



Cornton Baptist Church

Demonstrating God's love in action

in the community of Cornton

Through the Bible

Exodus
Nehemiah
2Chronicles Luke
Acts 2Timothy 2Peter
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Ecclesiastes
1Timothy Joshua
Psalms James
Isaiah
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Proverbs

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In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth...So God created man in his own image...God saw all that he had made and it was very good. (v.1, 27, 31)

An unbelieving lawyer had a plaque on his office wall that read: GOD IS NOWHERE. His small daughter, while waiting for him one day, passed the time by copying that motto over and over on a piece of paper. Unintentionally she spaced the letters in a way that completely changed their meaning. Adding a space between the letters W and H, she wrote GOD IS NOW HERE. The letters on the sign in the attorney's office may be read two different ways, but only one meaning is true. Many people look at God's mighty handiwork in the universe and think that it simply says "wild chance." But others see it as saying "wise Creator."

Genesis 1 begins with the work of our creator God. He made something out of nothing. In fact he made rather a lot out of nothing. In just 6 days He made light and darkness, water and sky, dry ground and vegetation, sun and moon, water creatures and birds, living creatures – animals and human. And just think about the beauty of everything. Think about the intricacy of the human body – the bones and joints that all connect together and move, as well as the amount of blood vessels in the body. This was no accident.

And at each stage God looked at what he had done and saw that it was very good. And having completed all this in just 6 days he then took a day to rest. He didn't do this because he was tired but to encourage us to have times of rest in our life. Our God is a creator God – he made the whole world and everything in it. God is now here!

Pray: give thanks for God's creation. Take a walk today and reflect on the beauty of God's creation all around you. If it's too wet, take a look out the window and marvel at the work of God's hand.

Reflect: consider the pattern of work and rest – is it important? If so, is it a regular part of my life?

The Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and the man became a living being. (v.7)

That word ‘formed’ pictures for us a master craftsman at work shaping a work of art to which he then gives life. God made us from the dust and dirt, therefore our value as human beings is not in the physical components that form our bodies but in the quality of that body and life. And notice that the finishing touch to make us was for God to breathe life into us. Without God we are nothing and yet for so many in our world today they live without knowing or acknowledging the one who gave them life. The Psalmist had it worked out when he wrote Psalm 139:14 *‘I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made’*. So we thank God for life. Jesus would later say in John 10:10 *‘I have come that you may have and life in all its fullness.’*

Adam had life in all its fullness. He was in the Garden of Eden. He had the tree of life to sustain him and it was placed right in the middle of the garden. Alongside it was the tree of knowledge of good and evil; from this tree Adam was told not to eat any of its fruit. I’ve often wondered why the trees were named as they were. The tree of life is obvious for it had those special properties to sustain eternal life. I wonder if the other tree was so named because it was a test of obedience for our first parents. Would they be good or bad, would they obey God or disobey his command. If Adam didn’t disobey, he would never know evil; but when he disobeyed he experienced evil because evil is disobedience.

I wonder what is in the centre of your life just now as a test. Look at it carefully and remember the one who breathed life into you. Walk away with your integrity in place.

Pray: give thanks for your life: for life and breath and for the measure of health you have. If you are struggling with your health just now ask him to keep sustaining you and to bring healing. Remember others with ill health in the church family.

Reflect: in what ways are you being tested just now? Consider an accountability partner to walk with you and encourage you.

Did God really say...? (v.1)

Satan is very good at throwing us off guard. He is skilled at making us question everything. It is good to question teaching and events in life but always do it in relation to the Scriptures; take it back to what you know and have read there. Notice that what Satan is doing here is casting doubt in Eve's mind. He is making her look at the delights around her and in front of her. He says 'Is it true he has restricted you from the delights of this place? This is not like one who is truly good and kind.' He is tempting her with momentary pleasure – something that will bring delight for a moment but pain for a lifetime. Satan was planting in Eve's mind the idea that there should be no restrictions in the perfect plan of a good God.

And that is what Satan is so skilled at...so much so that he continues to operate in the same way today. He whispers into our ear that the little tablet our friend is offering us is good and will bring pleasure – forgetting to mention of course it is only momentary and will soon pass and start an addiction. He whispers into our ear that lovemaking is good and so there is nothing wrong with a one night stand – forgetting that God designed sex for a loving marital relationship and perhaps more practically the possibility of a surprise pregnancy. He whispers into our ear that missing church one Sunday is OK – forgetting to mention that we soon make excuses and never go back. He whispers into our ear all kinds of wrongs and we look at them and see instant pleasure and never consider the lasting pain.

For Adam and Eve the consequences would be devastating – banished from the Garden of Eden, separated from the presence of God, enduring hard toil to survive, limited life on earth.

Pray: use the Lord's Prayer and ask God to keep you from temptation and deliver you from the evil one.

Reflect: What are you being tempted with just now? What is pleasing to the eye? Consider carefully before jumping right in. Think on God's Word and God's guidelines for good living.

Sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it. (v.7)

How did Cain, the first child of Adam and Eve, come to the fearful state of being a murderer? Cain and Abel both brought offerings to the Lord. It is not recorded that God had given any specific instructions about this, but no doubt Adam had taught his family about maintaining a good relationship with Him. Abel, being a shepherd, made an offering from the firstborn of his flock. Cain, being a farmer, brought some of his produce. God was pleased with Abel's sacrifice, but not with Cain's.

Why? The text does not give us a reason to think the difference lay in the content of the sacrifices. Rather, the problem was one of heart attitude and motivation. Abel's offering showed honour to God, true gratitude, and worship. Cain's offering was at the least careless - he didn't offer his first fruits - and his response revealed an even deeper bitterness or anger. Despite a warning from the Lord about sin "crouching at your door," he lured his brother out to a field and killed him.

God punished Cain professionally (farming would become difficult), personally (exiled from home and family to be a "restless wanderer"), and spiritually ("hidden" from God's presence). But He also showed him mercy. He had already been gracious in warning him against temptation and implicitly offering him a second chance to "do right" (v. 7). After the murder, He showed more mercy by putting some kind of mark on Cain to protect him from vengeance.

