1717 BIBLE STUDIES

"Your Word Is Truth" (John 17:17)

OVERVIEW

Study: Genesis, Part 2
Theme: God with You

Overview: The promise of God's "withness" is scattered throughout the Bible. In this unit, students will see from the lives of Adam and Eve, Jacob, Joseph, and Hagar and Ishmael that God is with his people in their failings, in blessed times, in times of oppression, and when they feel outcast. Even when others abandon us, God will not.

HOW TO USE

Each week has a **lesson aim**, **lesson text**, and **supplemental text**.



Tabs indicate the week of each lesson.

Each week features three sections: **Study**, **Application**, and **Discovery.**



Use the **Discovery** questions to study, discuss, and apply the Scripture passages in a group or class.

© 2026, Christian Standard Media — CSM authorizes individuals and nonprofits to print copies and otherwise distribute these lesson materials for ministry purposes only. Not to be repackaged or resold.

INTRODUCTION

Author

Genesis does not name its author, but Jewish and Christian tradition credit Moses with writing it as the first of the five books of the Law. Jesus and the New Testament writers refer to the Law as coming from Moses (Luke 24:27; John 5:46).

Audience

Genesis was written for the people of Israel, to tell them how God created the world, how sin entered it, and how God began his plan to save the world through Abraham and his family.

Date

Many conservative scholars believe Moses wrote Genesis during Israel's years in the wilderness, around 1440–1400 BC. The events it records stretch from creation to the death of Joseph in Egypt.

Setting

The lessons in this study move from the Garden of Eden, where Adam and Eve first sinned (Genesis 3), to the Desert of Beersheba, where Hagar and Ishmael were sent away (chapter 21), to Potiphar's house and an Egyptian prison, where Joseph served (chapter 39), and finally to Beersheba and Goshen, as Jacob moved his family to Egypt (chapters 46, 47).

Theme

God with you. God is always wanting to get closer to people. He walked in the garden, spoke to Jacob in a vision, was "with" Joseph in slavery and in prison, and heard the cries of Hagar and her son in the desert. His promise still stands: "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5).

Why Study Genesis?

These stories from Genesis show that God does not abandon his people. This study calls believers to know that God is with them even when they make mistakes, to worship him in blessed times, to trust that he will never forsake them in times of trouble, and to rest in his care when others push them away.

STUDY CONTENT

WEEK 1:	Genesis 3:6-21
WEEK 2:	Genesis 46:1-6; 47:27
WEEK 3:	Genesis 39:1-4, 19-23
WEEK 4:	Genesis 21:8-20; 17:19, 20

WEEK ONE

LESSON AIM: **Know that God is with you even when you make mistakes.**

STUDY: Genesis, Part 2

THEME: God with You

LESSON TEXT: Genesis 3:6-21

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Hebrews 10:15-18; Psalm 25:6, 7

GOD IS WITH YOU IN YOUR FAILINGS (ADAM AND EVE)

BY MARK SCOTT

The word *closer* sums up much of the Bible's content. God is always wanting to get closer to people. Even in our text today God is pictured as walking in the garden (near Adam and Eve) in the cool of the day. The promise of God's "withness" is scattered throughout the Bible (Exodus 3:12; Joshua 1:9; Isaiah 43:2; Matthew 1:23; 28:20; Hebrews 13:5; Revelation 21:3). During this month of lessons we will discuss the theme, "God with you." Here is the kicker. He is with us even when we fail.

This text is large in its significance. It deals with our first parents, our primal reality, and the archetypal temptation. In *Renovation of the Heart*, Dallas Willard observed, "When [Satan] undertook to draw Eve away from God, he did not hit her with a stick but with an idea." That idea caused Eve, and then Adam, to distrust the goodness of God. The enemy lied about the veracity of God's word (Genesis 3:4; see John 8:44). Hell on earth broke out as Adam and Eve embraced a culture of death.

Degradation

Genesis 3:6, 7

Sin might look enticing and fun (Hebrews 11:25), but in the end it makes the way of the transgressor hard (Proverbs 13:15, KJV). Adam sinned with his eyes wide open, but Eve was "quite deceived" (1 Timothy 2:14) by the devil when he persuaded her to "look" at the tree. That first look is often problematic. She saw the fruit of the tree was *good for food*, *beautiful to the eye*, and *desirable* (lust or covet) for gaining wisdom. The first couple had loved God, but now they wanted to be God. Eve ate the fruit. Eating is actually a sacred thing (see *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating*, by Norman Wirzba). But the couple, we could say in jest, ate themselves out of house and home.

The effects of sin and death took a while to work themselves into the now stained planet, but the degradation of sin was realized immediately. Their eyes were opened (not all knowledge is sanctified). They realized they were naked (innocence was forfeited). They made *coverings* (girdles, loincloths, or aprons) for themselves (shame caused them to have secrets even to the point of hiding their bodies from one another). This failure caused God to hold court.

