

When Genesis draws back the curtain on the Eternal Drama, there's only one Person on stage. *God* and *Beginning* are synonymous. Without God there is no beginning, and there is no beginning before God. So the drama begins, and God quickly establishes lighting (1:3) and time (1:5), then begins moving in scenery—waters, sky, dry land, vegetation.

Then there are creatures with a possibility of being more than scenery: birds, fish, animals, crawling things. At last, human beings (1:26-31), creatures who will play opposite God in this drama. They can fill this role because they are made in God's image and are therefore able to communicate with God.

It's an awesome picture, and all the more so because of the simplicity with which it is drawn. The writer sees no need to accumulate adjectives; it is enough that God will say, at intervals, *Good!* If God feels that way about it, what other word is needed?

I am impressed that the creation is such an intimate process. The Creator might be portrayed as a Master Engineer or the Ultimate Computer. Instead, Genesis tells us that God has soul; he wants to talk with someone. So the creation develops step by step on the framework "*God said.*"

Science speaks increasingly of a Big Bang at creation. Genesis tells of a big conversation. But of course science is talking about *how*, while Genesis is telling us about *who*.

PRAYER: Help me, O God, on this day of new beginnings, to have all my beginnings in you. Amen.

Genesis 1 told us we are made in the image of God. That's exciting, but from practical experience it's also confusing. We don't feel that God-like all the time; some days, we don't feel God-like at all.

Genesis 2 helps by telling us more about ourselves. We are creatures of the dust, which is easy to believe. Our physical person will decay into dust, and our personality is earthy enough to suggest our origins. But into that dust, God breathes something of the divine. Here is both our dilemma and our glory—that we are a bit of sod and a breath from God.

Perhaps the best evidence of our God-likeness is that we desire, like God, to communicate. Genesis 1 pictured both male and

female created at once (1:27), but this chapter uses a beautiful story to let us know that we human beings need one another. We are bone of each other's bone and flesh of each other's flesh. John Donne underlined the point centuries later by saying that when one person dies, every person is diminished.

The intimacy of which we human beings are capable is uniquely expressed in marriage, partly because in marriage there is the possibility of engaging with God in the creation process.

There is a kind of divine humility in this chapter. Though the man is able to commune with God, he isn't expected to find fulfillment in God alone. "It is not good that the man should be alone" (2:18). We need God, but we also need one another.

PRAYER: Help me, I pray, to see every human being as part of my very being. Amen.

GENESIS 3, 4; PSALMS 5, 6

Week 1, Day 1

When Genesis 2 ends, all is perfect; man and woman have each other, they are in communion with God, happily employed, and blessed with idyllic housing and food.

Then, enter the villain. He is known by a variety of names, but probably the most significant is *Adversary* or *Accuser*. He enters our story making accusations against God, but it is soon evident that the object of destruction is the human creature.

The sin, quite simply, is disobedience to God. What Adam and Eve wanted was itself admirable (as is often the case with sin); they wanted to "be like God." But they pursued their goal in the wrong way.

The results were catastrophic. They found themselves distanced from God, from each other, from nature, and from their own selves.

The pain continued into the next generation, and it continues to our own time. All our deeds, for good or ill, have consequences. In Adam and Eve's case, the tragedy grew monstrous when their older son murdered the younger.

But there's a note of grace from the very beginning. When Adam and Eve sinned, they received a message that traditional scholars over the centuries have seen as a promise of the Messiah (3:15); and when godly Abel was killed, there was a birth of new hope in Seth.

PRAYER: Save me, O God, from the day of temptation; and if I fall, teach me to repent. Amen.

There's much to be learned from reading an obituary column, chief of which is that we will all die. That, as Samuel Johnson would say, concentrates the attention. Genesis 5 is the first obituary column; its brief biographies are identical in their endings: *and he died*.

All but one. Enoch is a different sort of human being. In a setting of dying, he insisted on living, by means of his extraordinary communion with God.

Genesis 6 is an obituary column of another kind. It portrays a dead society. The smell of destruction is all about it, in proportions so ugly that "every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually," until at last "the LORD was sorry that he had made humankind."

But here, too, there was an element of wondrous life, in the man named Noah. He "found favor in the sight of the LORD," for with evil all around him, he was "blameless in his generation." Further, he managed to communicate his goodness to his family, so that his wife, his sons, and his daughters-in-law accepted his spiritual leadership.

No one else did, however. Though a New Testament writer calls Noah a "herald of righteousness" (2 Peter 2:5), his message was not heeded. Perhaps it was achievement enough to be good and godly in a thoroughly perverse time, even to the point of winning his own household.

PRAYER: Grant me, dear Savior, the grace to be a child of life, no matter how great the measure of death around me. Amen.

If Hollywood were telling this story, a large share of the screen time would be invested in scenes of terrifying destruction. Genesis tells us the proportions of the rain (forty days and nights), the total involvement of nature ("the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened" [7:11]), and the long wait for the waters to subside; but there is no description of human terror or of vast areas of desolation.

