1717 BIBLE STUDIES

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

OVERVIEW

Study: Genesis, Part 3
Theme: God Blesses

Overview: God promised to bless all nations through Abraham's family, and he kept blessing that family along the way. In this unit, students will see from the lives of Isaac, Judah, Sarah, and Joseph that God blesses the faithful, the repentant, the unexpectant, and those who forgive.

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.

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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 birth of Isaac in Abraham and Sarah's old age (Genesis 21), to Isaac's life among the Philistines at Gerar and Beersheba (chapter 26), to Joseph's brothers selling him to traveling Ishmaelites (chapter 37), and finally to Egypt, where Judah offered himself in Benjamin's place and Joseph forgave his brothers (chapters 44, 45, 50).

Theme

God blesses. The Lord promised Abraham, "I will bless you . . . and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:2, 3). In spite of famines, family conflict, deception, and long years of waiting, God kept his promise and blessed his people, so that Joseph could say, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good" (50:20).

Why Study Genesis?

These stories show how God blesses those who trust him. This study calls believers to live by God's promises, to experience his blessing through repentance, to trust that even a small faith brings the Lord's blessings, and to seek the healing that comes through forgiveness.

STUDY CONTENT

WEEK 1:	Genesis 26:3-6, 12, 13, 23-33
WEEK 2:	Genesis 37:26, 27; 44:17-34
WEEK 3:	Genesis 21:1-7
WEEK 4:	Genesis 45:1-15; 50:15-21

WEEK ONE

LESSON AIM: **Have confidence that God blesses those who live by his promises.**

STUDY: Genesis, Part 3

THEME: God Blesses

LESSON TEXT: Genesis 26:3-6, 12, 13, 23-33

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Proverbs 8:32; Psalm 119:1-8

GOD BLESSES THE FAITHFUL (ISAAC)

BY MARK SCOTT

A Sunday school children's song contains the lyrics, "Every promise in the book is mine, every chapter, every verse, every line." Cute song. Bad hermeneutics. The fact is that we participate in the promise that God made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and we experience its blessings (Galatians 3:9). But the promise itself was unique to Abraham so that there would be no mistake that salvation would arise from one family.

The Isaac narrative in Genesis (chapters 21–35) shows the continuance of the promise of God to save the world through Jesus. In so many ways Isaac's life paralleled that of his father. Both shared similar famines, similar lies about their beautiful wives, similar sibling difficulties, similar potential adultery of their wives with high-ranking officials, and similar challenges with the "peoples of the land." But for all of Isaac's challenges he continued to place his confidence in God's promises and thereby experienced God's blessings.

The Land and Legacy of the Promise

Genesis 26:3-6

A second famine ran the risk of derailing the promise of God. It was similar to the one Abraham experienced (Genesis 12:10). What if the people of the promise died of starvation? To the Israelite reading this story (or hearing it), there would have been a question about Isaac's obedience. God kept Isaac from going to Egypt as Abraham had done. Instead he told him to *sojourn* (dwell; inhabit) in the land.

God promised Isaac his presence and his blessing. These would manifest themselves in the *land* (ground; earth) and the legacy (the oath to his family). Abraham's family needed a place to "be," so God included the promise of the land (a word appearing twice in this text). But more than place is the people. *Offspring* (children; descendants) occurs four times in the text. This offspring would multiply as the stars of heaven. In fact, this offspring would end up blessing the nations at large. This ongoing promise located itself in the obedience of Abraham. He *obeyed* (harkened) and *kept* (observed or watched) all the legal literature of the Old Testament. Notice the synonyms, *charge*, *commandments*, *statutes*, and *laws*. These terms designated nuances of written revelation. Isaac would attempt to keep them as his dad had done—though not in Egypt but in Gerar (a Philistine town south of Gaza).

The Harvest and Peace of the Promise

Genesis 26:12, 13, 23-33

Like father, like son. As Abraham had lied about Sarah, so Isaac lied about Rebekah (Genesis 26:7-11). This hardly endeared him to Abimelech (the name means, "my father is king"), king of the Philistines at Gerar. Abimelech added two plus two when he saw Isaac caressing Rebekah. In fact, it may well explain why the natives started filling in the wells of Isaac. Were the Philistines upset that Isaac had come among them, lied about his wife, and seemed to succeed abundantly in his agrarian pursuits—and that, in the midst of a famine? The text says that Isaac's harvest was a *hundredfold*. In that world it was more than a bumper crop. It was all but miraculous (see Matthew 13:8). Isaac grew more and more *rich* and *wealthy* (the same word used twice). What the Philistines did not know was that God was behind the harvest.

