

THE INTERPRETATION BIBLE STUDIES LEADER HELPS

GENESIS

The IBS Leader Helps are designed to facilitate group study by providing lesson plans for the ten units in each of the Interpretation Bible Studies. These lesson plans utilize a variety of instructional methods that have been chosen for the express purpose of engaging participants in the learning process.

Each participant in the group should have a copy of IBS study book and should make a commitment to do advance preparation for each session.

The sessions are planned for one hour. If the time allotted is shorter than an hour, it will be necessary to be selective about the activities, choosing those that are most appropriate for your group.

Leader Preparation

Read Genesis in its entirety before beginning to teach. It is important to familiarize yourself with the book's overall content, so you can see how the individual passages fit into the larger scope of the book.

Skim through the whole study book to discern its flow. This is especially helpful if there are multiple teachers, in order to prevent leaping ahead into the next unit.

Prepare the room ahead of time. For informal discussion and ease of sharing, a semi-circular arrangement of chairs works best. Position yourself as one of the group, instead of setting yourself apart as the "authority."

Secure necessary teaching aids. A newsprint easel is an invaluable asset. Be sure to have markers and masking tape if you wish to display the sheets for future reference. Maps of the Holy Land in biblical times could be very helpful, especially a map that shows the time of the Patriarchs. Check the teaching suggestions for other materials necessary for certain units.

Prepare necessary handouts. Invite the participants to provide a folder for each handouts.

Keep the key idea in mind. Understand the purpose and goal of each activity.

Pray for God's guidance. Prior to making preparations for the session, allow time to pray for each participant and for yourself.

Unit 1: The Creation (Genesis 1:1—2:4a)

Key Idea: The Genesis creation passage is not a scientific account of how the world came to be, but a dynamic story revealing what kind of God we worship and the personal nature of God’s relationship with us.

Advance Preparation

Bring a picture of your father or mother and prepare a personal story that reveals something about the character of your father or mother. Also bring envelopes, paper, and pens or pencils for each participant.

Prepare a sheet of newsprint with the heading “Genesis 1:1—2:4a.” Under the heading, make four columns labeled “Science,” “Myth,” “History,” and “Story.”

Opening (10 minutes)

1. Prayer

Pray aloud this prayer, use one of your own, or ask a participant to pray:

O God, you called the world into being. You call us into the church. Let your story become our story, majesty mingled with mundane, for that is the mystery of it. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

2. Introducing the Study Book

If not done so before, hand out the study books. Spend a little time going over the format of the units. Suggest that a useful practice is to begin the reading of each unit with the Questions for Reflection section. These offer a clue to the writer’s intention and help direct one’s reading. Give the class a few minutes to read quickly through the introduction and the first unit, keeping track of any initial questions or puzzlement.

Presentation (15 minutes)

3. Introduction to Genesis

Post the newsprint with the four columns. Invite the class to discuss what each of these words means. Then read Genesis 1:1—2:4a as a litany, with a leader reading aloud one verse, the group reading the next, and so on.

Discuss the question of what this passage is about in terms of the chart on the newsprint. Ask: What does the story tell us? A useful shorthand might be: *Science* tells us how things happen; a necessary characteristic is replication; a major purpose is control. *Myth* is not necessarily untrue but describes the overall structure of things, often metaphorically. *History* tells what happened, offers a chronicle of events backed up by evidence. *Story* is open-ended, describing relationships and character, and fosters involvement and affirmation in a way that the other categories do not.

Note that the writer suggests the *story* category is more appropriate than the others for studying this passage. To further illustrate the point, place the picture you brought before the group and invite them to jot down what they think the person is like. Then, tell your story. Ask whether the story gave them a different opinion and which method provided the most useful insight.

Exploration (20 minutes)

4. Viewing This Passage as Story: What Does It Reveal about the Character of Our God?

Point out that almost every people had their own god or gods. Ask: What does this passage say about the relative power and scope of Israel's God? Point out that the people of Israel may have heard this story for the first time when they were in exile in Babylon. Ask: What special power would this have for people who felt abandoned?

Then note that in some religions, including a few that tempted the Israelites to foreign worship, the sun and the moon represent gods in themselves. Ask: What is the special significance here of the fact that God is the creator of the sun, moon, stars, and everything else?

Point out that on p. 6 of the study book, the writer says "the means of creation is the very word of God." Ask: Why is that not very helpful scientifically (i.e., in telling us how it happened)? On the other hand, what does that say about the character of our God and about God's relationship to the creation? How does this passage help answer the question of who we are?

Then point out that the writer speaks of a "theology of blessing" or a "creation theology" on p. 7. Ask the participants to consider God's blessings on living creatures (1:22), humankind (1:28), and the seventh day (2:3). Then ask: What does this say about God's character and about our relationship to creation?

End this step by noting that the story conveys the completely unscientific idea of God's delight in the creation. The phrase "God saw that it was good" occurs six times. What does this say about God, the creation, and our attitude toward it?

5. Viewing This Passage as Story: What Does It Reveal about Our Relationship with God?

Have participants consider the following questions:

- What does it mean to be created in the image of God? How does this understanding go far beyond any simply biological description of human beings?
- What is the difference between *dominion* (Gen. 1:28) and *domination*? What is the human role of responsibility, stewardship, and care? How does the view of the planet as creature affect the way we treat it?

Response (10 minutes)*6. Weekdays Are for the Sake of the Sabbath*

Discuss the way in which the Sabbath is not just an interlude in one's work schedule but a way of responding to God's presence in all of life. List on newsprint ways we trivialize the Sabbath. Then list ways in which we can make the Sabbath a response to God's presence in all of creation.