Instead, the emphasis is on restoration. We are told much about what was saved of both animal and human life, and of the patience and faith with which Noah waited for an end to his journey. Then, a moving interaction between Noah and God. Noah builds an altar

and presents a sacrifice to God, and God, in turn, expresses divine pleasure at Noah's act. Never again, God vows, will there be such destruction; seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.

In this scene of judgment the overriding quality is mercy. Judgment has come so a worse fate can be avoided. God's judgments are never for pointless destruction or revenge, but for redemption.

So, too, the flood is not an end, but a beginning. And what a beginning it is! A human being in trusting worship, and God responding with the assurance of continuing mercy.

PRAYER: When I face judgment, dear Lord, help me to see it as redemption at work; in Jesus' name. Amen.

GENESIS 9, 10, 11; PSALM 9

Week 1, Day 6

The Bible is a book of new beginnings. When sin seems to have destroyed an age or an individual, there is always a place of starting again.

It is as if the flood had washed the earth clean for this new start. The "first generation" was told to "be fruitful . . . and fill the earth" (1:28); now Noah and his family are given the same instructions (9:1). And as if recalling the sins of Cain and Lamech, a warning is reiterated against the shedding of blood (9:6).

But things soon began to go wrong. Even as the rainbow of the covenant fades from view, Noah falls into drunkenness and one of his sons mocks his shame. Then, as the descendants of Noah multiply, a new spirit of rebellion appears: "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens" (11:4). So the original sin repeats itself: A people would, by their own devices, become like God and perhaps even displace him.

Their effort ends in disarray. When we set ourselves against God, whether as a civilization or as individuals, we put ourselves out of joint with the very nature of things and we are captured by confusion. Not only is communication with others broken, but within our own souls we speak a multitude of tongues.

But now, a new ray of hope: "Terah was the father of Abram . . . ; the name of Abram's wife was Sarai" (11:27-29). God has a friend, and who can say what good lies ahead?

PRAYER: Deliver me, dear Savior, from the confusion that comes from my rebellions against your love. Amen.

Abraham is known as the father of the faithful (Galatians 3:6-7). These two chapters show why he deserves the title. They also show that faith almost always follows an uneven course, because it resides in human vessels.

Abraham's faith begins in a dramatic act: "Get up and go!" That could be said to be the essence of faith, because faith leads to action. So Abraham and Sarah, who were partners in the faith venture, left all that was familiar and dear to follow a promise.

But faith, as I said a moment ago, takes an uneven course. In Egypt, Abraham seems to retreat into doubt through his fear of the Egyptians. One would think that a person who was ready to go into the wilderness of the unknown would confront Pharaoh with confidence, but we human beings are rarely that consistent. That's why we need God's grace.

Abraham returns to his position of sublime strength, however, when there is conflict with Lot's herdsmen. He makes a decision based on character and trust, letting Lot have the far better portion, and only after the choice is made is Abraham revisited by God with a message of grand assurance. God said, "Raise your eyes now, and look from the place where you are . . . ; all the land that you see I will give to you" (13:14-15). And with that, Abraham moved on, and "built an altar to the LORD" (13:18).

PRAYER: When I fail, dear Savior, help me to trust in you and rise up to try again; in Jesus' name. Amen.

In those ancient days, wars between city-states went on constantly. Abraham was himself a kind of traveling city, with his 318 trained men; and his little army turned the tide.

I think the writer of Genesis sees the victory as an achievement of faith and of Abraham's skilled leadership.

Abraham refuses any reward for himself, but he gives a tithe to Melchizedek, king of Salem (which means *peace, shalom*). Melchizedek is a mysterious figure, open to our speculation. The New Testament pays him particular attention (Hebrews 5-7), portraying him as a forerunner of Christ.

But again Abraham struggles. When the Lord says, "Do not be afraid, Abram . . . ; your reward shall be very great" (15:1), Abraham reminds God that he still doesn't have an heir. Will his

holdings simply pass to his steward, Eliezer of Damascus, “a slave born in my house” (15:3)? It is a plaintive cry.

What follows is at once inspiring, mysterious, and symbolic. After God has reassured Abraham of the divine plan, God asks him to make a sacrifice. Abraham has to drive scavenger birds away from the sacrifice; they seem like a malevolent force. Then Abraham has a terrifying dream, which reveals some of the peril that will one day threaten his descendants, even as the scavengers have invaded his place of worship.

PRAYER: When I am in a dark and uncertain place, O God, reassure me with your presence and promise; in Christ our Lord. Amen.

GENESIS 16, 17; PSALM 12

Week 2, Day 2

Sarah, who is of course as fine an example of faith as Abraham, wavers as does Abraham. In frustration, she attributes her childlessness to God (16:2), and judges (as Abraham seems to have done in Chapter 15) that she will have to take matters into her own hands.