Interrogation

Genesis 3:8-13

The judge of the universe was spoken of anthropomorphically. God is pictured walking in the garden in the cool of the day. We may not know what that was like, but it probably represents a level of fellowship that is unheard of this side of Eden. Our parents' shame caused them to hide from their Maker.

God interrogated Adam and Eve with four questions. In none of the four questions did God seek information. The nature of the questions underlines the magnitude of the failure. "Where are you?" underlines their *fear* (dread) of the lover of their souls and the lifter of their heads. "Who told you that you were naked?" underlines their shame. "Have you eaten from the tree?" underlines their transgression. "What is this you have done?" underlines their guilt.

The uncomfortable interrogation was met with the blame game. Adam blamed Eve and Eve blamed the serpent. But at the end of the day, they both implicitly blamed God. After all, God made the tree, grew the fruit, and even created the serpent (Genesis 3:1). Interrogation makes us all nervous.

Condemnation and Substitution

Genesis 3:14-21

The God of the Bible is a God of justice. He cannot stay true to his own nature and refuse to punish sin. So curses were distributed to the serpent, the woman, the man, and the earth. But in the midst of such denouncements there were hints of hope. Within the curses were glimpses of grace. The serpent would crawl on its belly and eat dust. The woman would have additional pain in bearing children. The man would eat food from the earth but not without a struggle.

But even though death was now part of the earth, Eve would bear offspring (life) that would ultimately crush the ugly serpent (Mark 15:22; Romans 16:20; Galatians 3:13-16). Even though sin destroyed relationships, marriage would be redeemed and sustained (1 Corinthians 11:11, 12). Even though work would be toilsome and the earth would produce thorns and thistles, a redeemer wearing thorns would come as a substitute for sin (John 19:5). To prepare the world for this substitution God sacrificed an animal for clothing for Adam and Eve. God's plan was to smite his own Son (Isaiah 53:10) so that he would not have to smite us.

Mark Scott serves as preaching minister with Park Plaza Christian Church in Joplin, Mo. For 35 years, until 2021, he served as professor of preaching and New Testament with Ozark Christian College in Joplin.

MY WORST SIN

BY DAVID FAUST

Does the title of this article grab your attention? Are you curious to know, *What is Dave's worst sin? What wicked deed will he confess?* You already may be imagining the possibilities. Of course, if I wrote down all of the sins I ever committed, this page couldn't contain them all.

While eating breakfast with a group of men in a restaurant the other day, I told them I planned to write an article about my worst sin. After some good-natured teasing about my shortcomings (as a group of guys can do), my friends offered several serious observations.

One commented, "The worst sin I can imagine is disloyalty—betraying the trust of God or the trust of someone else who loves you."

Another friend suggested, "I think the worst sin is to plant a lie in the mind of another person. What could be worse than leading someone else astray?" He also reminded us of Jesus' warning about blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

Another man at the breakfast table observed, "I'm not sure any one sin can be considered the worst because any unforgiven sin separates us from God." To illustrate his point, he continued, "We picture our righteousness like a heart monitor with a line that goes up and down depending on how well we perform. But without God's mercy, it's a flat line. We're dead without him."

Each of my companions made good points. Who hasn't overstepped the boundaries established by our Creator? All of us need to ask God to forgive our trespasses, "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it" (James 2:10). And sin is more than outward lawbreaking; it reflects the inner disposition of our hearts. Even when we manage to avoid bad behaviors, we leave good things undone. "If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, it is sin for them" (4:17).

The Root of Our Transgressions

I told my breakfast companions, "I think my worst sin is selfish pride." I hope you're not shocked by my confession. Ever since the Garden of Eden, Satan has hinted that self-will trumps God's will. Cunningly he whispers, "Why not follow your personal preferences rather than obeying God's Word?" Adam and Eve's struggle was much like yours and mine. Pride makes us think too lowly of God and too highly of ourselves.

I consider self-centeredness my worst sin because it seems so difficult to eradicate, and because it leads to so many other wrongs. For example, selfish pride spawns transgressions like ingratitude, greed, bitterness, irreverence, arrogance, unrighteous anger, a critical spirit, and hurtful speech.

Pride makes me self-righteous. It makes me stubborn, refusing to admit when I'm wrong and seek forgiveness. It makes me unloving, prioritizing self-interest over caring for others. Selfish pride doesn't just offend God; it distorts reality, creating a charade where, instead of being honest about my limitations, I pretend that I'm in charge—as if I can handle things fine without the Lord. And pride keeps me from enjoying the blessings God reserves for the humble and contrite in heart.