Cain was sloppy in his approach to God, he was angry, and he lied about where his brother was. Temptation was there and Cain, rather than relying on the commands of God, gave in and sinned.

Pray: examine your life today and confess any sin to God. 1 John 1:9 reminds us he is faithful to forgive when we confess our sin.

Reflect: How is our attitude to God? Do we give him first place? Do we recognise sin is crouching at the door? Consider how we can live for God and avoid sin.

Enoch walked with God 300 years (v.22)

This chapter highlights the struggles of humanity after the fall in Genesis 3. No longer would humanity live forever with God but they would labour and toil in life, and one day die. Here we have the genealogy that takes us from Adam to Noah. And each person named comes in the likeness of their parents thus the image of God (likeness of God in v. 1). The DNA is being passed on. So we all gain something of that image of God from creation but oh how we have marred that over the years. Although each person named has sons and daughters we do read that each also died. This is a direct consequence of the sin of Adam and Eve.

One man though did not die. His name is Enoch. And we read that Enoch had a son and then walked with God for 300 years having more sons and daughters during that time. We do not read of Enoch doing anything special or spectacular...he simply walked with God. The original word is in a tense that means it was continuous - Enoch walked with God and kept on walking with God. Just imagine three centuries of close fellowship with God. Three centuries of intimate relations with Him. No wonder Enoch did not die. As one old preacher said, "It got toward evening one day, and because he was closer to God's house than his own, God invited him to come with Him." We can have that same intimate relationship with God today. We can call Him "Abba! Father!"

The test of a person's religious life and character is not what they do in the exceptional moments of life, but what they do in the ordinary times, when there is nothing tremendous or exciting going on. The worth of a person is revealed in their attitude to ordinary things when they are not before the lights. Would we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith (Hebrews 12:2)?

Pray: give thanks to God for his faithfulness and ask him to help you keep walking with him every day of your life.

Reflect: are my eyes fixed on Jesus? What does it mean to walk with God and keep walking with God?

The Lord was grieved...his heart was filled with pain. (v.6)

Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked with God. (v.9)

Seldom in the Bible do we read of God being in pain. But this text (verse 6) tells us that God's heart was filled with pain over the intense and continuous evil of the man that he had created. It seemed their sole purpose was to do evil. They turned those things that God had created for good into evil. When one reads these early verses one can picture our world today. Is God's heart filled with pain today? I think it must be.

Why did Noah find favour (grace) in the eyes of a God whose heart was filled with pain? In verse 9 we read that Noah walked with God. This is the same expression used of Enoch (Genesis 5:24). It is what God wants from each of us (Colossians 2:6). As Noah walked with God he was found to be righteous and blameless. He lived God's way and not the world's way. He sought to please God and not please himself. And that is the problem with the world today and perhaps it is the problem with us – we like to do what we want regardless of anything or anyone else.

Once again, this story sounds the twin notes of judgment and mercy. God would punish sin with a Flood that would wipe out all human and animal life, but He would save a remnant. That remnant was Noah and his family. As a righteous man, Noah contrasted strongly with the people of his generation. He walked with God as a friend, and God shared His plans with him, telling him to build a large boat and put on board a zoo of animal species - a kind of ancient DNA library! Noah obeyed in faith.

And so through his walking with God and his acts of obedience Noah and his family were saved. When we are walking with the Lord we will then practice obedience. Walking and obeying always lead to God's favour.

Pray: ask God's forgiveness for those times you have sinned against him today and in the days past. Ask for his help to walk closer with him.

Reflect: what is my attitude to sin? How is my walk with God – am I praying regularly, reading my bible regularly, living God's way daily?

*Noah did all that the Lord commanded him...then the Lord shut him in.
(v.5, 16)*

I imagine Noah created quite a spectacle that day as he and his family began to load the ark with all the strange creatures that had arrived in town. It may have been almost a circus-like atmosphere as “crazy old Noah” loaded his boat, labelled perhaps by most of his neighbours as “Noah’s Folly.” Perhaps, some might have had a twinge of nervousness as Noah and his family walked up the ramp, but what could they expect from a “crazy man.” Then God shut the door with a loud thud.

Two key statements are found in this chapter: verse 5 - another reminder that Noah did all that the Lord commanded him; and verse 16 - the Lord shut him in. I think there is a relationship between these two verses. Because Noah did obey all that God had said, it pleased God to close him safely into the ark. The blessings of safety followed the acts of obedience. I often wonder what went through Noah’s mind during all this. There was no water anywhere and no rain so far. And yet he kept building and then filling the ark as God brought the creatures to him. In faith he kept doing as God commanded.

When those first rain drops came, some began to wonder if Noah had not been right. But the rains persisted - day after day. Now it was no longer funny - it was deadly serious. They beat upon that ark door but Noah would not open it up. He couldn’t because it had been closed from the outside. Finally, the knocking ceased and the only sound now was the beating of the rain on the hull of the ark. Oh, if the people had just heeded God’s warning while there was still time! But, have we learned the lessons of the flood? I think not. The day will come when the Lord will come and so many will be left behind to experience the flood of God’s judgment that will come upon the world.

Pray: for those we know and love who are not yet saved.

Reflect: do I always respond in faith even when the request seems strange? What is God asking me to do just now that is out of my comfort zone?

But God remembered Noah...when the dove returned to him in the evening, there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf! (v.1, 11)

Forty days and nights it rained and for one hundred and fifty days the flood waters covered the earth. Everything that lived and moved on the earth was destroyed. Along with this plants and trees would be destroyed as well. The water will have left nothing untouched. And yet even after this destruction and after the time – almost half a year – God remembered Noah. God remembered his people. He remembered the righteous, blameless one who walked with God. God never forgets. He knows where we are all of the time (check out Psalm 139).

