying both of his girls is one of the most entertaining in the OT and not without some spiritual lessons for us.

Love lessens work and shortens time.

Rachel was a looker and Jacob was a lover. He volunteered to work seven years in order to have her as his wife. Laban snapped at the deal, saying, "Better you than some other man." Laban was no dummy; he knew Jacob's father was rich and welcomed the chance to bring the heir into his family.

To Jacob, the seven years flashed by like "a few days." Love does funny things to our conception of time. Rebekah had sent him there "for a while;" literally translating the Hebrew, "for a few days." Seven years later it seemed to Jacob that he had been in his uncle's employ "a few days." Time flies when courting a pretty girl.

What the tide carries out it brings in.

Jacob made his brother the victim of his trickery; now his uncle makes Jacob a victim of shady dealing. Jacob sleeps with his new wife in happy darkness and awakens in shocking light. Beside him is Laban's older daughter Leah, less attractive and less desirable to Jacob. The cheater has been cheated. "Custom" is named as the justification for the switch. Just as Jacob had taken advantage of his

father' blindness, so Uncle Laban took advantage of Jacob's darkness to unload his oldest girl. Jacob was in Haran because he had practiced deception, and now he cries, "You deceived me." Jesus teaches that the same measuring cup we use in sinning against others will be used against us. Eventually, you get what you dish out. Life is an ocean tide. What we send on the outgoing tide will be brought home to us on the incoming tide.

God rules human affairs despite human failures.

After a festive week with Leah, who certainly deserved the consideration, Jacob was given Rachel, payment in advance for another seven years of toil. Children were born to him from Leah's fruitful womb, but a miracle was necessary before Rachel could birth a child. God was faithfully fulfilling his covenant, and graciously repeating the divine solution to human dilemmas that had earlier been faced by Abraham and Isaac.

The ancient record reads as if Jacob's wives became boy-factories. The less-loved Leah was first to have children, increasing her prestige as Jacob's wife. Jealousy drove the best-loved Rachel to demand, "Give me children or I'll die." Caught in the middle of the wives competition for favors, frustrated Jacob grew angry. He wasn't God; he had no power to give life. The primary wives complicated the picture and increased the family by giving their maids to Jacob as "secondary" wives and surrogate mothers. Before Rachel could bear Jacob a son the Lord had to "remember" her and "open" her womb.

God was teaching Jacob that he allowed for the sake of the covenant what he could not approve in moral misconduct. He was teaching Jacob that the fulfillment of divine purpose owed to divine

power, not to human plotting and deceptive practices. Jacob had tried to achieve a good thing in a bad way, grasping for it from selfish motives and by wicked deeds. He would gradually learn that he could be fitted into the purpose of God not by his schemes and conspiracies, but through being changed by the power of God to transform a sinner.

On the human stage it was shyster versus shyster, trickster versus trickster, bargainer versus bargainer, as he and Uncle Laban sought to exploit one another. God intervened to tilt the table and make Jacob the ultimate winner.

5. JACOB GETS RICH

Genesis 30:25-43.

In-laws were a grief and not a joy to Jacob. He was especially fed up with Laban, and likely he was homesick for his aged parents. Jacob wanted to “be on [his] way,” taking with him his wives and children. He was tired of being overworked and underpaid by Uncle Laban, one of the shrewdest men you will read about in God’s Book.

A surprising offer was made.

“Name your wages,” Laban said to Jacob. He didn’t want to lose good labor, and likely didn’t want his daughters and grandchildren far away.

Jacob hinted that Laban owed him more than his wives and children, saying, “You know how much I’ve done for you.” He worked fourteen years for those wives. He had lived with them long enough to feel insufficiently rewarded for his long and hard labor. He had also become, as their husband, responsible for feeding, clothing and sheltering those wives which took a big chunk out off Laban’s cost of living and added it to Jacob’s expenses.

Laban had learned--“by divination” he said--that the Lord had blessed him because of Jacob. He now viewed Jacob as a human good-luck charm and didn’t want to lose it. So he entreated his nephew to work on, saying, “Name your wages and I will pay them.”

It would be interesting to poll the workers in this congregation for what their response would be to such an offer from their employers. Most of us feel that we earn more than we receive. I served some churches whose paychecks I did not want to take to the

bank. I didn't want bankers to know how little money the church was receiving and/or how little the church thought I was worth.