Adam and Eve lost their home in God's garden by swallowing forbidden fruit. The way back home requires us to swallow our pride.

David Faust serves as senior associate minister with East 91st Street Christian Church in Indianapolis.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

Use one or both of these questions to introduce the lesson:

- Fans of some sports teams are described as "diehards." What are some characteristics of diehard fans?
- Do you have any diehard fans? Who sticks with you through your failures as well as your successes?

Read Genesis 3:6, 7

1. Compare the description of Eve's thought process (vv. 4-6) with the words of 1 John 2:16. Try to summarize, in a single sentence, why we stray from the path God has for us.

2. Read Romans 1:28, 32, noting the words "depraved mind." What evidence of this degradation do you see in the events occurring after the fruit of forbidden knowledge was eaten?

Read Genesis 3:8-13

3. Many a parent has put a disobedient child into "time out" with the words, "Now think about what you have done!" How did the four questions (that God already knew the answers to) serve a similar purpose for his rebellious children?

4. Have you ever confronted a child caught in the act of doing something wrong? How would you feel if the child responded, "I didn't do it!" or "It's not my fault!"? Considering how you would respond, what have you learned about God's "great mercy and love . . . from old" (Psalm 25:6)?

Read Genesis 3:14-21

5. Death was the promised consequence for rebellion (Genesis 2:17; 3:3). But this death was more than the removal of humankind from the face of the earth. Look at verses 16a, 16b, 18, and 21. Try to explain ways death infected all that was once good in creation.

6. In some ways, Eve gave birth to sin. But through God's mercy, how would she also give birth to redemption (vv. 15, 20)?

7. Scripture shows us that God is our diehard fan, sticking with us through our darkest "losing season." Consider Isaiah 53:2-5. Why is "die hard" especially appropriate when it comes to God's love for us?

WEEK TWO

LESSON AIM: **Worship and trust God, who is with you in blessed times.**

STUDY: Genesis, Part 2

THEME: God with You

LESSON TEXT: Genesis 46:1-6; 47:27

GOD IS WITH YOU IN BLESSED TIMES (JACOB)

BY MARK SCOTT

Long ago Jewish prayers often started, "Blessed be he . . ." Prayer began with blessing God. The irony is that God, who deserves all the blessing, has blessed us (Ephesians 1:3-14). Surely we experience difficult days on this stained planet. But often day after day after day we experience God's special presence in blessed times. Be honest—life is pretty good for many of us.

Our text today concerns God's blessings to Jacob. In his earlier years this famous patriarch (whose name appears alongside of the name of God more than any other human being) is only slightly better than Samson (Judges 13–16). His name meant "heel grabber" or "cheater" (Genesis 25:19-26). While Clovis Chappell called his brother Esau "The Sensualist," Jacob was no epitome of virtue either. He cheated Esau out of the birthright and the blessing. But he who deceived others would be deceived (Galatians 6:7) by his father-in-law Laban (Genesis 29–31). Jacob must have been a challenging individual for the Lord to bless. At a crucial point in his life he even wrestled a blessing out of God (Genesis 32:22-32). But God did bless Jacob with his presence in some very blessed times.

The Blessing of Worship

Genesis 46:1

Jacob was now an old man and called by another name, Israel, which defined more of his new reality. He had fathered twelve sons and one daughter. He had established himself as a man of prominence in the land of Canaan. God had blessed him with riches. He originally set out from the southern tip of the land of promise, Beersheba, to travel north to make his fortune (Genesis 28:10-22). God promised to be with him, and Jacob promised a tithe of everything that God gave him. Now he returned to Beersheba, from where everything for his adult life had started.

The original stop at *Beersheba* (well of seven oaths) had involved worship—and a special dream of a ladder reaching to heaven. Now Jacob will once again worship the Lord—this time by offering sacrifices. This worship no doubt included the sacrifice of a sheep. He no doubt had heard the story of how his grandfather had gone to sacrifice his father only to have an angel stay the hand of his grandfather and substitute a ram for his father's life (Genesis 22:1-19). Beersheba was the place from which Abraham had left to journey to Moriah for the sacrifice. Biblical history often comes to us in layers and with some repetition.

The Blessing of Assurance

Genesis 46:2-4

As God had originally promised his presence to Jacob when he left Beersheba so he renewed that promise here. God spoke to Jacob once again in a vision to assure him that God would be with him in this new journey to Egypt. God called his name twice, "Jacob, Jacob." The repetition indicated urgency. Jacob responded as did his forefathers, "Here I am" (Genesis 22:1). The Navigators organization suggests that after a person is saved their biggest need is assurance of salvation. Now that Israel was well along in years he was in need of God's assuring presence before believing that his son Joseph was really alive and was serving in Egypt.