There is an interlude in our text in verses 14-22. Just as the lie about Rebekah interrupted the previous narrative, so the Philistines stopping up the wells (Esek, Sitnah, and Rehoboth) in this narrative interrupted the farming success of Isaac and the challenge of living at peace with the peoples of the land. Isaac moved from Gerar to Beersheba (southern tip of the land of promise and meaning "well of seven-fold oath"). God appeared to Isaac and reaffirmed his presence, his blessing, and his promise of offspring. Isaac's response to this blessing was worship (*built an altar*), prayer (*called upon the name of the Lord*), and habitation (*pitched his tent* and *dug a well*), which meant he would dwell in the land.

But Isaac's prospects of dwelling in the land were compromised when the Philistines began to fill Isaac's wells with dirt. Abimelech knew that he needed to patch the fence. He brought his *adviser* (friend, companion) and his *commander* (captain, leader) to seek terms of peace. Isaac reprimanded the Philistines but agreed to the covenant—not to *harm* (seek evil) or *touch* (strike) them. They sealed the deal with a meal (very common in the ancient world) and went on their way in peace. Isaac's servants dug a new well, which they called *Shibah* (oath). Water meant crops, and crops meant that the family of promise would be sustained for another day. The obedience of one brings blessings to many.

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IN THE SHADE OF YOUR FIG TREE

BY DAVID FAUST

Do you know that Fig Newtons got their name from the city of Newton, Massachusetts? Other than eating one of those cookies once in a while, I seldom think about figs, so it's hard to appreciate what fig trees meant in the ancient Middle East. There weren't many ways to satisfy a sweet tooth back then, so people loved delicacies like honey and figs.

Fig trees grew slowly, requiring years of patient cultivation, and they weren't particularly large, reaching an average height of 10 to 15 feet. Mature, fruitful fig trees were considered a sign of peace and godly well-being. During King Solomon's prosperous reign, the Israelites "lived in safety, everyone under their own vine and under their own fig tree" (1 Kings 4:25). The prophets foretold a coming age of *shalom* (peace) when everyone would sit "under their own fig tree, and no one will make them afraid" (Micah 4:4), and "each of you will invite your neighbor to sit under your vine and fig tree" (Zechariah 3:10). Jesus saw Nathanael sitting under a fig tree, perhaps praying there (John 1:48).

I don't have any fig trees in my yard, but those biblical promises of security and rest sound good to me. I often feel a sense of godly well-being when I lie back in the overstuffed recliner that sits in my living room. I suppose that comfortable chair is my version of a fig tree—a place where I consistently find *shalom*. Do you have a favorite spot in your house or a place outdoors where you like to reflect, pray, and thank God for his good gifts?

Surviving Crop Failures

The Bible doesn't tell us whether Isaac owned any fig trees, but it says he planted crops and "reaped a hundredfold, because the Lord blessed him" (Genesis 26:12). Whatever successes we enjoy, we should recognize them as God's blessings. Humble gratitude is a better response than pridefully patting ourselves on the back. Job's faith was tested when he lost his family, his health, and his material possessions; but his faith also was tested when he still had all of those things. Prosperity presents different temptations than adversity does, but it tests our faith nonetheless.

And what about when our work seems fruitless? How should we respond when nothing goes right and life seems to be falling apart? One Hebrew prophet declared his determination to remain faithful even if a total crop failure occurred. "Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior" (Habakkuk 3:17, 18). Did you catch that? "Though the fig tree does not bud . . . yet I will rejoice in the Lord."

Here's a prayer to ponder as you and I sit in our places of *shalom*. "Father, thank you that we can sit under our fig trees in peace. We're grateful for every good and perfect gift you bestow. But, gracious and faithful God, please enable us to find peace and joy in your presence even when our fig trees bear no fruit at all."

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QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

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

- What do you know about the history of your family? Think about your parents, grandparents, and great grandparents. List five or six words that describe their accomplishments and character.
- How have you benefited from the legacy left by your ancestors? How would your life be different today had one of them chosen another occupation or homeland or spouse?

Read Genesis 26:3-6

1. Isaac moved to the land of the Philistines because of a famine (vv. 1, 2). What impact would we expect a famine to have on the residents of a country? What very different consequences did God promise to Isaac?

2. Compare Isaac's situation to that of Abram (12:1-3, 10). How might Isaac's situation have been different had Abram made different choices?