Her solution was probably a rather common one in that time and culture; she and Abraham use her maid as a surrogate mother. But when the maid, Hagar, finds that she has succeeded where her mistress could not, she feels scorn for Sarah. So Ishmael is born; and since the Arab world looks upon him as their ancestor and the Jews upon Isaac as theirs, the strife between Sarah and Hagar continues to our day.

Thirteen years pass, and when Abraham is ninety-nine (17:1) God promises again that he and Sarah will have a son. It has been a long wait! At this moment his name is changed from Abram (exalted ancestor) to Abraham (ancestor of a multitude), and Sarai is changed to Sarah. Still, Abraham wants to cling to what is present and visible: “O that Ishmael might live in your sight!” (17:18). No wonder, when he and Sarah had waited so long and to no avail.

But God assures Abraham that there will be an Isaac and commands that the covenant mark of circumcision be instituted. From this point on, the Hebrew Scriptures divide the world, by this mark, into the circumcised and the uncircumcised.

PRAYER: Thank you, gracious Lord, for not giving up on me when I wonder and wander! Lead me on, I pray; in Jesus’ name. Amen.

When the New Testament writer urges that we be hospitable to strangers because by doing so “some have entertained angels without knowing it” (Hebrews 13:2), he may well have had Abraham and Sarah in mind.

These desert visitors brought good news and bad news. Abraham and Sarah are told again, this time with a specific detail, that they will have a son. Sarah laughs—half, I think, in doubt and half in incredulous joy—but the strangers say it will be so. But then they confide to Abraham that Sodom and Gomorrah, whose sins are “very grave,” will soon be destroyed.

Abraham begins bargaining. He is half saint and half merchant in a Middle Eastern bazaar, and the marvel is this: that it is only when Abraham stops asking that God stops giving. The two cities will be saved if only there are ten righteous.

But the righteous element in Sodom and Gomorrah was almost nonexistent. Even Lot’s attempt to get together a Noah-like family contingent falls short; his sons-in-law think he is jesting. This may say as much about Lot’s quality of witness as about the young men’s sensitivity. At last even Lot’s wife shows how tied she has become to the life and culture of Sodom and Gomorrah.

It is a sad and instructive story, and the postscript about the Moabites and the Ammonites only accentuates the irony.

PRAYER: Give me, please, the faith of Abraham, to plead and work for the redemption of the times in which I live; to your glory. Amen.

The Bible is a wonderfully honest book. It portrays us as we are, even as it holds before us the ideal of what God wants us to be. Once again Abraham, the man of faith, conducts himself more like an artful manipulator. God respects the heart integrity of Abimelech (20:6) and—in what may seem almost irony—instructs the king to solicit prayer from Abraham. Because Abraham, whatever his occasional lapses, is a servant of God.

And now the promise is fulfilled and the child Isaac—*Laughter*—is born. Abraham is a hundred years old, and Sarah is ninety. Are these ages according to our length years? some will ask. Whatever the case, Genesis wants to make one point clear: Abraham and Sarah are far past childbearing age, and Isaac is a miracle, a gift.

But now the tension between the child of logic and the child of faith grows to the point of disaster, and Hagar and Ishmael are forced out. From the Bible's point of view, Isaac is the issue of the story, because the witnessing line and the redemptive line will come through him and his descendants. Nevertheless, God watches over Hagar and her son. When she reconciles herself to death, an angel chides her: "What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid" (21:17). Perhaps this is what theologians call common grace; for while Ishmael is not the key figure in the eternal drama, his life is nevertheless preserved and blessed.

PRAYER: Help me, Lord of all, to have room in my heart to see you at work in those who are different from me; in Christ. Amen.

GENESIS 22, 23; PSALM 16

Week 2, Day 5

When Abraham lifted the knife to kill Isaac, it would be a triple murder. He would kill his son, his dream, and the product of his faith. The enormity of the act is shown in the command: "Take your *son*, your *only* son Isaac, *whom you love*" (22:2). Abraham had waited decades for God to fulfill the promise in this son; now he has been asked to destroy him. Even God's miracle is not allowed to compete with God.

Abraham is faithful; and Isaac, who is strong enough to resist his aged father, cooperates with him. It is an awesome father-son partnership of faith. At the last moment, God's angel intervenes. Generations later the writer of Hebrews will say that, "figuratively speaking," Isaac was raised from the dead (Hebrews 11:19).

Abraham must have asked himself what kind of God it would be who would make such a monstrous request. He must also have wondered how God's plan could be fulfilled with Isaac gone. But he believed in the face of all his questions. However much this man of faith may have faltered on other occasions, there is no apparent faltering here.

The story stumbles us. We claim to be troubled by its primitive quality, but what bothers us most is its insistence on an ultimate commitment. Our era is not comfortable with ultimate commitments—not in marriage, patriotism, friendship, or faith. It is hard to follow Abraham up this mountain because it is hard to be an ultimate disciple.