Several things aid Jacob's assurance. God identified himself as *the God of your father*. This underlined heritage. Next Jacob was told that he need not be afraid because God would make him into a great *nation* (*goy*—so think of the promise of God being advanced, Genesis 12:1-13). Finally God assured Jacob of his presence and his promise that not only would he be brought back to Israel (albeit in a casket, Genesis 50:12-14) but that his son Joseph would be present at his death (Genesis 50:1-3).

The Blessing of Togetherness

Genesis 46:5, 6; 47:27

When Joseph's brothers lied about his death (Genesis 37:32-36), Jacob knew he would never see his favorite son again. When Benjamin was taken to Egypt with his brothers (Genesis 43:14), Jacob despaired of life itself. Who would have guessed that Jacob would be reunited with his whole family one day? But from the Lord's fullness have we received grace upon grace (John 1:16).

Jacob goes with his entire clan and his *carts* (wagons) from Beersheba to *Goshen* (literally, "drawing near") in the land of Egypt. In fact, the government even picked up the bill for the move. Famine might have driven the family to Egypt, but their possessions were still many. Once in Goshen their wealth continued to increase, and they multiplied greatly (Genesis 1:28; 9:1). Jacob, the man who was a "taker," learned that his God was a "blesser," because every good and perfect gift comes from him (James 1:17).

Mark Scott serves as preaching minister with Park Plaza Christian Church in Joplin, Mo. For 35 years, until 2021, he served as professor of preaching and New Testament with Ozark Christian College in Joplin.

WHICH DIRECTION ARE YOU LEANING?

BY DAVID FAUST

Jacob had many reasons to be grateful. His long life spanned about a century and a half. His descendants multiplied and flourished under the gracious hand of God (Genesis 47:27, 28). As Jacob grew old and approached death, his faith remained strong, but his legs became tottery. He needed a staff (a wooden walking stick) to keep him from falling.

Genesis 47:31 says the aging patriarch "worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff." The New Testament reiterates the point by saying, "By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph's sons, and worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff" (Hebrews 11:21).

What went through Jacob's mind as he leaned on his walking stick? It's not difficult to imagine. Reflecting back on his life through the lens of faith, he recalled years of conflict with his brother Esau. He remembered his strange prophetic dream of angels ascending and descending on a stairway to Heaven, and his night-long wrestling match with an angelic visitor that left him walking with a limp (another reason he needed a staff to hold him up). No doubt Jacob reminisced about his wives Leah and Rachel and their 12 sons. He recalled the long season of grief when it appeared his beloved son Joseph was gone forever—followed by the joy of discovering Joseph was still alive and well in Egypt. In these closing days of his life, Jacob realized that, through all the ups and downs, God had poured out abundant blessings on him and his household.

One thing we know for sure. While Jacob stood there leaning on his staff, he was thinking about God. Twice, Scripture says he "worshiped" as he leaned on his staff. Physically he put his weight on a wooden stick, but spiritually he leaned hard on God. Leaning on God is the right way to live, and it's the only wise way to die.

We All Lean on Something

Skeptics claim that faith in God is merely a crutch for the weak, but there are at least three problems with this assertion: (1) It disregards the abundant positive evidence of God's existence found in nature, history, Scripture, philosophy, and human experience. (2) It assumes only weak-minded people believe in God, while throughout history well-educated individuals with keen minds have found faith more reasonable than unbelief. (3) It ignores the fact that while God does comfort those who suffer, mercy is only one of his attributes. The almighty God rules the universe with wisdom, purpose, and power.

None of us can stand completely on our own. If we lean on our talents, money, and material possessions, eventually we will lose them all. Should we lean on popularity and fame? Eventually they will fade away. On alcohol and drugs? Temporary highs usher their victims into lasting lows. If we depend on government to fix everything, we will be disappointed. Friends are a blessing, but they can't save our souls, nor can our own cleverness.

Proverbs 3:5 urges, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and **lean not** on your own understanding" (emphasis mine). As Jacob approached death, he needed more than a walking stick to keep him steady. Wisely, he worshiped God. Everyone leans on something. The wise lean on the Lord.

David Faust serves as senior associate minister with East 91st Street Christian Church in Indianapolis.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

Use one or both of these questions to introduce the lesson:

- Think of a time you moved from a familiar location. What were some concerns you had at that time? How did the move work out for you?
- If you were to have a family reunion, where would you hold it? Does that place have any special significance to your family? Why?

Read Genesis 46:1, 2

1. On the way to Egypt, Jacob stopped at Beersheba. What might be the significance of this? See Genesis 21:33; 26:23-25; 28:1, 2, 10.

2. Believers respond in worship when recalling the ways God has blessed them. Jacob was no exception. What were some blessings Jacob received since leaving his childhood home of Beersheba decades earlier? See Genesis 28:13-15; 30:25-30; 35:9-12.