Read Genesis 26:12, 13

3. Consider the best financial investment you ever made. How much did your initial investment increase in value? How long did it take you to get a return on your investment? Compare that to the increase Isaac received on what he planted and the length of time it took to reap that increase. What was the secret of his success?

4. Isaac was a foreigner who achieved overnight success in a hostile land. How did the citizens of that nation react to that success? (See verses 14-16.) While that reaction was not pleasant for Isaac, what could have happened that would have been even worse?

Read Genesis 26:23-33

5. Underline the command that Yahweh gave to Isaac in verse 24. Judging from Isaac's circumstances, do you think fear was justifiable? Explain. Although we seek security in our wealth and our defenses, how was Isaac's source of security different from those?

6. When we are in hostile territory, we may expect the enemy to approach us to attack. Explain why Isaac's meeting with Philistine forces was very different than what one might have expected.

7. Skim through Genesis 26:1-33 and count the number of times the name "Abraham" appears. While we are blessed by the achievements of our ancestors, why is our spiritual legacy from Abraham an even greater source of blessing? See Romans 9:8; Galatians 3:7.

WEEK TWO

LESSON AIM: **Experience the blessing of God through repentance.**

STUDY: Genesis, Part 3

THEME: God Blesses

LESSON TEXT: Genesis 37:26, 27; 44:17-34

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Psalm 32:1, 2; Revelation 5:5

GOD BLESSES THE REPENTANT (JUDAH)

BY MARK SCOTT

The website for futurologist Leonard Sweet is called "Preach the Story." The thesis of the website is that in all the little stories of the Bible there is the embedded big story of God's plan to rescue the world through Jesus. That is very much in evidence in our text today where Judah's speech to save Benjamin's life showed his repentance and sent Joseph over the emotional cliff.

Other famous Bible people made "substitution" speeches. God had his fill of the disobedience of the Israelites and was ready to wipe the nation out and start over with Moses (Numbers 14:11, 12), but Moses interceded for the people and stayed the judgment of God (vv. 13-19). When the remnant of Israel was to be annihilated, Esther stood in the gap with her famous line, "If I perish, I perish" (Esther 4:16). Even Paul was willing to go to Hell if it would mean salvation for the Jewish people (Romans 9:3).

He Set Up the Transaction

Genesis 37:26, 27

Joseph had few filters. When he spilled the beans about his dreams to his brothers, it did not endear him to his siblings (Genesis 37:1-11). When his brothers had a chance to do Joseph in, they took full advantage of it (vv. 12-24). Judah's speech ended up sparing Joseph's life and God used it to preserve his promise.

A caravan of Ishmaelites provided Judah with just the right opportunity for this first transaction. No *profit* (unjust gain) would be gained from murdering Joseph and then *concealing* (covering) his blood. Judah suggested selling Joseph to the Ishmaelites (they were family members from their distant past, sons of Ishmael). The thinking was that Joseph was a brother and their own *flesh* (kin). The transaction was made for 20 shekels.

He Reviewed the History

Genesis 44:17-29

We fast forward to the cat-and-mouse game that Joseph played with his brothers later in the story. Jacob sent the brothers to Egypt in search of food during the famine. Joseph's identity was kept from the brothers as they navigated the tricky relationship with this second-in-command of the nation of Egypt. This was now the third time that the brothers had appeared before Joseph. The famous cup was found in Benjamin's grain sack so he would be forced to stay in Egypt as Joseph's servant. Judah spoke up, recounted Israel's history, and harkened back to the pledge he made to his father (Genesis 43:8-10).

Judah addressed Joseph as *lord* (five times). Judah, on the other hand, referred to himself as the *servant*. Some form of that word occurs nine times in this text. It refers to Judah, his brothers, and their father, Jacob. Judah *begged* (prayed, beseeched, or entreated) Joseph for a hearing as he acknowledged Joseph's status (like Pharaoh) and pled for his anger not to burn against him.

Then Judah launched into the historical review. Judah gave the details of the family tree: the father (Jacob) was still alive, Benjamin was the child of Jacob's old age, and *His brother is dead* (a clear reference to Joseph). Father Jacob did not want to lose another son and at first refused to allow Benjamin to go back to Egypt with his brothers. The brothers explained to their father that no Benjamin meant no food. So the brothers brought Benjamin back to Egypt against their father's desires because Joseph had insisted. From Jacob's perspective Rachel had borne him two sons. One *left* (went out), and was surely torn to pieces, and he had never seen him since (another clear reference to Joseph). If something happened to Benjamin, then Jacob's gray hairs would be brought down in evil to Sheol.