PRAYER: Grant me, O Lord, the grace to trust you with all of my being, for all of your purposes; in Jesus' name. Amen.

We have had two miracles in Isaac—first his birth, then his preservation. But there will not be a family line through Isaac unless he becomes a father, so there must be a marriage.

That seems simple enough, but Abraham felt otherwise. He was convinced that his son must not marry a daughter of the Canaanites, but he was equally sure that his son must not settle back in the land he and Sarah left so long ago. Both these convictions sprang from Abraham's understanding of the plan of God in his life and in that of his family.

So he sent his trusted servant (whose name, perhaps significantly, is never mentioned) on an expedition of trust, and the servant brings back a wife for Isaac, the beautiful and clever Rebekah.

The developing plot has its own pain. Rebekah conceives, but finds a war in her womb. The twins, born only a moment apart, are as different as if from alien cultures. As they grow up, Esau is his father's favorite and Jacob is his mother's. By convention, Esau should be the primary heir, as the older son, but Jacob is the one who is chosen by God. In many ways, Jacob does not appeal to us; he is too crafty and too ready to dupe his brother. But Esau is interested only in the needs and excitements of the moment, and he gladly sacrifices his birthright to fulfill an evening's appetite. Whatever his other limitations, Jacob has a better grasp of life's ultimate values.

PRAYER: Lord of life, teach me to prize what truly matters most; in Jesus' name. Amen.

Isaac seems to have inherited something of both his father's strength and his weakness. He follows the same pattern of deception regarding his wife; yet like Abraham, he enjoys God's blessing on all he does (26:12-13), and in time God confirms for him the promise that was previously made to his father (26:24). And like his father, Isaac becomes a builder of altars.

Esau continues to be a person who seeks his fulfillments regardless of other commitments, and marries out of the will of his parents. And Jacob continues to be Jacob! This time he has the help of his mother. It is not a pretty story. They combine forces to

deceive blind Isaac; and they succeed, so that Jacob receives the blessing that was intended for Esau. In the previous instance, Esau was equally at fault, but this time the sin is all Jacob's. And Esau, hating Jacob, vows that when his father has died, he will kill his younger brother. It appears that the Cain and Abel story is about to be re-enacted.

Yet even from this ugly scenario, some good will come. Rebekah, her own cleverness turning in upon her, knows that she must send her favorite son away. But she uses the crisis to be sure that Jacob marries, as both his father and his mother desire, from other than the Canaanite women. The hour of extremity will become an occasion of opportunity.

PRAYER: Heavenly Father, may I never be so anxious for a desirable end that I use an unworthy means; in Jesus' name. Amen.

GENESIS 28, 29, 30

Week 3, Day 1

*A*lmost any circumstance of life can be endured if only occasionally there is a Bethel. As it happens, our Bethels often come when the circumstances are most bleak. Jacob is a fugitive now, alone in a trackless wilderness, but God visits him in a dream and promises him blessings for himself and his offspring.

The blessing begins soon thereafter in the household of his uncle Laban, as he falls in love with Laban's daughter Rachel. But the blessings come with a price, because Jacob and Laban are cut from the same cloth. It's fascinating to watch these two clever dealers outwitting each other.

Jacob's cleverness is no match, however, for the problems he encounters in being married to the sisters Leah and Rachel. It is Rachel whom he loves, but it is Leah who is fruitful; and as the years go by he is caught between their jealousies and resentments.

But his family grows, and so does his wealth. Clever as Laban is, Jacob is more clever. He gradually builds a small fortune; and while it is the result of his own ingenuity and hard work, it can also be said that he would never have had the opportunity if it had not been for his father-in-law. Above all, Jacob enjoys the favor and blessing of God. And while his pursuit of God's purposes is sometimes misguided, it is to Jacob's credit that he never loses sight of what is best.

PRAYER: Help me this day to keep my eyes fixed on your will, O Lord, that my life may fulfill your purposes; to your glory. Amen.

Almost all of us have some unfinished business in our lives, and the sooner we deal with it, the better off we'll be. Jacob had more than his share. These chapters report his handling of each matter.

First, there's his father-in-law, Laban. When Jacob sensed that trouble was brewing with his brothers-in-law, he fled the territory, but Laban soon caught up with him. In truth, both Jacob and Laban had poor records, and they settled matters in a rather tentative way, a truce of suspicion.

Chapter 32 records the story of Jacob's encounter with God, but it begins with Jacob's unfinished business with his brother, Esau. Over twenty years had gone by since Jacob had defrauded him and since Esau had vowed murderous revenge. Jacob apparently wants to make things right; but when he sends emissaries ahead, he learns that Esau is coming to meet him with four hundred men. Jacob organizes a diplomatic mission, but he is not at peace. That night he separates himself from every living person, only to find himself confronted by a Stranger.