Read Genesis 46:3, 4

3. Review the verses preceding our lesson text (Genesis 45:16-28). What events caused Jacob to leave the land of Canaan and head for Egypt? Why do you think Jacob might have had mixed feelings about this move?

4. Just as God blessed Jacob's days to that point, God reassured Jacob that he would bless his coming days. List and explain the assurances God gave to Jacob in Genesis 46:3, 4.

Read Genesis 46:5, 6; 47:27

5. While Jacob feared the move to Egypt (v. 4), God's words seem to have replaced the fear of the unknown with the fear of the Lord. How does Psalm 34:8, 9 help you understand the difference between those two fears?

6. Jacob's earlier life was scarred with family conflict and division (Genesis 27:41; 37:11, 17-20). How did the final days of his life differ from those earlier days?

7. Leaving our comfort zones is no easier for us than it was for Jacob thousands of years ago! Think of times you moved from the comfortable surroundings of the past because you knew God would continue to bless with his presence. Encourage someone with your story during the coming week.

WEEK THREE

LESSON AIM: **Be assured that God will never forsake you in times of trouble.**

STUDY: Genesis, Part 2

THEME: God with You

LESSON TEXT: Genesis 39:1-4, 19-23

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Romans 8:35-39

GOD IS WITH YOU IN YOUR OPPRESSION (JOSEPH)

BY MARK SCOTT

We sometimes use the expression, "There is light at the end of the tunnel," when we want to emphasize that good is on the way and that soon our "tunnel experience" will end. But sometimes we add to that secular proverb the phrase, "But the light at the end of the tunnel is an oncoming train." Of course this creates angst because often life goes from good to bad or from bad to worse. Such was the life cycle of the patriarch Joseph. About the time he thought his life would improve it seemed to spin around to another conflict.

In terms of the number of chapters, Joseph's story controls the bulk of Genesis—from chapters 37–50. Joseph's life seems like a yoyo. He was his father's favorite and he had the coat to prove it. His family dreams did not endear him to his brothers (Genesis 37:1-11). When Jacob sent Joseph to check on his brothers, they mistreated the dreamer and sold him to the Ishmaelites, who in turn sold him to Potiphar, captain of the guard for the Pharaoh (Sesostris II) in Egypt. Within a short time he went from being a chosen son in Israel to a slave in Egypt. But you can't keep a good man down.

Egypt—Mountain of Success

Genesis 39:1-4

Our text reveals Joseph's rise to the mountain of success. Joseph (whose name meant "Yahweh has added") served in Potiphar's house. Potiphar (whose name meant "Belonging to the sun") was one of Pharaoh's *officials* (chamberlains or eunuchs)—the fact that this word can refer to eunuchs is proof that sometimes the word *eunuch* did not mean a sexually-compromised male, since Potiphar was obviously married. He was *captain of the guard*. Joseph was oppressed, but *God was with him*—a phrase that occurs four times in our printed text.

God caused Joseph to *prosper* (succeed). This was so obvious that even Potiphar noticed it. Joseph had free rein in Potiphar's house. Joseph had gained Potiphar's *favor* (grace or charm). Joseph became Potiphar's *attendant* and was in charge of his household and everything he owned. Potiphar could even tell that Joseph's God was blessing his own house (Genesis 39:5, 6a). But this success would not last.

Prison—Valley of Despair

Genesis 39:19-23

The non-printed text gives the reason for the quick descent from success (Genesis 39:6b-18). Potiphar's wife had more than just eyes for Joseph. She was in a state of mad lust. Madam Folly (Proverbs 5 and 7) made her move on Joseph day after day. Perhaps she felt that she could wear him down with her persistence. When a moment of privacy presented itself, she grabbed him and made her brazen move. Joseph knew that the stakes were high and ran out of the house leaving his coat (now the second time that a coat played a significant role in his life) in her hands. Totally scorned, Potiphar's wife lied about Joseph and lived out the proverb, "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned."

Once again Joseph found himself in the valley of despair. Potiphar *burned with anger* (the expression means to flare back like the nostrils of a horse). Potiphar incarcerated Joseph where the king's prisoners were confined. But once again we read, "But while Joseph was there in prison, the Lord was with him. God showed Joseph kindness (*chesed*, mercy) and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden."

Almost immediately Joseph was given significant responsibility. He was put in charge of all the prisoners and was responsible for all prison activities. He became the overseer of the prisoners and the activities director of the prison. The prison warden began doing what Potiphar had done earlier (Genesis 39:8) by not concerning himself with anything in the prison. Make no mistake, God was behind all of Joseph's successes.