And so God sent a wind to begin to dry out the land. The waters began to recede. Soon Noah would send a raven then a dove to see what happened. The raven flew back and forth as the water still covered the earth. The dove did likewise the first time but the second time it returned with an olive leaf. Life was returning to the earth. A tree had sprung up with its leaves growing.

The olive leaf also symbolises a renewal of life. God destroyed the face of the earth by the flood, and here was a fresh leaf, a sign of new life growing in the chastened world. God in His goodness did not return Noah's family to a barren wasteland, but to a land of new growth. This is a good lesson for us to remember when God disciplines us. What awaits us afterward isn't barrenness and dryness but renewal of life.

God never forgets his people...he would later send Jesus to save us. He has promised in Hebrews 13:5 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.'

Pray: give thanks for God's mercy and for new life we have in Jesus.

Reflect: are there times in my life I feel God has forgotten me? Does he ever forget us?

I have set my rainbow in the clouds and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. (v.13)

The destruction of the flood is over. All has been wiped away except for Noah, his family and pairs of animals. God has remembered Noah and now blesses him and tells him to ‘be fruitful and increase in number.’ These are words God gave to his creation back in Genesis 1:28. They are repeated now as the earth is once more empty and Noah and his family, and all the living creatures preserved are to go and fill the earth again.

As well as this blessing God makes a covenant with Noah and every living creature. This is the only time in the entire Bible that animals are explicitly included in a covenant. Why are they listed? The Flood had been universal, affecting the whole of the created world. So the promise that there would never be such a flood again is likewise a promise to all of creation, ‘an everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth.’ (Genesis 9:16).

The covenant is symbolised with a rainbow, a new phenomenon here, which will be placed in the sky. God designated the rainbow as a sign of this fresh start, His promise, and His covenant. Every time we see one in the sky we should remember God’s mercy to us. And notice God says in verse 15 ‘I will remember’. Just as he remembered Noah in the ark so he will remember this covenant. God never forgets. He always keeps his promises. We may break our promises but he never does.

The cycle of sin and judgment could have gone on indefinitely. No amount of “New Year’s resolutions” or “moral fibre” could have helped us escape our sinfulness, and so we would richly have deserved any number of Floods or similar punishments. Genesis 1-9 could have kept repeating, over and over. But God took the gracious initiative to break the cycle. He had better things in store!

Pray: give thanks for God’s grace and for the fact that he never forgets us.

Reflect: what promises have I made to God and before God. Am I keeping those?

From these the nations spread out over the earth after the flood. (v.32)

Chapter 10 is another genealogy. It starts from the single origin of Noah and his family the only survivors of the Flood. It shows us that they took God's command seriously and were fruitful and increased in number. This time though the genealogy is not so much concerned with chronology and the development of families through time as Genesis 5 was but rather with geography – the spread of nations across the lands. In this we are reminded that God is God of creation and of the entire world. All humanity has the same origin. And God's blessing is for all people. How sad when so many ignore him, make other gods, and do their own thing.

Nimrod...was a mighty hunter before the Lord. (v.9)

In the midst of this list of people and people groups (nations) one is given a special mention and described as a hunter before the Lord. We know that Nimrod was a mighty warrior, a man skilled with military might. We might say he was the very first “Alexander the Great” or “Napoleon” of the world. We also know that he was a great builder of cities, some of which went on to play major roles in world history (like Babylon). But the phrase that intrigues us is the statement that he was a mighty hunter before the Lord.

Did Nimrod have time for God? Did he serve God? It seems the phrase ‘before the Lord’ is somewhat ambiguous, but most scholars feel he worshiped his military might before the Lord. Certainly, Babylon, the city he founded, became the centre for worship of false gods. It is always dangerous to place anything, including our own abilities and desires, before God.

Pray: asking God to forgive us for placing other things before Him. Ask for his help in making time for reading His Word and talking with Him in prayer.

Reflect: who or what has first place in our lives? Do we place God first and serve him wholeheartedly? Do we make time for God in the midst of busy lives? How can we give Him more time?

Come let us build ourselves a city...so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the earth. (v.4)

A twenty-five-year-old acrobat gained widespread attention when he climbed the steel and glass surface of the world's tallest building. In seven and one-half hours he scaled Chicago's 1454-foot, 110-story Sears Tower. On the way up, he carried fifty pounds of climbing equipment and fought off forty-mile-an-hour winds. By the time he reached the top, he had made a name for himself - but he was also in trouble. Police greeted him and took him in handcuffs to the city jail, where he was charged with disorderly conduct, trespassing, and damage to property.

This reminds me so much of the people in Babel. God had commanded Noah and his sons to be fruitful and increase in number and multiply on the earth. They were to scatter across the earth. This scattering only got this group of people as far as a plain in Shinar where they decided to build a city. They didn't want to go anywhere else. They wanted to make a name for themselves and stay put. God came and confused them by giving them different languages to speak.

We too like to make a name for ourselves. We are proud and selfish people at times. We want the best for us and for everyone to know who we are. So we go about climbing the business ladder, or climbing some religious or social tower of our choosing in order to make a name for ourselves. God is still on top though – He cannot be replaced. The Ten Commandments remind us we can have no other god before him – He is the one and only.

Pray: asking God to forgive us for our selfishness and our earthly desire to make a name for ourselves. Praise him for who He is – creator and sustainer of the earth and the one and only true God.

Reflect: are there situations in my life where I am trying to make a name for myself? Consider the workplace – am I working hard to make a name for myself or working hard because that is my duty?

Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. (v.1)

We were introduced to Abram at the end of chapter 11. His father had left Ur of the Chaldeans and was heading to Canaan. He probably left Ur because his son Haran died there and the memories were too bad. The journey began easily and they reached Haran. Beyond Haran the terrain was more difficult so in many ways they did the easy bit and then stopped. How often do we do the same? We start well in the Christian life but soon we hit a rocky patch and our progress comes to a halt. We stay stuck there or even worse maybe backslide.