Jacob and the Stranger wrestle through the night until at last Jacob wins by giving up. The Stranger gives Jacob a new name, *Israel*, the name that will ever after be that of his people.

Who was the Stranger? Centuries later Charles Wesley, putting himself in Jacob's place, said, "'Tis Love! 'tis Love! Thou diedst for me." We aren't surprised that Jacob's meeting the next day with Esau was successful. Having done business with God, he was ready to meet his brother.

PRAYER: Conquer my soul, O God, till I know your name is Love. Amen.

If you believe that the Bible is the story of God's dealings with our human race, as I do, you may wonder why Chapter 34 is included. It is a primitive story, full of violence. It makes clear, however, that Israel was already committed to a higher level of sexual morality than the other nations, and that at least to a degree, there was more respect for women.

But it's also clear that they expressed their convictions in crude fashion, leaving Jacob in a perilous position. In this crisis Jacob returns to Bethel, with instructions to build an altar. It is as if the

bad prospects were forcing him to re-examine his past, remembering his two major encounters with God, and to renew his vows. He remembers that God sustained him in other difficult times, and he turns to God again. It's good to be able to call back some experiences of mercy to carry one through a current crisis.

Now Benjamin is born, and the family of Israel is complete. Here are the twelve tribes around which the nation's history will revolve for centuries.

The long list of Esau's family, constituting the nation of Edom, is not our favorite form of reading, but Genesis considers it essential to the story. As time goes by, the Edomites will appear again and again, generally in strife with Israel. So although Esau and Jacob are at peace (35:29), their descendants will dwell with the sword.

PRAYER: Grant me the grace, I pray, to hold deep convictions with a kindly spirit; to your praise. Amen.

GENESIS 37, 38; PSALM 21

Week 3, Day 4

*W*e human beings are a complex lot, and we weave strands of life that continually entangle us. Jacob was inclined, it seems, to love much but not wisely; so even as he had loved Rachel to Leah's hurt, now he loves Rachel's son Joseph to the resentment of his siblings and to Joseph's own pain. And Joseph, though very bright, is nevertheless not tactful enough to handle his dreams and his ambitions well. The smoldering resentment grows into disaster, and the teenager is sold into slavery. Jacob thus pays dearly for his favoritism. He will spend the next long years of his life mourning the son he thinks is dead, while in truth that son is preparing the way for his family's well-being. Probably much of our mourning comes from our ignorance. If we knew better how faithfully God is working behind the scenes, we would have more peace.

Not only does God work behind the scenes, but also the divine hand reworks many of our misshapen doings. So it is in the story of Judah and Tamar. Again, the story is told with candor; feelings and reputations are not protected. Judah denies his daughter-in-law the protection of the laws that were intended to provide for women, and Tamar uses a clever plan to make her case. Not much can be said for Judah's conduct, but at least this: He acknowledged his sin (38:26). The end of the story—God at work behind the scenes—comes in the Gospel of Matthew, when we discover that

out of this incestuous relationship came a child who is in the line of the Messiah, our Lord Christ (Matthew 1:3).

PRAYER: Give me the faith to see you at work, O God, even in our human sins and shortcomings; in Jesus' name. Amen.

GENESIS 39, 40; PSALM 22

Week 3, Day 5

Joseph the dreamer must now see his dreams broken and delayed. At first all goes well: "The LORD was with Joseph, and he became a successful man" (39:2). But his very success and his being "handsome and good-looking" made him attractive to Potiphar's wife. Joseph is admirable in resisting her enticing, and his reasons are admirable. He feels a debt to his master and he knows that if he were to lie with his mistress it would be a "sin against God" (39:8-9). He has obligations to both God and society, and he means to fulfill them.

But in doing so he loses his position and, even worse, is thrown into prison. Doing what is right does not necessarily bring immediate reward. Perhaps not even on this earth, else what's a heaven for?

Even in prison Joseph's character and God's blessing combine for achievement; he is soon as trusted there as he was in Potiphar's house. A wise writer will say later that if people's ways please the Lord, even their enemies will be at peace with them (Proverbs 16:7). Joseph seems to demonstrate the point, and when the opportunity comes to exercise his gift of insight through the dreams of his fellow prisoners, Joseph's future seems very hopeful.

But it is not to be so easy. "The chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him" (40:23). Sometimes faith shows itself best by our waiting.

PRAYER: If at times, O Lord, I am disappointed in life and in people, grant me the faith to hold steady; to your glory. Amen.

GENESIS 41, 42; PSALMS 23, 24

Week 3, Day 6

After two whole years" (41:1)! I imagine Joseph waiting almost momentarily after the cupbearer has left the prison; then, slowly, hope dies. But there is a time and a tide. If the cupbearer had told Pharaoh of Joseph immediately upon his return to his office, Joseph's name would have been filed under "applications received." But now Pharaoh is in need of just the talents Joseph has, and now the cupbearer remembers.