Jacob quickly agreed with Laban, saying, "The little you had before I came has increased greatly, and the Lord has blessed you wherever I have been." In short, he was saying, "Uncle, you owe your wealth to me." Now Jacob wanted "something for [his] own household." That household was growing like Laban's wealth. Jacob left home a bachelor and would return home with two wives and twelve children. The man had a lot of expenses! With that many deductions the IRS wouldn't hit him for much, but others he dealt with wouldn't discount bills because he had so full a quiver (see Psalm 127:4-5).

Laban had his own prosperity in mind, not Jacob's, when he asked, "What shall I give you?"

A strange request was granted.

Jacob asked for all the "speckled and spotted" animals in Laban's large herds. Laban agreed, had them cut from the flock, and then put "a three-day journey" between himself and Jacob. Jacob now had a sizable herd for himself and his family. Laban called that herd a gift but Jacob called the animals "my wages."

Then Jacob began a strange trick. He placed newly cut branches from "poplar, almond and plane trees" at the watering holes when the flocks drank and mated. Those branches had been ringed by cutting and peeling bark from them. The female animals that mated before the speckled and spotted branches bore speckled and spotted offspring.

Jacob brought only the stronger females before those branches, and removed the branches when the weaker females were rutting. The flocks of Laban became markedly inferior to the flocks of Jacob, both in number and quality.

Frankly, I don't understand this part of the story. I believe it but I can't explain it, being totally ignorant about matters of raising, grazing and appraising sheep or cattle. Given the fact that it all happened as two con artists competed for advantage, I can only remind myself that God allows what he doesn't approve. He allowed Jacob's deception of Father Isaac, and then allowed Jacob's hustling of Uncle Laban. God had valid and honorable reasons for prospering Jacob; that doesn't mean he approved Jacob's trickery.

During those years Jacob became "exceedingly prosperous," the owner of large flocks of sheep augmented by herds of camels and donkeys. His household expanded with "maidservants and manservants." He came to Laban's home single and going broke. He would leave it married and getting richer by the day.

God's plans for Jacob were more important than material wealth. To carry those plans forward God would need to create a new and better Jacob. That would require no shady deals or shabby tricks; it would be done by the power of God's love and grace.

6. JACOB FLEES HIS UNCLE

Genesis 31:1-21.

When a servant is getting richer than his master, trouble is bound to brew. “Jacob heard” and “Jacob noticed”--these two phrases tell us that Jacob became aware that the inevitable had happened. Laban’s sons were grousing about their diminishing inheritance and Laban’s attitude toward Jacob made a one-eighty turn.

Jacob received direction.

Jacob had a decision to make--stay and fight or get out and go home. He didn’t have to depend on instinct or reason; the Lord spoke to him. “Go back to your home,” the voice directed, and then a comforting promise followed: “I will be with you.” Only four other men are given that promise in the Old Testament stories--Isaac, Joshua, Gideon and Jereboam. The promised presence is extended once to the entire nation of Israel. A similar statement, “I am with you,” is spoken to Isaac, Jacob, Joshua and Jeremiah, and to Israel six times. In the New Testament, the church, as it obeys the Great Commandment, is told by Jesus, “I am with you always.” Can you think of a more comforting promise?

Jacob related a dream.

Leah and Rachel came at Jacob’s request to where he was keeping his flocks. There he told them the situation. “I have worked for your father with all my strength,” he reminded them, “yet your father has cheated me by changing my wages ten times.” Then he told them the secret of his growing herds. The Lord had caused the animals to birth streaked and spotted offspring, which Laban had

promised to Jacob. “God has taken away your father’s livestock and has given them to me.” This didn’t mean that God was a cattle-rustler; it meant he had righted a wrong.

Jacob had dreamed of such flocks before they became a reality. In that dream the Lord spoke to him, reminiscent of the dream and the message from the Lord at Bethel. He was told by the Lord, “Go back to your native land.” He related the dream to his listening wives, not sure of how they would respond.

Why the dream? Why not a voice from a burning bush? Why not a voice from the skies? That’s how God spoke to Moses and to his only son Jesus. We aren’t told so it isn’t important for us to know. The varied means of communication, however, remind us that God can do the same thing in different ways. He cannot be boxed into a routine or a program. The important thing is not how he addresses us; it’s how we respond to his messages.

