

2020: The Global Year of the Bible
A Lamp and a Light, Part 3
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For those who are still on track, we are almost through the first full book of the Bible – the book of Genesis. By the time we gather next Sunday, we will already be 15 chapters into the book of Exodus! I am excited that so many of us are committed to reading through the Bible this year, and I'm very grateful that God led us to the version we are using. I've spoken to many of you who have said that this NLT Chronological Daily Bible is making God's Word so much more understandable. Of course, we have to remember that no one version is perfect, but if any version helps feed your hunger for God and His Word, that's a win in my opinion. (If you are reading this sermon and want a copy of the Bible we are using this year, let me know. We will get one to you!)

Let's pray: *Thank you, Heavenly Father, for your words of life and truth. Thank you for your Holy Spirit within all believers, who helps us by poking and prodding us to do what is right and best. Thank you that we are not helpless nor hopeless – You are our Helper and you are our Hope. Would you fill us anew with your Holy Spirit in these very moments as we open your Word and seek the desires of your Heart for us? We welcome you and all that you want to do in us, for Jesus' sake – Amen.*

Since Genesis 3 and the great Fall of humanity, the great 'turning away' from God, the great and awful choosing of our own way over God's Way – since God evicted us from the beautiful, peaceful Garden of Eden, it's been bad. How far God's chosen have fallen! To me, one of the big words that keeps emerging is this one: Deception. Deception. Over and over again.

- The serpent deceived Eve by convincing her that eating of the fruit from the tree in the middle of the garden was not going to lead to death but to a better life.
- Abram & Sarai tried to deceive Pharaoh by passing Sarai off as Abram's sister instead of his wife.
- Lot's daughters deceived him and end up becoming pregnant by their own father.
- Abraham & Sarah tried to deceive Abimelech by again passing Sarah off as Abraham's sister instead of his wife.
- Jacob and Rebekah deceived Isaac so Jacob could get Isaac's blessing instead of Esau by dressing Jacob up in Esau's clothes so he smelled and felt more like Esau to a blind Isaac.
- Laban and Leah deceived Jacob by sending Leah into the marriage tent instead of Rachel.
- Jacob and Laban deceived each other with the whole 'spots and streaks on the goats' thing. That was fascinating.
- And then we come to Jacob and his sons. The 10 brothers deceived their father by allowing him to believe that his favorite son, Joseph, had been killed by wild animals when in fact, they had sold him to the Egyptians as a slave.
- Potiphar's wife deceived her husband and palace officials by telling them that Joseph had tried to rape her, when that was not the case at all. He would not give in to her advances and she was just plain mad and wanted revenge.
- And Joseph deceived his brothers when they came to Egypt by not revealing himself to them right away and then planting items in their sacks of grain so they could be accused of robbery and be brought back to him so he could bargain with them to bring his younger brother to Egypt.

Any questions as to why the word 'deception' kept rising to the surface? How far God's chosen have fallen! And yet, God remains faithful. God remains a God of hope who never gives up on us. He almost did, as you remember from before his eyes landed on Noah. He was sorry he had ever made us. But then after wiping all humanity off the face of the earth through the flood, except Noah and his family, God established a covenant with Noah, his sons, and with all of us

as ancestors of Noah, never again to end all life by the waters of a flood. The rainbow in the clouds is a reminder to us and to God himself of the covenant he made.

Gary spoke last week about the covenant God made with Abram to make of him a great nation, making his offspring more numerous than the stars of the sky. In Genesis 15 we see how God himself vowed to fulfill not just his own part of the covenant, but vowed to fulfill Abram's (and our) part of the covenant as well. Which God has done once and for all through the sacrificial death of his son, Jesus Christ. God knew we would never be able to perfectly fulfill the laws of righteousness and live perfectly holy lives that would insure our acceptance as his people. And so he did it for us in and through his Son, my Savior, and I pray YOUR Savior, Jesus Christ.

*What gift of grace is Jesus, my Redeemer. There is no more for Heaven now to give.
He is my joy, my righteousness, and freedom. My steadfast love, my deep and boundless peace.*

To this I hold, my hope is only Jesus. For my life is wholly bound to His.

Oh, how strange and divine I can sing, all is mine, yet not I but through Christ in me.

Amen? Amen!! So now, we dig into the life of Jacob and his sons, including a savior-type figure in his son, Joseph. I say that because of how God used Joseph, in spite of the persecution he faced, to preserve the nation of Israel.