Joseph credits God with his gift of insight, as well he should and as well all of us should. Pharaoh sees more in Joseph than simply a diviner of dreams; he also has obvious administrative skills. The bright teenager who alienated his brothers with his dreams has now been matured by life's buffeting. He is prepared. And he has prospered. Rightly he names his second son, "God has made me fruitful in the land of my misfortunes" (41:52).

But the best evidence of Joseph's maturity is yet to be seen. It is sometimes easier to run an empire than to make peace with one's own family, and easier to execute orders than to forgive injuries. In the course of time Joseph is visited by his brothers. The teenager is now a grown man, dressed in the regal garb of an Egyptian ruler so his brothers don't recognize him. But he knows them. The situation is dramatically reversed from that dark day when they sold him into slavery. Now they are the suppliants and he is in command.

PRAYER: When I have moments of power, O Lord, help me use my strength with kindness and wisdom; in Jesus' name. Amen.

GENESIS 43, 44, 45

Week 3, Day 7

When you read these chapters, you realize why the Nobel-prize winning German author Thomas Mann felt driven to expand the story into a four-volume novel. What a plot: Brothers sell their brother into slavery, then are dependent on him years later when he is in a position of absolute power. His father thinks his son long dead but now gets the unbelievable news that the boy is not only alive but as successful as only that boy could have dreamed.

And what a tangle of emotions! Follow the brothers, from resentment to revenge to deception to fear. Or the father, from despair and grief, to fear of losing his other "special" son, to a fantasy of reunion. And Joseph, of course. Surely during his slave and prison days, and perhaps even more in his position of power, he must have contemplated revenge.

But the issue to the writer of Genesis is more than plot or human psychology. He sees God at work. Even through the ugliness of human jealousy and brutality, even in a motley course of heartbreaks and delay, God is working out the divine will. Joseph is so sure of it that he makes the point three times in one paragraph. The brothers are not to "be distressed" for what they did, because "God sent me before you to preserve life" (45:5),

“God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth” (45:7), “So it was not you who sent me here, but God” (45:8). Joseph sees a far larger plot than his brothers ever dreamed.

PRAYER: May I have the faith, dear Savior, to see your hand at work in all the fortunes of my life! In the name of your Son. Amen.

GENESIS 46, 47, 48

Week 4, Day 1

When you see Jacob and his family setting out for Egypt, you are also laying the foundation for the book of Exodus. This move to Egypt is seen as a step in the making of “a great nation,” and Jacob is assured that his family will return in time (46:4).

But the seeds of eventual trouble are already present. This family of seventy will become to the Egyptians a threatening nation; they follow an occupation that the Egyptians despise (46:34); and because of Joseph they are given “the best part of the land” (47:11), which in time will anger the native peoples.

Joseph’s policies in 47:13-26 do not appeal to me, since they reduce the people to slavery, completely controlled by Pharaoh, but I am imposing the standards of another time; to the people of Joseph’s day, he was a savior from starvation. And of course the tax he imposed—20 percent—would seem hospitable today, especially since it really was nothing other than rent on the land.

The blessing of Joseph’s sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, brings them officially into Jacob’s family. But they come, not as Jacob’s grandsons, but as his sons, so that they will be listed among the tribes of Israel and Joseph’s name will be removed (Numbers 1:10, 32-35). Ephraim is preferred over Manasseh, following a consistent pattern in which the younger is chosen over the older (for example, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau).

PRAYER: Lord, may I have faith to see you at work in all of life. Amen.

GENESIS 49, 50; PSALM 25

Week 4, Day 2

Jacob’s last words to his sons are not only “a suitable blessing” (49:28) but also a prediction of “days to come” (49:1). The most interesting, of course, is the section on Judah (49:8-12). It is this tribe from which King

David eventually comes, and it is this tribe that later gives its name to all that remains of the people of Israel. And especially, it is from this tribe that the Messiah, Jesus, comes. Themes are established here that will reappear even into the New Testament.

Joseph's humane quality, his consistency of character, and his belief in God's purposes come through magnificently both in his love for his father and in his generosity toward his brothers. Though Joseph had told them years before that they should not be distressed over the evil they had done to him because it was part of God's purpose, nevertheless they are consumed with new fears now that their father is gone. They construct a story to convince Joseph, still not realizing that he needs no convincing. The shame of their long-ago deed still clouds their lives. After God and others have forgiven us, a harder task is to forgive ourselves.

"Am I in the place of God?" Joseph asks. Then, again, he reiterates what he said so long before: Though your intentions may have been for evil, "God intended it for good" (50:20). That kind of faith gives all of life a quality of hope, dignity, and beauty.

PRAYER: Help me, O God, to believe that you can use even the darkest issues of life to my eventual good and to your honor. Amen.