Abram's father died and God called Abram to leave and head towards Canaan. God promised him great blessing and we see that in the wonderful verses where he is told he will become a great nation. Abram does not need to think about this. He is obedient to God and goes. Is our faith strong enough to do likewise?

Why didn't you tell me she was your wife? (v.18)

A famine sends Abram down into Egypt. Notice though that this is his choice – God hasn't told him to change direction yet. And as he goes he recognises how beautiful his wife Sarai is and so concocts a plan to pretend she is his sister. He is lying and deceiving others. Abram's downward steps away from God eventually led to open rebuke. It is sad when a child of God has to be corrected by the world. All of this came about because of Abram's lack of faith, which resulted in his going to Egypt - a symbol of the world of unbelief. Abram's time in Egypt was a wasted time in his spiritual life – and it drew him away from God. Don't fall into the trap of trying to please the world – it doesn't work.

Pray: for God's help to remain obedient to him.

Reflect: What is God calling me to do right now? Will I follow faithfully? Are there areas in my life where I am living a lie? Then deal with them before God.

There Abram called on the name of the Lord (v.4)

Abram has left Egypt and returned to the Negev area. He has much with him now – he has accumulated much on his travels. When he returned the altar he had made earlier he stopped and called on the name of the Lord. Abram has learned an important lesson in Egypt – when trouble came he tried to solve the problem in his own strength and in his own way. He should have called on the Lord first. Now he stops and calls on the name of the Lord. And this is important for in a few verses we read of the struggle for Abram and Lot living in the same area. They both had too much. So they decided to part company and go there own way. In truth this was right for Abram. I don't think he was ever meant to take Lot with him in the first place (12:1).

Lot saw the plains of the Jordan with his physical eyes. He saw green pastures, clear waters, and people. The cities and lands around Sodom looked so much more exciting and offered more hope for success than did the barren plains of the Negev. What he did not see was the evil of the hearts of the people living there. Lot chose based only on the physical evidence. But the beauty of Sodom would soon fade into ashes, and its hopes would turn into total despair. The eyes of men do not see as the eyes of God.

After Lot had chosen the best what was left for Abram? God now told him to look. What did he see? He saw and heard the promise of God. All the land was to be his and his descendants. I am certain that Abram may not have fully understood it all but he trusted God. I have often wondered how Abram could have had the peace to let Lot choose first. I think I have found the answer in verse 4. Abram returned to the altar and called on the name of the Lord. Prayer, surrender, and obedience - these are the keys to fully trusting the Lord.

Pray: for God's wisdom in making the right choices.

Reflect: on the choices you face at this moment in your life. How will you decide what to do? Consider calling on the name of the Lord first and asking for his guidance.

I have raised my hand to the LORD, God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth, and have taken an oath that I will accept nothing belonging to you, not even a thread or the thong of a sandal, so that you will never be able to say, 'I made Abram rich.' (v.22)

When you associate with the wrong crowd there is a great possibility that you will be subjected to the same fate as they are. That is what happened to Lot. He never took part in the civil war that was going on in the area. But when Sodom was attacked and defeated, Lot and his family were taken captive just like all the other residents of Sodom. There is a profound lesson to be learned. I might attend a school event where alcohol is being served illegally and I may not even be drinking, but if the school authorities enter the premises, I will be just as guilty as those who were drinking. Oh how careful we must be in the selection of those we call friends. What a lesson to be learned from Lot.

And then a lesson on refusing what the world offers in dear Uncle Abram. Abram rushed in to save the day and save his nephew. When celebrating the victory the king of Sodom tempted Abram by urging him to take the earthly goods they had gained in battle. Abram was ready, and his answer was quick, concise and final. Abram declared God to be his God and that he was confident and determined that God alone would provide his portion.

Abram declared unashamedly that he would trust God for his every need. He did not want to give either Satan or man the opportunity to say that he had made him rich. What a challenge to us!

Pray: for strength to do the right thing and to stand out from the crowd at times.

Reflect: on the areas of your life where you feel you are sucked in with the crowd. How can you avoid this happening?

Abram believed the Lord and he credited it to him as righteousness. (v.6)

Abram trusted God alone for everything. This is an amazing thing. He does at times fail – don't we all. He failed when he headed to Egypt before waiting on God's instructions and he would later fail when trying to get a son and heir. Here and now though in Genesis 14 and 15 Abram is trusting God. Having defeated those enemies who had captured his nephew Lot and brought all the plunder back, Abram was offered by the king of Sodom all those riches. Abram did not want them.

At the start of chapter 15 God reminds Abram that He is his shield and great reward. God is basically saying I will protect you always and in me you have everything you ever need. We see from God's promise to be Abram's reward that God never permits His children to lose when they honour Him and seek His glory. God never leaves His child without spiritual blessings after His child has taken a stand for the glory of God.

Abram then gets worked up about an heir and successor and is about to choose Eliezer one of his servants. God takes Abram outside and shows him the stars in the sky. Count them he says knowing fine well that it is impossible. So shall your offspring be. And this is an important part of the text for us for in this we see the bridge which leads to the royal line from which will come our Saviour Jesus.

Although Abraham had no children at this time, his faith in the Lord is recorded in verse 6. Verse 6 states that Abram believed the Lord. I don't think he understood what God had promised him, but he believed it anyway. Because of Abraham's faith in God, he was able to look into the future and trust God for everything. There is a lesson there for us as well.

Pray: for faith to trust God for everything and to stand on the promises of Scripture.

Reflect: on the things that cause you to worry. Consider them in light of the promises of God never to leave you nor forsake you. And let them go...

Abram agreed to what Sarai said. (v.2)

Times of testing always seem to follow times of great triumph. Some of the worst times of temptation come after a spiritual high – the week after baptism, the day after a great sermon, or the day after we have been really blessed by God. It happens to us all. Abram was no different. He has served God well in the way he handled the battle and victory. He has believed God and trusted God as God revealed he would have a son and heir. But now the hard bit comes. Waiting for it to happen. And after great triumph comes the test (albeit the test here is ten years down the line – check out verse 3).