Obviously, Jacob is rehearsing these matters to create an option for his wives: Stay with your father or journey with me. Live here or live there.

The two wives had been nursing a single grudge. They were no longer in their father’s will. He had treated them “like foreigners,” selling them as wives and using the purchase price for himself. Slowly but surely a gap had widened between themselves and the maternal grandfather of their children. To remain with him was to have nothing. To go with Jacob was to have wealth, to be provisioned and protected. Their response was, “So do whatever God has told you.” They did not simply trust a husband; they trusted their husband’s God.

Jacob rushed a departure.

When the Lord makes known his will and reinforces the revelation with a huge promise, the sooner we obey the better. Jacob lost no time in mounting up and moving out. He put wives and children on camels, drove his livestock ahead of him, and took along all that he had accumulated through hard work and shrewd bargaining.

Unknown to Jacob, his favorite wife, Rachel, mixed her faith in Jacob's God with Laban's pagan superstitions. While Laban was away, shearing his sheep, she fleeced her father. She stole his "household gods." The precise nature and uses of these small "teraphim" is not certain. Many scholars regard them as miniature human figures thought to bring good luck to their owners and bad luck to the owners' enemies. Rachel must have thought that these small "gods" had some power to either avenge her father or provide for her.

And so, in company with deceit and theft and family and flocks, Jacob headed for the hills--"the hill country of Gilead"--without telling Laban goodbye. Sometimes flight is the sequel to truth. Always flight is the sequel to deceit. We had better rid our lives of deceit, for Labans can be outrun but there is no escape from God.

7. JACOB GETS CAUGHT AND RELEASED

Genesis 31:21-42.

Jacob was gone three days before Laban discovered his decampment. With a posse of “relatives” he pursued his nephew and in a week he caught him. By traveling lighter, Laban had traveled swifter. Pursuers and prey encamped in the hill country of Gilead awaiting an angry confrontation. There is no conflict worse than an inter-family dustup.

A dream fulfills a dream.

When Jacob was enroute to Laban’s house the Lord had appeared to him in a dream, promising to prosper and protect him. Now the Lord chooses again the medium of a dream to fulfill that promise. Laban intended to exercise his “power to harm” Jacob. The kind and degree of punishment he wanted to dish out isn’t specified. It didn’t matter because God disturbed Laban’s sleep with a dream and told him “hands off.” He was not to say anything “good or bad” to Jacob, making no promises and issuing no threats. In other words, he was not to act as Jacob’s judge, for Jacob belonged to God who had special plans for the man and through the man for the world.

A deceiver cries deception.

Laban said, “You’ve deceived me.” How ironic, considering the times Laban had deceived Jacob! This behavior is typical of human nature under the power of sin. We are swift to accuse others and to condemn in others what we are guilty of doing ourselves.

Laban berated Jacob for sneaking away without giving him a chance to kiss his daughters and grandchildren goodbye. Had he known of Jacob’s homesickness for “his father’s house,” Laban

insisted, he would have thrown a farewell party for him and his family. He would have sent them off “with joy and singing to the music of tambourines and harps.” How true that was we cannot know, but Jacob left in secret because he didn’t trust his uncle to grant a peaceful departure. He flatly told Laban that except for God’s intervention he would have been dismissed “empty-handed.”

A daughter cons her daddy.

The chief focus of Laban’s anger was the stolen household gods. “Why did you steal my gods?” he asked. Jacob, unaware of Rachel’s theft, angrily denied the accusation. If anyone in his company had done such a thing, Laban could put them to death. He challenged Laban to personally search for the missing teraphim, and Laban promptly did just that.

Rachel, fearful but resourceful, had the idols in her saddlebags, and was sitting on them when her father entered her tent to search for them. She modestly and cleverly excused herself from not rising by saying, “I’m having my period.” Taking her at her word, which is surprising, Laban fell for the ruse and never found the purloined figurines.

He who practiced chronic duplicity never expected his child to scam him.