EXODUS 1, 2; PSALMS 26, 27

Week 4, Day 3

When Jacob and his family came to Egypt, they were only the size of a good family reunion. As such they were welcome, particularly since one of their number, Joseph, was already established as a national hero. But when both Joseph and the generation that knew him died, and the family took on the proportions of a small city-state, their Egyptian neighbors began to fear them.

So the government set out to destroy Israel by killing each newborn baby boy. But the midwives frustrated their effort in general, and then one family in the house of Levi frustrated it in a particularly dramatic case. By faith and courage they saved the baby's life; then, by God's providence, the baby ended in Pharaoh's palace, adopted by his daughter. So it was that the king who intended to destroy all Israelite male babies ended up preserving the very one who would one day deliver the Israelites from slavery, a man named Moses.

But it was not going to be easy. Moses received the best of training in his setting of preferment, yet somehow kept a heart for his own people, and apparently a sense of justice too. One day, while trying to protect an Israelite slave, Moses killed an Egyptian.

Just that suddenly the prince became a fugitive. He fled to Midian, where he could live in obscurity. There he became a shepherd, married, and started a family. End of the dream? Not with God.

PRAYER: Help me to see, dear Lord, that you are at work at all times and in all places, always and unfailingly. Thank you! Amen.

EXODUS 3, 4; PSALM 28

Week 4, Day 4

As Chapter 2 ended, we learned that God saw the pain of the people (2:23-25); but how is deliverance to come? God's purposes are almost always achieved through persons. In this case the person is a likely/unlikely one, but this too is pretty typical of God's working. This man was miraculously saved as an infant and raised as a prince, but he had spent most of his adult life on the back side of a desert, tending his father-in-law's flock of sheep.

No wonder, then, that when God calls him, Moses has little self-confidence and quickly explains to God that he is not qualified; he has to be convinced and restored before he can be useful for any purpose. Yet see a marvel and an irony in this encounter. The marvel is that God allows the shepherd to argue with him, and the irony is that this man who says he is afraid to plead a case with Pharaoh is nevertheless bold to state his case before God.

And see the quality of God's patience. Instead of giving Moses an ultimatum ("Shape up and do it my way or else") or instead of simply overpowering him with divine reasoning, God cooperates with Moses' feelings of inadequacy and provides help through his brother, Aaron.

"Two are better than one," a wise one said, "for if they fall, one will lift up the other" (Ecclesiastes 4:9-10). Moses and Aaron will have opportunity for such lifting.

PRAYER: Forgive me, Lord, when I argue with you; but remember that I am dust and that sometimes I feel very weak; in Jesus' name. Amen.

When Moses and Aaron come before Pharaoh in the name of the Lord, Pharaoh answers, “Who is the LORD, that I should heed him . . . ? I do not know the LORD” (5:2). Pharaoh’s answer is in the essential secular voice, one that denies any divine right except its own.

So Pharaoh flexed his muscle (“I’ll show them who’s king around here!”), and Moses found himself caught between a resentful people and the commands of the Lord. No wonder he pleaded, “Why did you ever send me?” (5:22).

God reassures Moses, reminding him that the ancestral revelation to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was coming to an even more wonderful focus now, and that the covenant (one of the wondrous words of Scripture) is indeed remembered. But the Israelites could not hear Moses “because of their broken spirit and their cruel slavery” (6:9). The harshness of life can make us dull to even heaven’s assurance.

Now the grand dialogue begins between Pharaoh, on the hand of strength, and Moses and Aaron, on the side of weakness. Moses is warned that there will be a hardening of Pharaoh’s heart, but even this warning is insufficient when the full degree of that hardening shows itself. The encounter begins with an almost playful show of power, Aaron’s miraculous rod, a demonstration that Pharaoh’s magicians easily imitate, though they are bested when Aaron’s rod consumes theirs. When the water is changed to blood, however, we know the full battle is engaged.

PRAYER: Give me the grace, dear Lord, to stand with those who are broken in spirit by some slavery of life; in Christ. Amen.

The series of plagues follows a pattern of somewhat predictable disaster in the way each leads into another. The blood is followed by frogs in the land, and their rotting stench by gnats; then swarms of flies, followed by a plague of the livestock. So it goes, through boils, hail, locusts, and then thick darkness.

And always, a pendulum swinging in Pharaoh’s soul. He repents, then rejects his own repentance. Sometimes the Scripture reports that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart, and at other times that Pharaoh himself hardened Pharaoh’s heart. Which is it? And how

do we reconcile the idea of God hardening someone's heart?

Charles Wesley found it easy to understand:

“There needed, Lord, no act of thine,
If Pharaoh had a heart like mine:
One moment leave me but alone,
And mine, alas, is turned to stone.”

It seems to me there is always this fierce inner struggle between our self-will and the Voice that calls us. The Voice is sometimes pleading, sometimes insisting, sometimes fierce, but always wanting us. Destruction, as a last resort, is chosen by the victim, not by God.