Oh the troubles we fall into when we try to help God do His work. Yes, Abram believed God, but I am not certain Sarai did. She grew impatient and she began to understand that the sands of her biological clock had run out. She was now 75 years old and Abram 85. She was never going to bear children. So she persuaded Abram to initiate plan B. This was not God's way and the world has paid the price for this wrongful act ever since. God does perform His word in our lives. He makes all things beautiful in His time. Sometimes we need the patience to wait.

Abram was tested by the suggestion of a well-meaning wife. Would he take matters out of the hand of God and act in the energy of the flesh? This test was the trying of the patience of his faith. Would he wait on God to fulfil His word in His own time and way, or would Abram's patience give out and the flesh take over? God wanted him to have a mature faith.

What would you have done in his situation?

Pray: for patience to wait on God.

Reflect: on the temptations in your life. Do you give in and try to solve the situation yourself or do you have the faith to wait on God.

Abraham fell facedown; he laughed (v.17)

Who wouldn't laugh - a century-old man being told he will become a father, and that his ninety-year-old wife will bear a child? The whole idea must have seemed ridiculous to Abraham. Yet he received the news with great delight. Bowing before God, he expressed his surprise, wonder, and gladness - with only a hint of unbelief. In Genesis 18, how-ever, Sarah laughed and God rebuked her. Sarah laughed in unbelief. Abraham laughed in faith.

Why did he laugh in faith? He laughed in faith because God has spent the preceding verses reminding him of his promise and confirming his covenant. Abraham's name is changed as God confirms the promise to make Abraham a father of many nations (v.5). At this time no child has been born to Abraham and Sarah, yet God says He has made Abraham 'a father of many nations.' What God has promised, He is able to perform. What He has begun, He is able to finish. When God says it, it is as good as done.

And I think somewhere in all of this Abraham believed God and trusted God. God introduces circumcision here as a sign of the covenant and Abraham immediately goes with Ishmael and every male in the household and is circumcised. Abraham follows God's leading.

He laughs at the plan for Sarah to bear a son in her old age. It seems so unnatural and impossible for us...and yet with God all things are possible. Abraham trusted God and worshipped him and obeyed him.

Pray: for that situation in your life where you need God to do the impossible – maybe it is in physical healing or in a broken down relationship.

Reflect: on God's call to walk before him and be blameless (v.1). How are you getting on with that?

*Sarah your wife will have a son...so Sarah laughed to herself (v.10, 12)
'Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? (v.17)*

What did Sarah do after she had been confronted with her laughter before God over the news of her impending pregnancy? She lied to God. Now I am not certain that she knew this was God, but at the very least it was a very important stranger who had made this incredible birth announcement. In Sarah's shoes, I would have laughed as well. Biologically, it was an impossibility. Who had ever heard of a 90-year old woman giving birth? Laughing in disbelief is wrong, lying about it is more wrong. When confronted we need to model truthfulness even when caught in an error. And we also have to remember that we worship the God of the impossible.

This chapter is a stirring reason why Abraham is described as the friend of God. God did not have to share with Abraham what He was about to do to Sodom, but He did. Oh the joys of friendship with God. And Jesus said that is just what we are - His friends (John 15:15). I recall the words of the hymn-writer: "And He walks with me and He talks with me, and He tells me I am His own. And the joys we share as we tarry there, none other has ever known."

And as Abraham hears what is to happen to Sodom he begins to intercede before the Lord and plead for the saving of the righteous in that city. Now he obviously does not think there are many righteous people for he starts at 50 and works his way down to just 10 righteous people. He pleads with God to save the city if there are any righteous people there. Intercession is not simply coming once and praying for someone or something...it is coming back again and again to ask God to intervene and then giving him thanks when he has answered our prayer.

Pray: for those in our church family who are ill just now. Remember those who are unable to get out to church as often as they once did.

Reflect: on your relationship with God and the words of the hymn writer quoted. Can we say "he walks with me and he talks with me"?

Flee for your lives! Don't look back... (v.17)

What a dark story! One wonders how Lot could have lived in a community so given to sexual perversity. It would appear from his offer of his virgin daughters for the sexual gratification of the crowd that he had at least tolerated their perversion in the past. Oh, the tragic consequences of sin. Lot lost his home, his wife, his possessions, and the respect of his daughters. The last portrait we see of Lot in scripture is a homeless drunken father committing incest with his daughters in a cold dark cave. Oh, the grievous wages of sin.

In this chapter we see the all too real dangers of sitting surrounded by sin and evil. Lot perhaps started by thinking he could be an influence on them for good but it did not happen. In the end he even offered to give his daughters away for sex. And then when the two angels urged him to get his wife and daughters and flee at dawn we read in verse 16 that he hesitated. Why, when warned, did Lot hesitate to leave Sodom? What kind of hold did the city have on him?

Once they did get Lot and his girls out of the city they told him to flee and not look back. But for some reason his wife looked back as the burning sulphur fell on the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. She was drawn to look back. Perhaps there was a yearning there, I don't know. What I do know is that look back towards sin and evil was disobedience to God and she was turned into a pillar of salt. She lost her life.

The lessons today seem simple – avoid sin and evil, flee from it and don't look back. Looking back will invariably draw us back into danger and even into sin itself.

Pray: for forgiveness for those times you have lived in sinful situations and ask for God's help in avoiding temptation.

Reflect: on the things that have a hold on us and hold us back. Ask God to help us let go. Let go and let God.

What have you done to us? (v.9)

Abraham has still not got everything sussed. For some reason he leaves the place of fellowship at Hebron and heads southwards again towards the Negev. He left the place which God had given him and headed towards Egypt. Abraham was putting himself in the place of temptation all over again. He was moving away from God and when you move away from God your focus moves from God to something else. And at this Abraham faced terrible temptation. The same temptation came back to Abraham. He was scared of what would happen. So what does he do? He sins again. He lies again. He deceives again. Oh how like him we are at times as well falling for the same temptations over and over. Satan knows our Achilles heel. He knows our weakest spot – and so he tempts us in a similar way all the time.