He Became the Transaction

Genesis 44:30-34

Judah put his life on the line. Essentially the paragraph says, "Take me instead of Benjamin." Judah informed Joseph that since Jacob's life was *bound up* (tied up) with Benjamin, if he did not return, Jacob would go to Sheol in *sorrow* (grief or anguish).

Judah became a *pledge of safety* (surety) and would *bear the blame* (incur the penalty by sin) for his brother Benjamin. Judah himself became the transaction for his brother. This was the final straw. The willingness of his brother Judah to substitute himself for Benjamin elicited an emotional response from Joseph. The next chapter reveals how Joseph sent the Egyptians out of the room. Then he revealed his true identity to his brothers. Judah had repented of his former evil. God blessed his willingness to be a substitute in one of the most moving petitions of the entire Old Testament. And Jesus, the great substitute, was from which tribe?

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REPENTANCE: TRY IT—YOU MIGHT LIKE IT!

BY DAVID FAUST

Bob Russell tells about a time when he was driving with his wife Judy, and she insisted they should get off the highway at a certain exit. Bob disagreed and kept going, only to discover soon afterward that she was right after all. He admits, "I kept driving quite a while, trying to figure out a way to turn around without her realizing it!"

No one likes to admit being wrong, so it's no wonder that repentance sounds harsh to postmodern ears. When is the last time you used the word *repent* in a conversation?

On the surface repentance may sound negative, but there's a lot more to it than scolding and shaming. If you find yourself in a deep hole, it makes sense to stop digging. If you're going in the wrong direction, it's wise to make a U-turn. Someone defined repentance as a change of mind that leads to a change of behavior. Understood that way, repentance doesn't sound so bad. In fact, it sounds downright appealing. Is your life so flawless and wonderful that nothing needs to change? Mine isn't, either. In plain English, if something in your life is seriously out of whack, why wouldn't you want to try a different approach? Obeying God can be difficult, but in the big picture disobeying God leads to far worse results. Humanity has gone our own way since the Garden of Eden. How's that been working for us?

What if, when Jesus said, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matthew 4:17), he wasn't scolding people as much as he was offering them a better approach? I think Jesus' voice rang with the sound of adventure when he invited men and women to follow him. In God's kingdom, the cross leads to glory. Sacrifice and self-denial lead to a deeper experience of God's grace. In the long run, the hardships of discipleship are always worth the hassle.

Times of Refreshing

Repentance leads to positive outcomes like cultural renewal (2 Chronicles 7:14), forgiveness of sin (Acts 2:38), "times of refreshing" (Acts 3:19, 20), and recovering our first love (Revelation 2:4, 5). Who wouldn't want blessings like those?

We resist repentance because it requires humbling ourselves before God and others. It means sliding out of the driver's seat so the Lord can take the wheel. After all, ruling the universe is above our pay grade. Repentance isn't just turning *from*; it's turning *to*—from sin toward God, from wrong toward right, from aimlessness toward purpose, from death toward life. God's kindness, not harshness, leads us to repentance (Romans 2:4). His Spirit guides us away from destructive patterns and helps us adopt healthier habits instead.

Wouldn't the world be a better place if the leaders of nations and religious organizations would all repent? And if estranged families, embittered friends, divided churches, and hostile neighbors would humbly repent and seek forgiveness from God and from each other? What if individuals all over the globe would yield our own agendas to the will of God?

Genuine repentance leads to positive results. Yes, it's difficult to accept responsibility for our actions and face our sins head on. But godly sorrow leads to repentance, which leads to salvation "without regret" (2 Corinthians 7:10). And a life without regret sounds very appealing to me.

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QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

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

- What, in your opinion, is insufficient about each of these apologies? I'm sorry (that you feel that way). I'm sorry (that I got caught). I'm sorry (but what's done is done).
- What constitutes a sincere apology? Give an example of a time when you knew an apology offered to you was sincere.

Read Genesis 37:26, 27

1. Sometimes people justify wrongdoing by thinking, "He deserved it." What was Joseph's offense in the eyes of his brothers? See verses 5-11, 17-20.

2. Another excuse for wrongdoing is to believe that the offense is not that bad. How did Judah justify his actions in this way?

Read Genesis 44:17-29

3. To whom was Joseph referring when he spoke of making the one found with the cup his slave (vv. 11-16)? Can Judah's attitude best be described as "casting blame" or as "accepting blame"? Explain.