It would be hard to believe that Joseph never wondered about God being there for him in the dark nights of his soul. But the truth of God never forsaking us in times of trouble is clearly a biblical irony. Reality is that sometimes God seems far. But equally real is that God is always near. He never does leave us or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5). But sometimes that is a hard truth to swallow. This is why we must continually lean into the promises of God (Romans 8:35-39). Joseph had much practice with this leaning in because he had so many valleys of oppression.

Mark Scott serves as preaching minister with Park Plaza Christian Church in Joplin, Mo. For 35 years, until 2021, he served as professor of preaching and New Testament with Ozark Christian College in Joplin.

WITH US

BY DAVID FAUST

At first, it looked like Joseph had a charmed life. His father Jacob showed him special favor. Smart and handsome, Joseph sported a flashy wardrobe and had a God-given penchant for interpreting dreams. His fortunes, however, quickly turned upside down. His jealous brothers tossed him into a pit in the ground, then sold him to traveling merchants who took him far away to Egypt. Enslaved, separated from his beloved father, and given up for dead, Joseph endured one misfortune after another. And right when things seemed to be taking a positive turn, he was falsely accused by Potiphar's wife and jailed for a crime he didn't commit.

How bewildered and alone he must have felt in that Egyptian prison! Troubles seem harder to bear when no one is around to share the pain or listen to our complaints. The very word *alone* has a dull, depressing tone. It's from the Old English *all one*, "solitary, unaccompanied, all by oneself." Loneliness lurks in the shadows, casting a hint of melancholy over our hearts when we eat alone, travel alone, or celebrate a holiday alone. It's especially painful to suffer alone.

However, Joseph's confinement wasn't solitary. "But while Joseph was there in the prison, the Lord was with him" (Genesis 39:20, 21). Notice, the Bible doesn't merely say "the Lord noticed what he was going through" or "the Lord cared about him from afar." The Lord was "with him," present and working for good in the midst of Joseph's afflictions.

God's Comforting Presence

Numerous Scripture texts highlight God's comforting presence. David wrote, "I will fear no evil, for you are with me" (Psalm 23:4). Jesus selected 12 apostles so "that they might be with him" (Mark 3:14), and the Lord assured all of his followers, "Surely I am with you always" (Matthew 28:20). Jesus promised a dying thief, "Today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). The apostle Paul viewed death through the same lens, insisting that for a Christian, dying means "to be away from the body and at home with the Lord" (2 Corinthians 5:8)—a prospect so appealing that Paul declared, "I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far" (Philippians 1:23). All of us who belong to Christ look forward to the day "we will be with the Lord forever" (1 Thessalonians 4:17). John summarized God's plan for the faithful by saying, "They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God" (Revelation 21:3).

Christian, what stressful situations do you face right now? The Lord is "an ever-present help in trouble" (Psalm 46:1). You are not alone in your distress. When you are sick, the Lord is with you in the hospital. When you sit at home by yourself, his listening ear is ready to hear your voice. When you face uncertainty and danger, he stands faithfully at your side. When the dark shadows of loneliness descend, God's presence brightens the path, and an even fuller experience of his presence awaits when you die.

Many titles for Jesus Christ appear in the Bible, but one of my favorites is *Immanuel*, which means "God with us." Life is hard, but God is good. His presence turns loneliness into love, misery into ministry, gloom into glory.

David Faust serves as senior associate minister with East 91st Street Christian Church in Indianapolis.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

Use one or both of these questions to introduce the lesson:

- Consider these three pairs: a wildfire vs. the fire in a household furnace, a stampede of wild horses vs. a horse-drawn wagon, and a car bomb vs. the explosions within your car's engine cylinders. What makes the difference between destructive and constructive power?
- Law enforcement agencies have used the question, "What's holding you back?" to encourage seat belt use. How does a double meaning in this slogan challenge a person to think differently about devices designed to restrain us?

Read Genesis 39:1-5

1. Summarize the circumstances that led to Joseph being enslaved (Genesis 37:12-36). Describe the motives of those who sold him into slavery.

2. Rocky Graziano (1919–1990) chronicled his rise from troubled youth to a middleweight boxing title in an autobiography called *Somebody Up There Likes Me*. Based on Joseph's circumstances alone, why might he not have described his life at this point with the same title?

3. Nevertheless, God's presence in Joseph's confinement turned negatives into positives. How was Joseph affected? How did Potiphar, despite being a pagan Egyptian, also benefit?

Read Genesis 39:19-23

4. Summarize the circumstances that led to Joseph's imprisonment (Genesis 39:6-19). Does doing the right thing always lead to immediate rewards? Explain.

5. Underline the identical phrases that appear in Genesis 39:2 and 23 and in 39:3 and 23. Why does tying oppression and God's presence together seem counterintuitive at first?

6. Joseph may have once dreamed of living a life of ease as the favored son of a wealthy landowner. How did placing Joseph into confinement (both as a slave and as a prisoner) yield more positive results than simply granting him "the good life"?