Abraham took his eyes off God and wandered away. This led to temptation and sin. We need to note too though that this sin did not affect Abraham only – it affected innocent Abimelech. He was acting in good faith. And yet he was about to sin because of Abraham. Abraham had lied to him and deceived him. Abraham had made him believe Sarah was his sister rather than his wife. This king was about to sleep with Sarah and commit adultery. Abraham's choice could cause him to sin.

God came to Abimelech in a dream and he then confronted Abraham. Abraham recognised his sin and dealt with it. When we sin it is good to deal with it and correct it. We do that by confessing our sin and asking God to forgive us and rebuild our lives. And then we start to influence people correctly. We live for Jesus and point others to him. We walk with God and are blameless before him. Instead of putting people off with our double standards and sinful lives, we can show others God's grace and mercy by living fully for him.

Pray: for God's help in dealing with the habitual sin in your life. Ask for strength to avoid temptation.

Reflect: on the habitual sin in your life. What are the weak spots Satan always uses to tempt you? Work on a strategy to overcome temptation.

Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him. (v.2)

In John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, Giant Despair captured Christian and Hopeful and held them as prisoners in Doubting Castle. They escaped when Christian remembered he had the key called Promise. Like Christian, we forget God's promises and guarantees. We live in a world where people will say just about anything to get what they want. We live in a world where politicians cannot keep promises but break them and lie. And so we doubt truth and forget promises. Like Christian we ought to remember that God is different to all humanity around us – He is faithful and He keeps his promises.

This chapter shares two powerful stories about God and His faithfulness to His promises. First, there is the account of the birth of Isaac. What a miracle! Sarah was ninety. That is too old to have children. But God had promised them a child and God was faithful to that promise. A little matter of old age did not really matter to Him; after all He designed our reproductive system. What a miracle of God's faithfulness!

The second account concerns the sad story of Hagar and Ishmael. Although treated unfairly by Sarah and cast out of the family camp by Abraham, God had made a promise concerning the boy Ishmael, the son of Abraham's impatience with God. When it appeared that all was lost and the promise would die there in the wilderness, God appears. And the first of two great miracles of provision for the sparing of Abraham's sons occur - this time a well of water. How thankful we should be that God always keeps His word.

Pray: giving thanks to God for answered prayer and for keeping his promises.

Reflect: on all the promises of God in Scripture and consider how he has kept them all. He is faithful.

So Abraham called that place The LORD will provide [Jehovah Jireh] (v.14)

This chapter contains one of the poignant stories in all the Old Testament. I have often wondered what went through Abraham's mind those three days as they walked to Moriah. Perhaps the young Isaac was filled with excitement. Perhaps this was the first time he and his father had made a trip like this. In his heart I believe Abraham was crying out to God, "why?" Abraham had believed the promises of God and now God was asking him to slay the one through whom the promises would be fulfilled. "God, this just doesn't make any sense!" Yet, the author of the text informs us that Abraham was very confident God would do something, even if God had to raise Isaac from the dead (Hebrews 11:19).

Each one of us has our own "Isaac", that which we love so dearly; that which we would struggle so intensely with giving up. God does call upon us to go to Moriah and there offer that as a sacrifice to Him. God cannot fully bless us until we have yielded ourselves fully to Him and that means surrendering our "Isaacs." Now God will not necessarily remove them from us; His desire is to know that we would surrender them to Him. I think Abraham had a greater love for Isaac after Moriah because he had been willing to surrender him to God.

And as God provided the lamb for the sacrifice so we look down through history and see that God provided another lamb for the sacrifice – the perfect Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, was slain that our sins could be forgiven. He is indeed Jehovah Jireh, the Lord our provider.

Pray: giving thanks to God for Jesus, the perfect Lamb of God, who took away the sin of the world. Thank Him for your redemption and salvation.

Reflect: on the "Isaac" in your life – what is it you hold so close that you have to fully yield to God. Are you willing to surrender all to Him?

I am an alien and a stranger among you. (v.4)

I often wonder how long Abraham and Sarah were married. We do not know. We do know she died at age 127. Abraham was very sad when she died and mourned and wept over her. They had been through so much together. They had good times and bad times, but they remained together. They worked at it. And there is an encouragement in there for those of us who are married – keep at it through the thick and the thin, through the happy times and the trying times. Through perseverance in life our love for each other can go stronger.

Abraham, the one to whom God had promised all this land, really owned none of it. Although it was all his by promise, he was currently a stranger there. So, when Sarah died, Abraham had no tomb in which to bury her. He, who was the lord of the land by promise, was forced to go to his neighbours and request the purchase of a burial site. In fact the only ground Abraham really owned in all of the land promised to him was a cemetery. But perhaps that too was fitting as the writer to the Hebrews shared centuries later that Abraham was really searching for a better country. The entrance to that better country comes through a cemetery, not only for Abraham but for each of us. Are our eyes focused on that better country? Or do we seek to change our status from stranger to resident here? I think Abraham was focused properly.

The hymn writer said it best:

*This world is not my home, I'm just a passing through;
My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue.
The angels beckon me from heaven's open door,
And I can't feel at home in this world any more.*

Pray: giving thanks to God for the home that is laid up for us in heaven – a place Jesus is preparing for those of us who trust in Him. (John 14:1-6)

Reflect: on how we view our lives on earth – are we citizens of heaven or citizens of earth? How can we live on earth whilst focusing on that better country?

Praise be to the Lord, the God of my master Abraham, who has not abandoned his kindness and faithfulness to my master. As for me, the Lord has led me on the journey to the house of my master's relatives. (v.27)

What an amazing story of God's guidance. After a journey of several hundred miles, Abraham's servant stops at a well as a stranger in a foreign land. He is certain that he is near the location of Abraham's immediate family. He offers a simple yet specific prayer to God for guidance: "God, I am here. Now bless my journey by causing this to happen." There is a lesson to be learned in listening to this man's prayer. He did not ask for some vague directions or for some mysterious answer. He needed to know God's will for that moment so he was very specific in how he desired an answer.