4. Underline the words *servant* and *lord* in these verses. How does this humility contrast with the "old Judah" who sold Joseph into slavery?

Read Genesis 44:30-34

5. Earlier, Joseph's brothers were furious with the suggestion that they would someday bow before him (37:8). When that day arrived (although they didn't know it at the time), show how Judah's words reflected more of a concern for the feelings of others rather than for his own pride.

6. True stories in Scripture often point to an even greater event that would happen in the distant future. How do you think Judah's offer on behalf of Benjamin is related to these verses: Mark 10:45; Romans 3:25; Revelation 5:5, 9?

7. What is the difference between sorrow and repentance? How does Judah's offer help explain the difference? Think of a wrong you have done. How can you demonstrate repentance rather than merely mouthing the words, "I'm sorry"?

WEEK THREE

LESSON AIM: **Trust that even a small faith brings the Lord's blessings.**

STUDY: Genesis, Part 3

THEME: God Blesses

LESSON TEXT: Genesis 21:1-7

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Hebrews 11:11; Proverbs 16:20; Psalm 84:11, 12

GOD BLESSES THE UNEXPECTANT (SARAH)

BY MARK SCOTT

Sometimes God is just off-the-charts good—like in his creation of the world (Genesis 1:31), in blessing the just and unjust (Matthew 5:45), in his plan to save Jew and Gentile (Romans 11:33-36), in supplying all our needs (Philippians 4:19), and in giving us everything that pertains to life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3). No wonder the psalmist said, "No good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly" (Psalm 84:11, ESV).

God promised to bless all the nations through Abraham's seed (Genesis 12:1-3; Galatians 3:16). He renewed that promise more than once (Genesis 15 and 17). He announced that promise when it came ever so close (Genesis 18). And in our lesson today, he fulfilled that promise when the promised seed was born. No wonder Proverbs 13:12 says, "Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life" (ESV). The promise was given to Abraham, but our lesson today focuses on Sarah. She would carry in her womb the promise for a changed world.

Beyond Normal

Genesis 21:1-3

There were some normal nuances to the birth of Isaac, but there were unique abnormalities as well. What was way out of the norm was that a childless couple of such advanced age would have a son. Just as God had appeared to Abraham earlier, now God *visited* Sarah. The word *visit* means to attend or care for. In the Septuagint it is the same word for what elders do in churches (they care for the flock). The angel of the Lord had promised that Sarah would bear this son of promise (Genesis 18:10). The Lord was now ready to enact what he had *promised* (said, the important Old Testament word, *dabar*).

It is not abnormal for older couples to enjoy sexual intimacy, but for that intimacy to result in conception is certainly not typical. But Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son *in his old age* (a truth underlined three times in this short text). Sarah was long past menopause (v. 11), and Abraham was a hundred years old and as "good as dead" (Hebrews 11:12, the tense of which could be translated, "Abraham was in the present state of having been dead"). Even though Sarah was unexpectant and surprised, she did believe that God would keep his promise (Hebrews 11:11). They named the baby Isaac.

Beyond Ironic

Genesis 21:4-7

Biblical humor is expressed primarily through three concepts: irony, sarcasm, and paronomasia (play on words). Moses intended for us to find some irony in the telling of Isaac's birth and circumcision. The name *Isaac* (laughter) appears three times in the text and two additional times *laughter* is mentioned. Abraham took his son Laughter and circumcised him when he was eight days old. This was part of the Mosaic Law that would be given later, but it also was part of the instructions God had given Abraham and his family earlier in the story (Genesis 17:9-14). *Circumcision* literally means "to cut," and was a sign of the covenant (Genesis 17).

How did Sarah say the words recorded in verses six and seven? Part of the irony is that we probably do not know. Would not it have been great to see her facial expression and hear her vocal inflection? Was she embarrassed? Did she feel self-conscious about being pregnant at her age? Was she complaining (just a tad) that God has made her a laughing stock, knowing that everyone would make sport of her, especially when it came to nursing Isaac? Or was she laughing along with God, her son, and the neighbors that God had taken away her sorrow and feelings of inadequacy? In other words, down deep, was she experiencing joy unspeakable? As she felt Isaac's movements in her womb was she quietly laughing as she looked heavenward with tears in her eyes, mouthing the words, "Thank you"? Ironic indeed.