That Rachel felt any need for these idols says volumes about her weak and disloyal allegiance to the Lord. Unlike Jacob, she had not been reared in the monotheism of Abraham and Isaac. This is not to excuse her, only to explain her. Those who serve false gods will rarely have scruples against false statements. Like Rachel, they will act lies as well as tell them.

A defendant vents his dander.

When Laban's search of all Jacob's people and possessions had produced no stolen objects, Jacob lit into his uncle like an angry hornet. He "took Laban to task." He demanded that justice be given him with his and Laban's "relatives" as witnesses. He had been hunted down like a criminal on the lam and no evidence of crime had been discovered. Now he wanted Laban to put up or shut up.

Warming to this eruption of anger, the accused became an accuser. He had tended Laban's flocks for twenty years, and he had never taken any of those animals for food. Furthermore, when "wild beasts" had dined on some of Laban's sheep, he had borne the loss by replacing the slain animals with choice ones from his own flock. He had worked hard, battled extreme elements and suffered changes in his wages ten times. The changes, of course, were never raises but cuts. To put it flatly, his uncle had lied and cheated in their two-decade relationship.

Jacob capped his tirade by affirming that the God of Abraham and Isaac had been with him through all his "hardship" and "toil." Apart from the help of God, he would have been sent away dead broke. Now his innocence had been proved and his adversary had been rebuked by God.

Throughout Jacob's impassioned defense, Rachel sat with feigned innocence upon her loot. Anytime anyone claims to be totally innocent, there sits somewhere a relative or friend who knows the claim is false. "All have sinned." None have gone totally unnoticed in their sinning. Even when the eyes of men are averted, God sees the offenses and will be the offender's final judge. As an old song

simply puts it, “You can’t do wrong and get by.” As Jesus said, “There is nothing hidden that will not be disclosed.”

8. JACOB PARTS WITH LABAN

Genesis 32:43-55.

Laban wouldn't budge by a syllable to concede that Jacob was right in the charges he made of being overworked and underpaid. Instead, he claimed that Jacob's wives, children and flocks were actually his, not Jacob's. This wasn't true but men in angry confrontations seldom regard truth as a serious matter. Laban knew that further argument was futile, however, so he gave up, saying, "What can I do?"

A pile of rocks.

Laban proposed a covenant and after the custom of that time and place a stone was set up and a pile of rocks was organized as a symbol and reminder of the pledges made on the occasion. Why rocks? Probably because they were enduring and also they were plentiful. The chief witness was not the rock-pile, however, but the God who had been with Jacob and would continue to journey with him.

Jacob gave the stones a Hebrew name and Laban gave them an Aramaic name, both of which meant "witness heap." Laban also called them "Mizpah," which means "watch over." God was being invoked to help each party to the covenant to honor its purpose. By any name you give it, a promise is a promise, a threat is a threat, a truth is a truth and a lie is a lie.

Further honoring the customs of their culture, Jacob's family and Laban's posse of relatives ate a ritual meal together. They were, in this way, binding themselves to one another as keepers of the covenant.

A pledge of peace.

Laban extracted from Jacob a pledge that he would not take other wives than the daughters of Laban he had already married. Jacob further pledged that he would not cross beyond that pillar of stone to fight with Laban, and Laban made the same promise to Jacob. They did not trust one another to keep the peace, for Laban said, “May the Lord keep watch between you and me when we are away from each other.” This implied, “I don’t trust you when you are out of my sight. Just remember that the Lord is keeping his eyes on you.”

He added, “May the God of Abraham and the God of Nahor, the God of their father judge between us.” He is not talking about two Gods but the God who was called by both names. “Judge” carries the idea of God deciding which party was right in any breach of the covenant and bringing appropriate punishment upon the covenant breaker. There was, as we say, “no love lost” between these covenant makers. Laban didn’t say “watch over,” but “watch between.” He didn’t say “judge us,” but “judge between us.” The covenant was not a tribute to their union but to their suspicion and distrust of each other.

The covenant-making was crowned by the family dinner, and each party remained encamped there overnight. At first light Laban kissed his daughters and grandchildren goodbye and headed home.

Jacob had faced, and even faced down, one bitter relative. He regarded himself as in the right and Laban as in the wrong. Now he must face another alienated relative, his brother Esau, and he knew that he would not be an innocent party in that encounter. We cannot

escape the consequences of wrongdoing even though God has forgiven our sins.