And notice that this man trusted God to direct affairs. So much so that he was patient after his prayer. In verse 21 we read that he watched closely what would happen and did not speak and jump in too quickly. He waited on God to reveal the answer to prayer in Rebekah. How often we quickly dive in don't we, trying to make things happen in our time. This man was also quick to worship God on account of the answered prayer. I wonder if we keep a note of our prayers and the answers to them so that we can praise God for hearing and answering our prayers.

Abraham's servant had observed the great faith of his master. As he left on his important journey, he tested that faith and God rewarded him by answering in such a powerful way. This story reminds us that others do watch our lives and are led to model what they observe. So, may all who come behind us find us faithful. If we can learn to pray specifically, then I believe God will answer specifically and our response will be like Abraham's servant - praise to the Lord!

Pray: for God's guidance in an area of your life where you need his help and guidance. Give thanks too for answered prayer in the past few days.

Reflect: are my prayers specific? Consider keeping a journal of your prayer requests so you can note the answers and see how faithful God is and praise and thank him for those answers.

Quick let me have some of that red stew! I'm famished! (v.30)

A story is told of a man who loved old books. He met an acquaintance who had just thrown away a Bible that had been stored in the attic of his ancestral home for generations. "I couldn't read it," the friend explained. "Somebody named Guten - something had printed it." "Not Gutenberg!" the book lover exclaimed in horror. "That Bible was one of the first books ever printed. Why, a copy just sold for over two million dollars!" His friend was unimpressed. "Mine wouldn't have brought a dollar. Some fellow named Martin Luther had scribbled all over it in German."

This man treated as worthless that which was valuable. So did Esau. Although he was a nice fellow who enjoyed hunting and fishing and the great outdoors, Esau was "profane" because he sold his spiritual birthright "for one morsel of meat" (Heb. 12:16). Only when it was too late to undo his wretched bargain did Esau realize that he had sacrificed the permanent on the altar of the immediate.

Two boys could not be much different than Jacob and Esau. They were total opposites. Esau lived for the moment - he needed food, now. Jacob lived for the future - he wanted the birthright and all the privileges that went with it. Esau gave up that which was priceless for a bowl of stew because he had stomach pangs. We say, "how foolish of him." Yet, how many times do we do the same? We sacrifice a moment with our children to take another business call. We surrender a night with our spouse for overtime at the office. We give up our time of silence before God to attend another meeting. I am afraid that too many times we make the same bad choice that Esau made. Those are moments and opportunities that we can never revisit. So, let's learn to make our choices more carefully with eternity's values in view.

Pray: for God's forgiveness for the times we have rushed away to do things rather than take time with him or with our families.

Reflect: on what is important in your life - and plan to spend more time with God and with your family.

She is my sister! (v.7)

Time has past and Isaac enters the lands of another Abimelech. But something interesting happens. As we read this story it is almost as if we have read it before. And we have. Abraham's son, Isaac, tells the same lie about his wife as did Abraham; and Abimelech's son almost committed the same offence as did his father. It would appear from both stories that God's judgment was not upon either Isaac or Abraham but upon Abimelech. In fact, both Isaac and Abraham prospered while in Abimelech's land. Both Isaac and Abraham had acted out of fear. We often do foolish things when we fail to trust the Lord.

There are two important lessons we need to learn from Isaac's imitating his father's example. First, it is much easier for children to imitate the weaknesses or vices of their parents than to excel in their virtues. It is easier because it is natural. Second, while Abraham and Isaac were men of vastly different temperaments, each succumbed to the same temptation. When famine arose, they fled for help. While they were in the land of the enemy, they both became afraid and lied about their wives.

This proves that natural man is under the control of the same sinful nature in which there is no good thing. The Apostle Paul recognised this and said, 'I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.' (Romans 7:18). Abraham and Isaac both had the sinful nature, even as we do, and they yielded to temptation in similar situations. They had to realise that unless they applied the grace of God, they would inevitably fall into sin. This should also serve as a warning to us.

Yield not to temptation, for yielding is sin; Each vict'ry will help you some other to win; Fight manfully onward, dark passions subdue; Look ever to Jesus, He'll carry you through.

Pray: for God's help and strength not to yield to temptation.

Reflect: on the example you set to your children and/or to the children in the church. Will they see Jesus shining through your life?

Your brother came deceitfully and took your blessing (v.35)

Rebekah and Jacob knew all about trickery and deception. Rebekah overheard Isaac speak to Esau about giving him his blessing. Jacob had the birthright but it was only part of the package – his father’s blessing was needed as well. Now Rebekah knew that Jacob was to be the blessed one so she decided to rush ahead of God’s plans and try and sort it herself. She told Jacob to go and pretend to be Esau and receive the blessing.

And so he did. He lied and deceived his father. Esau did not willingly give this away as he had his birthright. He lost it by trickery and deceit. I do believe it was God’s plan for Jacob to receive his father’s blessing. But it was not God’s plan for it to be obtained by deceit. Jacob had much to learn before God could change his name to Israel. Oh the penalty of a shattered relationship with his brother. Oh the consequences of sin. They are great indeed.

Rebekah’s sin was that she lacked faith in God’s ability. She felt she had to help God accomplish His will. While the intended goal was legitimate, the means she used to accomplish it were not honouring to God. She thought God must be frustrated concerning His plan and, therefore, needed her help.

Some people say, ‘The Lord helps those who help themselves.’ This is not true. The truth is that God helps those who come to the end of themselves. What we need is patience to wait on God. He is able to do everything He has said He will do, and He will always do it on time.

Pray: for patience to wait on God and not to rush ahead in our steam.

Reflect: on what we are waiting on God to do in our lives just now and on the plans we have come up with to rush it along. Reflect on how God always brings his purposes to bear at just the right time.