Sarah probably went through several stages: resignation (no babies), hopeful (the angel said . . .), unexpectant, and maybe a bit fearful (could this really be?), and finally laughter (through tears). It was not just Abraham who responded in faith to God. Sarah did as well. Believers are called children of Abraham (Galatians 3:29), but they can also be children of Sarah if they do good and refuse to give way to fear (1 Peter 3:6). God's ways can seem foolish—moronic, even funny (1 Corinthians 1:25).

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PLEASE GOD

BY DAVID FAUST

The English author Lynne Truss wrote a clever book about punctuation called *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*. The book's title comes from the grammatical misstep of a student who wrote an essay about pandas and tried to explain their plant-based diet. These creatures, the writer meant to explain, "eats shoots and leaves." Unfortunately, the student inserted an unnecessary comma, making the panda sound like a gun-toting critter that starts a fight in a restaurant. The panda "eats, shoots and leaves."

Tiny commas can make a big difference. Consider the two words *please God*.

With a comma inserted between them, those words become a meaningful prayer—one I have lifted up to the Father many times. I'm guessing you have offered such prayers as well. "Please, God, have mercy on me." "Please, God, let me pass this test." "Please, God, heal my sick friend." "Please, God, help me make the right decision." "Please, God, calm my nerves." "Please, God, get me out of this mess!" It's natural to cry out to our heavenly Father when we're in times of need.

Remove the comma, though, and instead of a prayer those same two words have a different slant. Now they state a vision to pursue: "Please God!" Several passages of Scripture exhort us to make pleasing God a personal priority. The apostle Paul urges us to "make it our goal to please him" (2 Corinthians 5:9) and to "find out what pleases the Lord" (Ephesians 5:10). Hebrews 13:16 exhorts us, "Do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased."

To be honest, in my own relationship with God, I tend to insert the comma more often than not. It's natural for me to pray, "Please, God," because I am quite conscious of my own worries and needs. But how often do I analyze how my attitudes and behaviors can "please God"? It's fine to ask God for blessings, but do we also make every effort to please the heavenly Father and bring him delight?

Faith in God's Faithfulness

Abraham's wife Sarah provides a fascinating character study. She traveled with her husband to a previously unknown land, faced the frustration of infertility, endured the indignity of her husband passing her off as his sister, and waded through the conflicts that resulted from Abraham fathering a child with another woman. When God promised to give her a son, at first Sarah reacted with laughter that sprang from delight and wonder (perhaps mingled with a touch of skepticism). But in the end, Sarah believed God, received his promised blessing, and made her mark in history as a person of great faith. She found that the Lord always proves himself faithful (Hebrews 11:11).

At first, I imagine Sarah's prayers were the kind that included the comma. "Please, God, let me have a baby." It was the kind of earnest request that flows out of a broken heart, begging God to intervene with blessings we long to receive. I will keep saying such prayers as long as I live. But as I grow in Christ, I also hope my faith will lead me not only to ask, "Please, God, will you do this for me?" but also to say, "God, how can I please you?"

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QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

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

- When have you been genuinely surprised (in a positive way) by a loved one? What action, gift, or other blessing from this person truly caught you off guard?
- Do you regularly take time to count your blessings? Quickly make a top 10 list of your life's greatest blessings.

Read Genesis 21:1-3

1. As children we may have wanted something but were told we were not old enough or the time wasn't right. What were some of those wishes? Note the timing of God's fulfillment of his promise to Abraham and Sarah. Why do you find it strange? Why might have God chosen that "very time" (v. 2) to fulfill his promise?

2. Review Genesis 18:9-15 and note that Abraham and Sarah were given the time when their son would be born. Note Sarah's reaction to the news. Look at a footnote in your Bible or in an analytical concordance to discover the meaning of the name given to their son. Why was it an appropriate name?

Read Genesis 21:4, 5

3. What is the significance of circumcision in this account? See Genesis 17:9-14. While it seems like a strange mark to show devotion to God (and one limited to males!) what might be some reasons for it?

4. Contrast the ages of Isaac and Abraham given in these verses. What might have happened to Abraham's covenant with God if Abraham would have waited too long to give Isaac a covenant sign? How do the words of Psalm 78:4-7 apply here?

Read Genesis 21:6, 7

5. What are some blessings that you have that you enjoy much more when you share them with others? Explain how sharing the news of Isaac's birth multiplied the joy of that blessing for Sarah.

6. A rhetorical question has one obvious answer. Note Sarah's rhetorical question in verse 7. What is the expected answer? What implications does that have for us when we are blessed by God?