9. JACOB PREPARES FOR A DREADED MEETING

Genesis 32:1-21.

Jacob was “on his way” and badly frightened. He was soon to face the brother who had sworn to kill him.

On his way he met “the angels of God.” How he knew they were angels we are not told. Perhaps they had appeared to him on other occasions. Perhaps they introduced themselves. No matter; the point is that he met them “on his way.” You aren’t likely to meet angels if you aren’t going somewhere and doing something in obedience to the Lord. The Lord had told Jacob to return home. If you want help from God do what he tells you to do.

Jacob called the place “Mahanaim” which means “two camps.” He not only was encamped with his family there, the Lord’s messengers were sharing the same camp ground. They were partial fulfillments of the Lord’s promise, “I am with you and will watch over you.”

Jacob’s strategy: third party contact.

Jacob sent messengers to contact Esau hoping that they could persuade him to show “favor” to Jacob. The favor Jacob sought was life and peace, peace that would forgive the past, secure the present and open the future. His chosen messengers were to tell Esau where Jacob had been and what Jacob had achieved, all because of divine favor. That God had favored him might dispose Esau to show him favor. Jacob didn’t rattle the saber; he called Esau “lord” and himself “servant.” He sought mercy; he didn’t threaten trouble.

The messengers returned to tell Jacob that Esau was coming with four hundred men to meet him.

Jacob's strategy: two party communion.

The news of Esau's approach was a knee-knocker to Jacob; it produced "great fear and distress." He divided his people and possessions into two groups, hoping that one could escape if Esau attacked the other.

"Then Jacob prayed." No one is ready to face the consequences of their misdeeds until they have sought the help of God.

In prayer Jacob confessed his unworthiness of the Lord's "kindness." He had fled from home "with only [his] staff," and was now returning home a wealthy man. His wealth was not a divine reward for his excellent character and behavior; it was visible evidence of God's mercy to a great sinner.

In prayer Jacob reminded the Lord of his covenant promises. They included land and descendants, neither of which he could have if Esau massacred his family and seized his flocks. He prayed that God would save him from his brother. How sad when anyone finds that petition necessary.

Jacob's strategy: one party contribution.

Jacob's plotting now focused on placating his estranged brother. Fortified through prayer, Jacob selected a large number of animals from his flocks and placed them in the care of his herdsmen. The herdsmen were to go in sequence, flock by flock, and present the gifts to Esau. Hopefully, these costly gifts would "pacify" Esau and win Jacob a welcome.

Your best hope of turning an enemy into a friend is by honoring him with gifts that say "I'm sorry," and also affirm, "God has been my

friend and has prospered me.” Paul wrote, “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.” “Give him something”—that command makes it hard for your enemy to hold a grudge and plot your destruction.

Sending his family, servants and flocks ahead, Jacob remained alone, as fear and faith contended for his heart. That is the point where much of life is lived. We often count on the word of God to prove true and at the same time doubt that it can. Too often we find ourselves praying as did the father of an afflicted boy who wanted help from Jesus: “Lord, I believe, but help my unbelief.” The Lord has shown repeatedly that he honors less than perfect faith. When faith and doubt conflict, live by faith and not by doubt.

10. JACOB WRESTLES WITH GOD

Genesis 32:22-32.

Jacob slept poorly and awoke early. Fearing an attack by Esau's army during a daylight crossing of the Jabbock, he decided that his people and animals should ford the river under cover of darkness. So he sent them across the stream and he remained at the campsite alone, probably to commune with God. If you are about to face the consequences of your wrongdoing you need to have a talk with the only one who can save you.

Wrestling in darkness.

Suddenly Jacob was jumped by an opponent, "a man." Who he was Jacob did not know, but the assault took him by surprise and evoked the full strength of his manhood to preserve his life--or so he thought.

They wrestled unto nearly daybreak, then Jacob's opponent "touched the socket of Jacob' hip" and "wrenched it." At the same time this mysterious wrestler said, "Let me go"--an equivalent of "let's break it off."

The ease with which the "man" had suddenly crippled Jacob made him aware that this was no ordinary man. This was "an angel" sent by God, so that Jacob could afterwards say, "I saw God face to face." This was not an ordinary angel like those who had gone up and down the heavenly staircase in Jacob's dream at Bethel. This was "the angel of the Lord," mentioned several times in Genesis.