The “darkness that can be felt” (10:21) is symbolic even while it is real, as it portrays the terror of the human soul that is absent from God and in rebellion against the Eternal.

PRAYER: Please give me a heart that is always tender toward you and your purposes, for my sake and yours; through Christ my Lord. Amen.

EXODUS 11, 12; PSALM 30

Week 4, Day 7

The Passover, Moses and Aaron understood, was to be “the beginning of months” (12:2). Many contemporary Jews who do not identify themselves as being religious nevertheless celebrate Passover; its roots are deep not only in their national heritage but also in the individual psyche. For the Egyptians it was a night of disaster and judgment, but for the Jews a night when they saw the power of God manifested on their behalf.

Thus it was a “day of remembrance” to be celebrated “throughout your generations” (12:14). A casual reader may find the many details tedious, but this exactness was intended to underline the gravity of this day above all days.

The Christian church, from its beginning, has found some of its roots in this same event. The first celebration of the sacrament of Communion came in the setting of the Passover meal (Luke 22:14-18). Any number of details from Exodus 12 have carried over into the hymns and liturgical language of Christians. Most important of all, Jesus Christ is identified as our Passover Lamb (1 Corinthians 5:7), the One who died that we might escape the eternal death angel.

I suspect that the Passover celebration is most poignant for those Jews who have a vivid sense of what God did for their ancestors in Egypt, just as Holy Communion means the most for those

Christians who realize how profoundly they have been saved from sin. Those who know how much they have been forgiven are the most grateful for the divine gift.

PRAYER: Dear Lamb of God, may I never forget your death for me. Amen.

EXODUS 13, 14, 15

Week 5, Day 1

Since the Israelite firstborn were spared from the death angel, the people were to consecrate all their firstborn, both human and animal, to the Lord. This would be a reminder that the Lord had brought them “out of Egypt, from the house of slavery” (13:14). They were to be a covenant people, led by a safe route since they were not ready for war (13:17) and guided by the quiet, continuing miracle of cloud and fire.

But (like you and me) they were an obstinate lot. They rebelled as they faced the sea, contending that it would have been better to stay in Egypt than to die in the wilderness. How could they so quickly forget the power of the Lord from the Passover night? Most of us, if we reflect honestly upon our own journey, will understand. We so soon forget the pain of the slavery from which we have been saved and the glory and mercy of God in our deliverance.

But as they saw their pursuers destroyed, they joined Moses in singing a song of deliverance. Then Miriam, Moses’ sister, picked up the theme. Tambourine in hand, she led the women in dancing and singing: “Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously” (15:21). They were only three days down the road, however, when they not only forgot the songs they had sung with Moses and Miriam but complained bitterly against Moses at their shortage of water. God used the occasion to add a new dimension to their covenant (15:25b-26).

PRAYER: Give me a sanctified memory, I pray, so that when I am inclined to grumble against you, I will remember your mercy. Amen.

EXODUS 16, 17, 18

Week 5, Day 2

God provided food (16:35), water (17:6), and victory in battle (17:13). The people provided the grumbling. Each day seemed to require a new miracle if the people were to

carry on, and always they seemed ready to return to Egypt where they “ate [their] fill” (16:3) and had plenty to drink (17:3). When I was seventeen a man named Herman Pencovic told me, “The Jews remembered the leeks and garlic of Egypt after they had forgotten the taskmasters and the making of bricks without straw.” Most of us have just such a selective memory when we recall the good old days.


The visit by Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law, is a special kind of bright spot in the midst of Israel’s struggles. Wise as Moses may have been, he was using his time and energy poorly; leaders are often inclined that way because they see themselves as indispensable. Jethro gave Moses advice that was ingenious good sense: Share the burden. From a religious point of view, Jethro might have been seen as a pagan; he was not one of the people of Israel.

If Moses had been more narrow in his sympathies, he would have refused this counsel; after all, God had been speaking to him directly, so why should he listen to an outsider? But Moses was both wise enough and humble enough to learn—even from an in-law! Here’s a lesson in common grace: God speaks to all his creation, to the degree we are willing to listen.

PRAYER: Dear Lord, help me to be ready to learn, no matter what channel or instrument you use to teach me; in our Savior’s name. Amen.

EXODUS 19, 20; PSALMS 31, 32

Week 5, Day 3

ut in the wilderness there is a mountain called Sinai. It is not the tallest mountain in the world, but it may well be the best known. Israel had been on the road long enough to know they needed the structure of law. Even the best and most careful drivers need a line to show which is their side of the road, and a sign to indicate who will stop at an intersection. Life together requires boundaries.

Although this law was to deal with the most practical issues, it was not ordinary; it was the gift of God. Moses made this clear by establishing restrictions of many kinds so the people would understand that Sinai was holy ground.

The Ten Commandments come from a basis of God’s right and our debt. So they begin, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (20:2).