7. Review the top 10 list of your life's blessings you made earlier. Mark each blessing with either a U (an unexpected blessing that caught you off guard), a W (a blessing you waited a long time to receive), or an S (a blessing that is meant to be shared). Remember to thank God for each of these blessings throughout the week.

WEEK FOUR

LESSON AIM: **Seek the blessing of healing, which comes through forgiveness.**

STUDY: Genesis, Part 3

THEME: God Blesses

LESSON TEXT: Genesis 45:1-15; 50:15-21

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Matthew 6:14, 15; Colossians 3:13

GOD BLESSES THOSE WHO FORGIVE (JOSEPH)

BY MARK SCOTT

"When deep injury is done to us, we never recover until we forgive. . . . Forgiveness does not change the past, but it does enlarge the future" (Mary Karen Read, last journal entry before being shot to death in the Virginia Tech shootings, April 16, 2007). Lack of granting forgiveness is a major hindrance to spiritual, emotional, and even physical health. Joseph was not hindered because he knew how to forgive.

Our lesson picks up where we left off two weeks ago. Following Judah's moving "My Life for the Boy's" speech, Joseph was overcome with emotion. He sent the Egyptians from the room, revealed his identity to his brothers, and assured them of his forgiveness. In the second text Joseph reassured his brothers once again of his forgiveness—this time following the death of his father Jacob.

Forgiveness Is Easier When We Sense the Providence of God

Genesis 45:1-15

Forgiveness is never easy. Just look to Golgotha. But forgiveness is made easier when we look for the fingerprints of God in our stories. Joseph could forgive his brothers for their abuse, their merchandising of his life, and their deception because he looked to the bigger story of God in his smaller narrative. Joseph could not *control* (restrain) himself. Even though his only audience was his brothers, the Egyptians and even the household of Pharaoh heard Joseph's weeping. This is the third time of five that Joseph cried. He was one who could be touched.

Joseph verbally declared his identity. Did he speak in the Hebrew language? Notice how "other-centered" he was. After the big reveal he immediately asked about his father Jacob. His brothers must have stood there like deer in headlights. They were *dismayed* (terrified or vexed) at his presence. So Joseph asked them to come closer to him, and they came near. He stated his identity again and added, "Whom you sold into Egypt." Genuine forgiveness does not whitewash the offense.

Joseph went right to work pastoring his brothers, acknowledging God's work in his situation, stating reality about the ongoing famine, revealing his Egyptian position, and giving the invitation for the larger extended family to move to Egypt, where he could care for them. He encouraged them not to be *distressed* (pained or grieved) or *angry* (to be hot or to burn). He saw the hand of God, even in his brothers' betrayal. God sent Joseph to Egypt to *preserve* (set in place) the family and thus maintain the promise of God. He explained that they were only two years into a seven-year famine. Joseph had the position and clout (*lord*, *ruler*, *like a father to Pharaoh*, and one who had *honor*) to provide during the famine.

Joseph did not take "no" for an answer concerning his invitation to come to Egypt. He even demanded that the journey be made with haste. His genuine forgiveness is seen in his desire to care for the very brothers who betrayed him. The emotions ran deep as the only sons of Rachel hugged and wept. Joseph kissed all his brothers and wept upon them. It reminds one of other touching scenes in Scripture (Genesis 33:4; Luke 15:20; Acts 20:36-38).

Forgiveness Is Easier When We Focus on the Future

Genesis 50:15-21

The scene shifts, but the theme of forgiveness remains the same. Jacob's whole family made the journey from the land that bore his name (Israel) to Goshen. Jacob had been reunited with his son Joseph and even got to see Joseph's sons. But Jacob died, and the brothers fell into family management mode. They feared that with Jacob out of the picture Joseph might try to get even. Does the brothers' guilt indicate that they have not emotionally owned the forgiveness that Joseph extended?

The brothers spoke on behalf of their dead dad (real quote or contrived?) pleading yet once again for forgiveness from Joseph. They admit that what they did was *evil* and a *transgression*. They still view themselves as servants of Joseph (Genesis 37:5-11). Once again Joseph is touched and expressed his emotion by weeping. Joseph told them not to fear. After all, he was not God. He admits that what they did was evil. Again, there is no whitewashing of the sin.

"*But God*" is an outstanding phrase in this narrative. The brothers meant things to go one way in selling Joseph, but God . . . (see Ephesians 2:4; Titus 3:4). Joseph wanted to put the past behind and move into a brighter future. He viewed his role as a providential provider. He comforted them and spoke *kindly* (from the heart) to them. Life is too short to be hindered by the past. Forgiveness helps us move confidently into the future.