Convinced that this was the Lord in human form Jacob clung to him, refusing to break his hold in spite of the pain in his hip, and humbly begging for a blessing. The divine wrestler could have

crippled Jacob and rendered him helpless when the struggle began. Jacob had to learn that he couldn't pin the Lord though he expended all his might. He could not win the Lord's favor by his exertions but by his surrender. The blessing of the Lord was not won by human merit; it was the gift of divine grace.

Confessing to deception.

Before the Lord would bless him, he demanded his name. A person's name is shorthand for all he is and does. Jacob had to confess that he was a deceiver, that he gained good things by bad methods, that he exploited the weakness of others for his own advantage. As Sam Jones put it, "No man ever got saved bragging on himself."

Jacob is presented in the Bible as man who bore three names. His parents named him Jacob. He named himself "Esau" when he deceived blind Isaac to get the covenant blessing that Isaac intended for Esau. And now the Lord would name him "Israel," which means "the one who wrestled with God."

The prophet Hosea tells us that Jacob "struggled with God." This could be a tag line for Jacob's whole life to this point. A man named Jacob could never overcome a Lord called "God Almighty." He could only win by losing. As Jesus taught, the one who loses his life finds it. To lose one's life, in this sense, requires first of all a confession of sin, followed by a trust in the God who blesses, not the self-made and self-sufficient, but those who humble themselves and cast themselves upon his mercy.

Limping as victor.

Jacob limped away at daybreak from Peniel, the place where he encountered God and, to his surprise, lived through the experience. He fully deserved to die under the wrathful judgment of God against sin, as do we all. God spared and blessed him because God is love and loves to forgive. God made promises to him that could be fulfilled only because the grace of God abounded toward the deceiver. To be crippled when you could have been justly killed is to spend life with a constant reminder of salvation “through grace by faith plus nothing,” as someone long ago expressed it. The wrestling match was a life-transforming experience for Jacob.

When kosher laws were established in Israel the tendons attached to the hip sockets of animals was forbidden as food. In this way the experience of Jacob and its significance for the history of Israel has been memorialized. Even better, the whole account of the bizarre event is “in the Book.”

11. JACOB MEETS HIS BROTHER

Genesis 33:

“Jacob looked up and there was Esau.” The past has a way of suddenly meeting us in the present. The meeting can be a good or bad, and Jacob was braced for the worst. With Esau were four hundred men, living proof of the powerful status Esau had achieved since the day Jacob fled from him in fear of being killed. The fear could have been magnified four hundred times. The old fear marked Jacob as he bowed seven times before his wealthy and mighty brother.

A huge surprise.

Instead of lopping off his head, Esau hugged and kissed Jacob. “They wept”--Esau in forgiving love, Jacob in happy relief. Jacob introduced his wives and children, calling them gracious gifts from God. That is how he should have regarded his brother in the first place, and the two decades of estrangement, hatred and fear would not have happened. God could have arranged a better way of securing the patriarchal blessing for Jacob than did his mother.

When Esau asked about the herds he had encountered, Jacob identified them as a peace offering. His candor acknowledged the

coldness between them and his blame for causing it. Esau said, “Keep them...I already have enough.” Jacob insisted, however, and said that in the face of a forgiving brother he had seen the face of God. Then Jacob evidenced a tremendous change in his own heart and life when he added, “I have all I need.” Before his encounter with God at Peniel, Jacob had always wanted more and more. Being rightly related to God and people will produce a right relationship to things.

Esau accepted the gift, realizing how important the act of giving was to Jacob. He didn’t need the gift but Jacob needed to give.

A lingering suspicion.

Esau offered his four hundred men as an escort for the protection of Jacob and his family and flocks. Jacob demurred, citing the need to travel slowly because of young children and nursing animals. When Esau then proposed to leave “some of his men,” Jacob still refused, affirming that Esau’s favor was sufficient protection. Things have been really bad when your own brother constitutes your greatest fear.

Jacob evidently felt that Esau’s emotional reconciliation might yet be replaced by his former hatred and desire for vengeance. Jacob wanted space between them, space that would help insure peace. Esau consented to Jacob’s wish and left that day for home. To find it hard to believe that God or people have truly forgiven our wrongs is a common experience. Guilt does not readily yield to grace.