Jacob, the son of Isaac (who was the promised heir of Abraham and Sarah given to them in their old age) Jacob (even though he deceived his father in order to receive his blessing) becomes the line through whom God's blessings flow. Jacob was a sinner, like you and me. But God was willing to use him, because remember, God himself had vowed to fulfill all righteousness. In Genesis 28 we read about a dream that Jacob had in which God spoke to him (vv. 13ff), *"He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. ¹³There above it stood the Lord, and he said: "I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. ¹⁴Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. ¹⁵I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." ¹⁶When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it." ¹⁷He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven." ¹⁸Early the next morning Jacob took the stone he had placed under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on top of it. ¹⁹He called that place Bethel, though the city used to be called Luz. ²⁰Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear ²¹so that I return safely to my father's household, then the Lord will be my God²²and this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God's house, and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth."*

Throughout the Old Testament, we will see God's people, leaders of the people, stop to set up a worship place with stones in a place where they knew God had done something or revealed something important. Watch for that as we continue to read through the chapters. In the classic hymn, "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing," the traditional words read, "Here I raise an Ebenezer, hither by thy help I've come." Many hymnals, including ours, have changed the words to 'Here I raise to thee an altar' instead of 'raise an Ebenezer,' because the majority of people don't know what an Ebenezer is. To help us understand, we look at 1 Samuel 7:12, *"Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen. He named it Ebenezer, saying, "Thus far the LORD has helped us." Eben-ezer means Stone of Help. And that's what we read our ancestors in the faith did when God had shown up in a mighty and memorable way – they raised an Ebenezer. They raised a stone, or a pile of stones and worshipped God in that place. (For those of you who were here in 2016 when we knocked down walls and built the new entryway out here, perhaps you remember that we called the project the Ebenezer Entryway. "Thus far the LORD has helped us!")*

So, there are two places I want to get to today. First of all, looking back over your life, where would you have wanted to 'raise an Ebenezer' in your life? Where, when you think about your length of years, whether you are still in elementary school or in your 80's, where does your mind go when I ask the question? Where was a place that you know, without a doubt in looking back, that God helped you through? Think about it. Do you have one? Tell somebody. Tell somebody how God got you through. Raise a Stone of Help right where you are! And give thanks to God right now, where you are, for that particular place in your life, but also all the other places I trust He will bring to your mind.

Jacob did this over and over. He raised rocks and he worshipped. He thanked God for getting him through, and then in one of those places, God changed Jacob's name to Israel. This is important, so let's hear from a professor at the Israel Institute for Biblical Studies to think about what the name 'Israel' means. *"The authentic Hebrew meaning of the word 'Israel', or in the original Hebrew, 'Yisrael', is the name of a land, of its people, and even of the modern state: The State of Israel. You've probably heard this name so frequently that you never bothered to stop and think: what does it actually mean? Well, fortunately, the Book of Genesis: Chapter 32, gives us a very clear answer to that question. We find a fascinating confrontation taking place between an Angel of the Lord and the Patriarch Jacob. All night long, the two wrestle together, and as the Sun rises the next morning, Jacob prevails. He struggles with the Lord and so he's given a new name: 'Israel'. When you read the Bible in the English translation, it's not immediately clear what the connection is between struggling with God and having a new name, Israel, is. But, if you go back to the original Hebrew, it's crystal clear. 'Saritah im Elohim' 'You struggled with God' and therefore your name shall be 'Israel'. You can hear the connection there between the phrase and the name. That homophonic similarity is very, very clear in Hebrew, but, in the English translation, it's lost. This scene of struggle, between Jacob and the Lord, is something that gets right to the heart of the unique relationship between the people of Israel and their God. It's not a passive relationship of blind obedience, but it's an active relationship of struggle and confrontation and dialogue. And that gets to the heart of what we see in each chapter of the Bible as our Biblical heroes, from Abraham, all the way through to Jesus, are constantly questioning God and asking for clarification and even confronting him in a very aggressive way."*

Why does this matter to us? Because it will help us as we continue to read through the Bible, and it helps us to understand our ancestors in the faith and understand ourselves as well because, through our faith in Jesus, we are grafted into the vine of God's chosen people, descendants of Israel. We are part of that bloodline through Jesus Christ the Lord.

Jacob struggled with God and prevailed with his faith stronger than ever. And isn't it true that that is when our faith grows the most as well? When times are not tough, when things are going along OK, often those are the times we forget what God has done. Those are the times we stop thinking about how God has fought for us and brought us through. So, to quote a popular stream of commercials lately, "Just OK, is not OK," if we are desiring to GROW in our faith and become more like Jesus. I never want to get to the place where I am OK with status quo in my faith. I want to keep thinking and struggling and finding victory through Jesus every day of my life – because that, friends, is where the blessings of God come flooding in. And this is the final piece I want us to think about today – the blessings of God.