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MEAN MEN

BY DAVID FAUST

I have read the *New International Version* of the Bible for many years, but for a change of pace, recently I have incorporated the *King James Version* into my personal devotions. The King James' phrasing often has a familiar ring to it, like "Our Father, which art in heaven, Hallowed be Thy name" (Matthew 6:9), although some of its terminology is hard to decipher, like "all manner of concupiscence" (Romans 7:8). Occasionally, the words selected by King James' translators in 1611 help me to see the text with fresh eyes. For example, there's an interesting turn of phrase in the King James translation of Proverbs 22:29, which says, "Seest thou a man diligent in his business? he shall stand before kings; he shall not stand before mean men."

What does the phrase "mean men" mean? To us, *mean* means malicious, nasty, and cruel; but the translators of the KJV used the word to denote someone who is average, ordinary, or insignificant. In the same verse, the NIV translates "mean men" as "officials of low rank." The King James phrasing strikes a chord with me, though, because I have encountered some mean people along the way. I'm guessing you have, too. Pharaoh was a powerful ruler, but he was a mean man in every sense of the word. So were cruel, self-absorbed individuals like King Ahab and King Herod.

Joseph's brothers were mean men. Envious and spiteful, they considered murdering their brother and eventually sold him into slavery. Believing they would never see Joseph again, they misled their father Jacob, allowing him to wallow in grief because he presumed his beloved son was dead. Yet, after years of painful disconnection, Joseph forgave his brothers with tears, hugs, and reassuring words.

Mean men crucified Jesus, but he prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34, NIV). Mean men threw stones and crushed the life out of a faithful preacher, but as Stephen died, he prayed, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (Acts 7:60). Early in his life, Paul was a mean man, "breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples" (9:1), but after accepting Christ, he considered himself Exhibit A of a sinner saved by grace. "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners," Paul wrote, "of whom I am the worst" (1 Timothy 1:15). That's why Paul could say from a deep place in his heart, "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you" (Ephesians 4:32).

Because all of us have sinned against God and against each other, forgiveness is an essential ingredient of all healthy relationships. Sin reduces me to a mean man, so I need God's forgiveness. When I have offended others, to them I have been a mean man, so I need their forgiveness. As Joseph Joubert put it, "An ounce of apology is worth a pound of loneliness." Someone else pointed out, "The one to apologize first is bravest, the one to forgive first is strongest, and the one to forget first is happiest."

No matter which translation you read, Scripture makes it clear that the Lord wants us to forgive our brothers and sisters from our hearts (Matthew 18:35). He really means it.

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QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

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

- What offenses against you do you find easy to forgive? What offenses do you find difficult to forgive, or even unforgiveable?
- In the New Testament, two different Greek words are translated *forgive* in English. One literally means "to write off or dismiss" and the other means "to extend grace to." Which do you think applies to the offense and which to the offender? What difference does it make?

Read Genesis 45:1-8

1. In his book, *This Far by Faith*, political commentator Juan Williams argued that the belief in the providence of God allowed the American Civil Rights movement to focus on nonviolence rather than open revolt. What evidence do you see that a similar conviction motivated Joseph to forgive rather than seek vengeance on his brothers?

2. What was another name given to Joseph's father Jacob (Genesis 32:28)? When Joseph's policies in Egypt saved Jacob's family, what impact did that have on Bible history? When would the Bible story have ended if Joseph had executed his brothers (which he had the power to do) rather than forgive them?

Read Genesis 45:9-15

3. Joseph sent his brothers back, urging them to tell a lot of good news to Jacob. List elements of that good news.

4. Nevertheless, there was bad news to tell as well. Although the text does not spell it out, Joseph's brothers would have had to answer Jacob's embarrassing question, "How did Joseph end up in Egypt?" What part does confession of wrongdoing play in healing relationships?

Read Genesis 50:15-21

5. Skim through Genesis 48, 49, noting the actions of Jacob between the time of his arrival in Egypt and his death. What part do you surmise that he had in holding his family together during that time? Why was his death a legitimate reason for Joseph's brothers to fear for their safety?

6. Compare Joseph's words in Genesis 50:19-21 to Paul's command in Romans 12:17-21. What parallels do you see in these passages?

7. Forgiveness is abandoning the idea of taking vengeance on someone who wrongs us. Reconciliation is attempting to restore a relationship between ourselves and a wrongdoer. How can we know which is appropriate?

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.