7. Are you in a circumstance today that makes you feel like an oppressed victim (ex: relationship issues, health problems, difficult job situation, etc.)? How might God be using this situation to contain and direct his power in you to achieve positive ends? How might situations that seem to hold us back actually be making us "more than conquerors" (Romans 8:35-39)?

WEEK FOUR

LESSON AIM: **Know that even when others abandon you, God will not.**

STUDY: Genesis, Part 2

THEME: God with You

LESSON TEXT: Genesis 21:8-20; 17:19, 20

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Psalm 34:18; Isaiah 56:3-8; Hebrews 13:5

GOD IS WITH YOU WHEN YOU FEEL OUTCAST (ISHMAEL/HAGAR)

BY MARK SCOTT

Headings matter. The *New International Version* titles this text, "Hagar and Ishmael Sent Away." The *English Standard Version* titles this text, "God Protects Hagar and Ishmael." The first heading emphasizes Abraham's duty. The latter heading emphasizes God's care. In this text we see both severity and grace in God's choices. God cares for the outcast while moving his specific promise along to redeem the world through the promised seed.

Hagar (and probably her 16-year-old son Ishmael) felt outcast from Abraham and Sarah. They felt thrown out. Jesus had compassion on such people (Matthew 9:36). In Jesus' day people felt "harassed" (to cut open) and "helpless" (to throw down). People feel the same today. How does God care for such people while continuing to leverage his purpose?

God's Choice

Genesis 21:8-13

God called Abraham (Genesis 12). God made a covenant with Abraham (Genesis 15). God sealed the covenant with Abraham by circumcision (Genesis 17). Abraham and Sarah's impatience with the fulfillment of that promise created real problems for the couple. But God did not allow their poor choice to derail his plan of saving the world through their seed (Galatians 3:16).

When Isaac, the son of the promise, was old enough to be weaned (probably two or three years of age), Abraham held a great feast to celebrate Isaac's move from infancy to the terrible twos. These were big occasions in the Ancient Near East. Sarah saw something that disturbed her. Ishmael (Abraham's son through Hagar) was *mocking* (same word for the meaning of Isaac's name, "laughter") her son, Isaac. Earlier we learned that there was bad blood between Sarah and Hagar (Genesis 16:6). In fact, it looks as if history is about to repeat itself with Sarah sending Hagar away—though this time she is not pregnant with Ishmael; he is a teenager. Sarah wanted a clear line drawn in the sand between her son and Hagar's son.

This *distressed* (the word for "evil" with the nuance here being "broken to pieces") Abraham. After all, Ishmael was still his son. But God's choice would work in spite of Sarah's feelings. God came alongside of Sarah and told Abraham to follow suit. God would choose between Ishmael and Isaac as to the messianic line, but that did not mean God would not care for Hagar and Ishmael.

God's Care

Genesis 21:14-20

God's care of Hagar and Ishmael is proof positive of his love for all the nations and his wide embrace of all peoples. Reluctantly Abraham prepared to send the mother and son away with some basic provisions (food and water). Like Hagar had done earlier in Genesis 16 she wandered in the Desert of Beersheba (northeast portion of the Sinai Peninsula).

It does not take long for the water to run out in the desert. It seems odd for Hagar to have put her teenage son under one of the bushes. Stranger yet is the fact that she put herself in a position not to see the young man struggle and die for lack of water and food. Hagar and Ishmael both cried. God's heart was touched by their grief. An angel answered from Heaven. The question asked by the angel, "What is the matter, Hagar?" makes one think of Hagar's first trip to the desert (16:8). The question there is, "Where have you come from and where are you going?"

God's care is seen in the angel's encouragement not to be afraid, an acknowledgement that God heard their cries, and a promise that God would make him into a great nation—a promise that occurs three times in this text. In addition to those three things God opened her eyes to a well of water. Whether this was only a physical phenomenon or a supernatural phenomenon is hard to say. Regardless, Ishmael was refreshed by the water and was spared. Ishmael grew up and lived out his days in the desert.

God's Choice and Care

Genesis 17:19, 20

This last part of our printed text takes us back to the chapter that highlights the seal of the covenant with Abraham. Isaac was God's choice for being the son of promise—plain and simple. The covenant promise belonged to him (see Romans 3:1, 2; 9:4, 5; Galatians 4:21-31). But God's care remained for all peoples, which would include Ishmael. God promised to hear, bless, and multiply his seed. For anyone who has ever felt outcast, marginalized, or forgotten, this lesson teaches that God will not abandon them. For God, out of sight does not mean out of mind.

Mark Scott serves as preaching minister with Park Plaza Christian Church in Joplin, Mo. For 35 years, until 2021, he served as professor of preaching and New Testament with Ozark Christian College in Joplin.