A temporary settlement.

Jacob didn't follow Esau. He chose a different direction that brought him to "the city of Shechem in Canaan." Outside the city he purchased land and there "pitched his tent." Tenting was a good choice, for later he would move, at God's command, to another place. The patriarchs were promised Canaan as an earthly inheritance, but they lived in the promised land as pilgrims, not as settlers, for their real destination was heaven and God (Hebrews 11:9-10).

At Shechem Jacob, following the hallowed example of his father Isaac and grandfather Abraham, "set up an altar" and named it for the mighty God of Israel. "El Elohe Israel" can mean "God, the God of Israel" or "the mighty God of Israel," we are told by scholars. Why not both? We cannot exaggerate the greatness and goodness of God.

Like Jacob, we need to keep places for communion with God in our lives, lest old ways revive to spoil new life.

From this portion of Jacob's history we can learn some important lessons for our own histories. For one, we can learn to value peaceful relationships. Restoring them when sin has broken them is worth whatever it costs. For another, we can learn to trust the triumph of good over evil. When God forgives he forgets, and we should never interpret our misfortunes as divine vengeance. Most important of all, we can learn to build altars and keep in grateful touch with the God who has graciously changed our lives.

12. JACOB REVISITS BETHEL

Genesis 35:1-15.

Chapter 34 records a tragic event. Jacob's daughter Dinah carelessly fraternized with the women of Canaan and ended up in bed with a prince named Shechem. He loved her and wanted to purchase her as a wife. Her brothers, pretending an ethical integrity they did not really possess, avenged her by slaughtering the men of Shechem and looting the city. This placed Jacob and his family in jeopardy. They could have been easily overcome and destroyed by the combined forces of natives in Canaan. God came to Jacob's rescue.

History repeats itself.

The Lord appeared to Jacob when he fled from home under threat of death. He promised the fugitive protection and prosperity. That promise had been graciously fulfilled, and now a death threat hangs over Jacob's head again, this time involving all his loved ones. So once again a merciful God appeared to an undeserving man, directing him to seek refuge elsewhere. The covenant made with Abraham, renewed with Isaac and Jacob, is not a reward for their merits but a revelation of God's grace.

Holiness reasserts itself.

Jacob realizes that his permissive attitude toward idols was at the root of the misbehavior of Dinah and her brothers. Now, "better late than never," he commands his family to bring to him all their

“foreign gods” and the jewelry associated with idolatry, and he buries the stuff at the foot of a conspicuous oak tree. The entire family underwent purification rites and clothing changes to signify their new loyalty to the one true God, the God who had supplied them with protection and provisions. Inward resolutions are strengthened by outward actions. That is a great part of the value of worship rituals.

God is holy, a way of saying he is the one and only God. He will not tolerate false gods or bless compromised allegiance to himself. “No other gods” will be his first commandment when the descendants of Jacob are rescued from Egyptian bondage and formed into a nation at Sinai.

The God who changed Jacob’s name to Israel at Peniel appeared to him again and repeated the covenant promises of posterity and property. The patience of God is set in contrast with the impatience and rashness of Jacob and his offspring. God has mercy upon his people again and again. God renews his promises to them again and again. Our blessings from God do not rest upon our goodness but upon his. His enduring love for us, not ours for him, is the explanation for the favor he shows and the laws he gives. The bedrock of all his dealings with us is always his love, never our loveliness.

God’s declarations were followed by God’s departure. “God went up from him at the place where he had talked with him.” The relationship was intimate but the mystery was not resolved. The form in which he appeared to Jacob was not permanent. God remains “the wholly other.” Furthermore, the Holy One is not at man’s disposal. The initiative remains with him. He cannot be summoned or

manipulated at the will of his people. He comes and goes, shows himself and hides himself, acts or does not act as he wills. True, he often makes himself the servant of his lowly creatures, but only as an expression of his sovereignty, never at the expense of it.

Jacob responded in humility and gratitude. He set up a memorial stone and called the place Bethel--the house of God. Earlier in the chapter he called it El Bethel--the God of the house of God. Bethel has no real significance if it becomes a vacancy sign. The presence of God in his house gives it meaning, value and force.