The Lord will be my God (v.21)

Esau was not a happy man. He had lost his birthright and now he had lost his blessing. He was angry and wanted revenge. He wanted to kill his brother. And so it came that Jacob had to flee for his life under instruction once more from his mother. After journeying he needed to stop at night and rest under the stars. As he rested he had the most amazing dream. He saw a stairway reaching from earth to heaven and angels ascending and descending. This is Jacob's Ladder that we sang of in our Sunday School classes long ago. God spoke to Jacob in the dream, renewing the covenant and promising to be his God in a personal sense also.

And it is at this moment that Jacob realised who God truly was. He had known of him but not known him. And how many of us have been in that situation. We grew up in a Christian home and learned all about Jesus so we had great head knowledge. The trouble was it did not descent into heart knowledge. And then one day we came to the realisation that Jesus was our Saviour and we were truly converted and born again.

This was that moment for Jacob I think. This was the moment he realised who God was. Jacob suddenly realised that God knew all about him. God knew about his meanness, crookedness and scheming. But God also knew that deep within his heart he was longing for spiritual realities; therefore, He undertook to mould Jacob's life to the praise of His glory.

God knew every detail about Jacob's life, and He knows every detail about your life. He knows the good things, and He knows the ugly things. He knows when you are putting on a front - acting like you are something that you are really not. He knows whether or not you are genuine - how much of what you say is really the truth.

Pray: giving thanks to God for being your God.

Reflect: have I truly given my life to Jesus – am I born again. If not then now is the time to surrender all and declare the Lord will be my God.

Jacob was in love with Rachel (v.18)

This is one of the most incredible love stories ever recorded. Jacob fell in love with Rachel almost from the very first moment he laid eyes on her. And the Bible says that his seven years of labour for her hand in marriage seemed to him just a few days. (I wonder how many men today would serve their future father-in-law even one year for his daughter's hand in marriage?) Then comes the truly incredible event. Jacob is married...to the wrong girl...and he does not even know it until after his wedding night.

Verse 25 stated is so well: When morning came, there was Leah. How could this have happened? Was Jacob so blinded by love that he could not tell the difference between Rachel and her sister? Just as he had tricked Esau out of the blessing, someone had now tricked him out of the rightful bride. I wonder if Jacob thought about that. We have no profound answers but I find the story incredible to believe. I am certain of this, the next seven years did not fly by as quickly as did the previous ones.

Jacob had refused to wait on God's fulfilment of His promise that 'the older will serve the younger'. Because he refused to wait for God to fulfil this promise in His own time, Jacob had to leave home to save his life. Because Jacob had such difficulty waiting on God, He taught him, through the incident with Leah and Rachel, the importance of waiting.

He had to wait seven years for Rachel, and this in itself taught him many lessons in waiting. Although he most likely married Rachel a week after he married Leah, he still had to work another seven years for Rachel before he could receive any wages for himself - 14 years of waiting before he began to accumulate possessions for himself. God has ways of teaching people how to wait.

Pray: giving thanks for the times God makes us wait.

Reflect: on what it means that those who wait upon the Lord will renew their strength, they will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.

*Then God remembered Rachel; he listened to her and opened her womb.
(v.22)*

Troubled times in the house of Jacob. His two wives are at each others throats. There is jealousy here and then competition. Oh the intense jealousy between Jacob's wives - Leah and Rachel. Lack of fidelity did not seem to be a problem for them - in fact they encouraged it. God's way is still best - one woman for one man.

Both Leah and Rachel viewed having a family as a contest. After the birth of Naphtali to Bilhah, Rachel declares victory. Later Leah, after the birth of Zebulun, states that she has won. All of this occurred because of the jealousy that existed between the two women.

In the end we read that God remembered Rachel, listened to her and opened her womb. The interesting phrase is the one in the middle – he listened to her. Rachel must have been praying for a child, particularly a son. She persistently prayed and eventually God answered the prayer of perseverance. Sometimes in life we pray for something and it doesn't happen so we give up. The example through various people in Scripture is to keep going, to keep asking God for his help and for his blessing. Rachel persisted in pleading with God for a child and her womb was finally opened.

Triumph at last as Joseph was born. Rachel said upon his birth, 'God has taken away my disgrace' and 'may the Lord add to me another son.' She and Jacob were blessed. This may be the reason Jacob grew to love Joseph more than the others - because he was born to him in older age and to the wife he loved the most and had been tricked about previously.

Pray: asking God to bring about that in your life which you have been praying for a long for – healing, work, family reconciliation.

Reflect: on the times we give up on our prayers because we see no answer. Resolve to keep praying and waiting on God's answer in God's time.

Go back to the land of your fathers and to your relatives, and I will be with you. (v.3)

Here we see the time for Jacob to turn and run. At a young age Joseph and his family make a hasty departure from his grandfather Laban's house. They flee away under the cover of darkness, Gen. 31:17-21, because Jacob has cleaned out his father-in-law through deception. Imagine the fear as your grandfather chases the family, overtakes the family and has hard words with your father, Gen. 31:22-35. Laban accuses Jacob of stealing his household gods. Jacob denies this, but it turns out that Rachel had taken them. She lies to her father to cover up her theft.

Jacob and Laban make a covenant to stay away from one another. Laban departs and Joseph never sees his grandfather again, Gen. 31:36-55. They now turn and run once more this time without fear of Laban following them. Turning and running is sometimes a good way to get out of a bad situation. But in this case the turning and running involved deception, stealing and lying.

In life when things are tough we are tempted to turn and run as well. Running away from a situation is not always the right answer. Sometimes we are called to stick it out and learn from it and grow through it. At other times of course turning and running is exactly what to do. This was the right time for Jacob and his family to leave - God was calling them back to Canaan. We must always be ready to listen for God and to follow his leading and guiding. Jacob heard God's call in 31:3 'Go back to the land of your fathers and to your relatives, and I will be with you.' Wherever God leads God promises to go with us and remain with us.

Pray: for wisdom in hearing God's call and obedience to follow his leading and guiding

Reflect: on that which God is calling you to do just now – will you follow his leading?