In these early chapters we read verses like Genesis 24:35 about Abraham, *"The Lord has blessed my master abundantly, and he has become wealthy. He has given him sheep and cattle, silver and gold, male and female servants, and camels and donkeys."* Genesis 26:12, *"Isaac planted crops in that land and the same year reaped a hundredfold, because the Lord blessed him."* Genesis 30:30 (this is Jacob speaking to Laban), *"The little you had before I came has increased greatly, and the Lord has blessed you wherever I have been. Genesis 39:5, "From the time he put him (meaning Joseph) in charge of his household and of all that he owned, the Lord blessed the household of the Egyptian because of Joseph. The blessing of the Lord was on everything Potiphar had, both in the house and in the field."*

From these verses, we get the sense that the word 'blessing' comes with the definition 'prosperity' or 'stuff that God gives you.' Flocks, herds, wealth, children, land, etc. And then we come to the New Testament and read verses like these: Matthew 5:3-4, 10-11, *"Blessed are the poor*

in spirit. . . . Blessed are those who mourn. . . . Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake . . . Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you.” Luke 11:28, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!” Romans 4:7, “Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven.” James 1:12, “Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial.” From those verses, we get the sense that a person is blessed not by ‘stuff,’ but by something much deeper, something not temporary, something eternal.

Is it possible that in those early days of God working in the lives of people that material prosperity was the way that God determined was the best way to get their attention, the best way for him to show his hand of grace and mercy to his people? Let’s remember what we read in Genesis 1:28 when God created humankind. We read, *“God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”* Being fruitful and multiplying was part of the original blessing, meaning children, flocks, herds, land, etc. They understood this language and were reminded of and thankful for God’s presence with them when they saw the fruitful multiplication.

But as we watch the story of Joseph unfold, we see Joseph being blessed by his high position in the palace (even though he was a slave), and we also see him being blessed while in prison (as a slave). We see him being blessed in using his gifts of interpreting dreams (still as a slave), and we see him being blessed in being reunited with his brothers who had sold him to the Egyptians out of jealousy, even though he was still a slave to the Egyptians.

Joseph, friends, wanted to honor God whatever he was doing, whether he was in prison or out of prison, whether he was with his family or separated from his family. His mind was on what God wanted him to do in any given situation – which enabled him to be able to say to his brothers after his identity had been revealed to them as we read in Genesis 45:4-8, *“Please, come closer,” he said to them. So they came closer. And he said again, “I am Joseph, your brother, whom you sold into slavery in Egypt. ‘But don’t be upset, and don’t be angry with yourselves for selling me to this place. It was God who sent me here ahead of you to preserve your lives. ‘This famine that has ravaged the land for two years will last five more years, and there will be neither plowing nor harvesting. ‘God has sent me ahead of you to keep you and your families alive and to preserve many survivors. ‘So it was God who sent me here, not you! And he is the one who made me an adviser to Pharaoh—the manager of his entire palace and the governor of all Egypt.”*

The Greek word in the New Testament translated ‘blessed’ (*makarioi*) means to be fully satisfied. It refers to those seeing God’s favor in their lives regardless of the circumstances. As we will see, ‘blessing’ is anything God gives us that makes us fully satisfied in Him. Anything that draws us closer to Jesus. Anything that helps us let go of what’s temporary and hold on more tightly to eternal things. And isn’t it true that it is often the heartaches, the struggles, the aching disappointments, and the unfulfilled longings that best enable us to do just that?

God’s greatest blessing always resides in God himself. No amount of flocks and herds, lands and silos filled with grain, no amount of money, or number of children, no amount of likes on your posts or followers on twitter, not a great report from the doctor, a last-minute win, a 4.0 for the semester, the news that 10,569,405 shoeboxes went to children all over the world through OCC, or the news that the president is trying to take steps to allow people to pray freely in public schools again – NONE of these things can fill the deepest longing of your heart and mine. Only God can do that. And when, in spite of our sometimes deceptive ways, when we know him, trust him, love him, and serve him in any and every circumstance of our lives knowing that **the power we have to do or accumulate anything good comes from Him** – we are BLESSED, church. Our lives are blessed. We can be used mightily by the Lord. We can forgive the unforgiveable. We can love the unloveable. Keep reading. Keep listening. Keep praying. Not to know more facts, but to know the One who made us and who loves us with perfect, unconditional love. To Him be the glory forever, Amen.