ARROWS IN THE DESERT

BY DAVID FAUST

Banished. Isolated. Pushed away. Trying to survive in a lifeless desert. That's what happened to Hagar and her son Ishmael, according to Genesis chapter 21. Deserts, though, aren't as lifeless as they appear. God does interesting things in deserts.

According to an online article I read recently titled, "127 Stunning Desert Plants," an amazing array of vegetation grows in arid climates. Most crops, of course, grow best in fertile, well-watered soil, but a wide variety of plants survive and thrive in the desert. Some gardeners actually plant a special kind of garden called a *xeriscape* (from the Greek word *xeros*, which means "dry") that replicates desert-like conditions.

In the desert you can find the mint-green and pinkish shades of the ghost plant and the burro's tail, the reddish-orange stems of the pencil plant, and the disc-shaped leaves of the paddle plant. Small round plants called living stones blend into the scenery because they look like little rocks. Cactus comes in different varieties with descriptive names like the zebra (shaped like a green cone with white stripes), the round golden barrel, and the aptly-named bunny ear. Wildflowers bloom in the desert, too, including orange California poppies, royal-looking magenta winecups, yellow desert marigolds, and desert sages that paint the landscape with purple and blue. Trees like the Joshua Tree and the aloe, with its healing properties, grow in the desert as well.

Learning a Useful New Skill

Throughout the Bible, God used deserts as a laboratory for spiritual growth. The Israelites wandered in a dry, dangerous wilderness for 40 years, but it wasn't a purposeless meandering; God was leading his people, disciplining and shaping them. David's time in the desert refined his prayers and provided the setting where he wrote many of his greatest Psalms. Fasting in the desert, Jesus faced temptation for 40 days at the start of his ministry. Away from the crowds in the desert of Arabia, the Lord prepared Paul for his ministry as an apostle (Galatians 1:17, 18).

Which brings us back to Ishmael, the son of Abraham. According to Genesis 21:20, "God was with the boy as he grew up. He lived in the desert and became an archer."

Archery was a useful skill for someone who lived in the wilderness. Ishmael's aptitude with the bow and arrow enabled him to protect himself from danger and hunt wild game for food. Archery also provided a constructive way to pass the time during lonely days in the desert. Learning a new skill or perfecting a talent is a good way to fend off boredom. Everyone needs a goal to pursue—something to shoot for. In Ishmael's case, archery provided a literal target at which he could aim. If Ishmael never lived in the desert, would he ever have learned the bowman's craft?

I have gone through dry, arid times in my life when the spiritual climate didn't seem ideal for anything to grow. Perhaps you have gone through such times, too. Maybe you are in the desert right now. Look carefully. There in the desert, you might be surprised to see some beautiful things starting to take root and grow. You might discover a new skill or a new target at which to aim. Even more, look carefully and you might detect the presence of God.

David Faust serves as senior associate minister with East 91st Street Christian Church in Indianapolis.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

Use one or both of these questions to introduce the lesson:

- How have you heard this sentence completed: "There are two kinds of people in the world . . ."?
- What types of cliques are found in a typical high school? Which one were you a part of? Which would never have accepted you?

Read Genesis 17:19; 21:8-12

1. A character in many stories about high school students is the so-called mean girl. How does the mean girl behave? What motivates her? What characteristics of a so-called mean girl does Sarah exhibit in this Bible account?

2. Describe Abraham's attitudes and behavior in this account. How does he fall short of the type of man one would picture as the heroic leader of a new nation?

Read Genesis 21:14-16

3. The Desert of Beersheba was exactly as it sounds—hot, dry, and unpopulated. How might Abraham have justified sending a woman and her teenage son into such adverse conditions?

4. Isaac was the son chosen to be the ancestor of God's chosen people, and Ishmael was not. But are those not chosen to have a special covenant with God less valuable in his eyes? Respond by paraphrasing Isaiah 56:3-8.

Read Genesis 17:20; 21:13, 17-20

5. In what appeared to be the last moments in the life of Hagar and Ishmael, an angel of God responded from Heaven. Summarize the three elements of that response.

6. Muslims to this day claim Ishmael as the ancestor of several prominent Arab tribes and as the forefather of Muhammad. How does that claim fit with the promises made about Ishmael to Abraham and Hagar?

7. Who in this story reminds you most of yourself: Hagar, who sees herself as a victim; Sarah, who does not want to associate with those not perceived as being up to her standards; or Abraham, who is distressed when a person or group is mistreated but feels powerless to respond? Explain.

For Next Week: This week's lesson brings this unit of study to a conclusion. Look for additional "1717: Your Word Is Truth" studies, for use with your Sunday School classes, small groups, or personal studies, at ChristianStandard.com.