Closing (5 minutes)*7. Promise Making*

Give each person an envelope, a piece of paper, and a pen or pencil. Invite them to write a promise regarding how they intend to make the Sabbath a way of honoring God's presence in creation. Let them put the paper in the envelope, seal it, and write their name on it. Collect the envelopes to return them at the end of the course.

8. Closing Prayer

Pray Psalm 8 as a litany prayer. Begin with "Let us pray." As the leader, read the first verse and have the group read the second verse. Continue reading alternate verses in this way to the end of the psalm. End with "In Jesus' name, Amen."

9. Assignment

Have the participants read Unit 2 and Genesis 2:4b—3:24. Also ask them to come prepared to answer the question: What is this story of the Garden of Eden about?

Unit 2: Another Look at Creation: The Temptation Story (Genesis 2:4b—3:24)

Key Idea: Although many interpreters (including the Apostle Paul) root their understandings of the fall, original sin, and the origin of death in this text, trying to read the text without these preconceptions may yield a fresh interpretation—namely, that it is about human alienation from God, creation, and self and how God works daily to overcome that alienation with our help.

Advance Preparation

Write the question assigned at the end of the last session at the top of a sheet of newsprint: “What is this story of the Garden of Eden about?” On another sheet of newsprint, put three columns headed “The Fall,” “Original Sin,” and “The Origin of Death.”

For your own background information, look up the following in a Bible dictionary or theological word dictionary:

- the fall
- original sin
- original righteousness
- total depravity
- free will

Provide paper and pens or pencils for the participants.

Opening (10 minutes)

1. Prayer

Use the following prayer, one of your own, or ask one of the participants to pray:

O God, all human life now takes place east of Eden, where a return to paradise is not in the cards. Our sin, not Adam’s, creates the gulf between us and you. We give you thanks that you have overcome that gulf through Jesus Christ. Amen.

2. Leftovers

Check to see if there are any questions or comments left over from the previous session.

3. Discussing the Assignment from the Previous Session

Post the newsprint with the question: “What is the story of the Garden of Eden about?” Invite people to offer brief answers. Write these on the newsprint.

Presentation (15 minutes)

4. Clearing the Decks

The purpose of Unit 2 is to allow this very familiar text speak in its own voice. One way to do that is to attempt to label some traditional interpretations, then set them aside while we listen to the text as if for the first time.

To this end, post the newsprint with the three columns. Invite people to jot down their understanding of these terms. Have them discuss their replies in triads (groups of three). After a brief discussion, invite people to share their ideas with the larger group. Write these on the newsprint in the appropriate columns.

The writer asserts that many interpreters read the story as the origin of sin and then assign blame. On p. 15–17, under the section titled “Who’s To Blame?,” the writer notes seven possibilities. Form the group into new triads. Divide these seven items up among the triads. Let the class evaluate each, then report their findings back to the whole class.

Exploration (20 minutes)

5. Two Stories of Creation

Point out that in Genesis 1:1—2:4a and 2:4b–25 we have two stories of creation. This may lead some to wonder which is correct. The appropriate theological answer is, of course, both!

Invite participants to compare the two creation stories in terms of the view of God and humankind found there. Then ask them to consider this idea:

As chronology (that is, *history*), these two accounts are incompatible. As *story*, each adds something valuable to our picture of God, ourselves, and our place in creation.

Discuss how one story compliments the other.

6. Misunderstandings

Discuss the second full paragraph in the study book on p. 15, beginning “The text is not about sex” Ask: How do these assertions fit with your previously-held ideas or doubts?

7. The Apostle Paul

Read Romans 5:12–21. Ask: In what ways does this help or hinder your understanding of today’s text?

Response (10 minutes)*8. Questions for Reflection*

Discuss the first two questions under Questions for Reflection on p. 19 of the study book, either in triads or as the whole group.

Closing (5 minutes)*9. Closing Prayer*

Pray Psalm 121 as a litany prayer. Begin with “Let us pray.” As the leader, read the first verse and have the group read the second verse. Continue reading alternate verses in this way to the end of the psalm. End with “In Jesus’ name, Amen.”

10. Assignment

Have the participants read Unit 3 and Genesis 4:1–26. Also ask them to consider this statement: “Anger occurs when a value is threatened.” Also ask them to address this question: The last three times I have gotten angry, what values were being threatened?

Unit 3: Cain and Abel (Genesis 4:1–26)

Key Idea: The focus of this text is not on a moral lesson, like something out of Aesop’s fables. Here is the complexity, tragedy, and pathos of human pride, anger, confusion, and guilt, as well as what we may expect of life and what God expects from us.

Advance Preparation

On the question of why God chose to accept Abel’s sacrifice, look at Hebrews 11:4. Weigh this reason against the study book’s assertion on p. 22 that there was no reason God had regard for Abel’s sacrifice other than the arbitrariness of God’s freedom.

Opening (10 minutes)

1. Prayer

Use the following prayer, one of your own, or ask one of the participants to pray:

O God, let us realize that we are Cain, we are Abel, by turns, and in different circumstances. Make us aware that sin is always “lurking at the door,” and that, yes, we are our brother’s and our sister’s keeper. In Jesus; name, Amen.

2. Leftovers

Check to see if there are any questions or comments left over from the previous session.

Presentation (15 minutes)

3. Role Play

Perform a role play of the story of Cain and Abel with the following cast of characters: Cain, Abel, God, two observers. Have the rest of the group be the audience.

After choosing the cast, give everyone a few minutes to read Genesis 4:1–16. Note that there are three scenes:

- Cain and Abel bring their sacrifices to God for God’s reaction.
- Cain takes Abel to the field and kills him.
- God comes looking for Abel and puts Cain on trial.

As the leader, announce each scene. Encourage the actors to respond to the action as they wish: making comments, asking questions, raising objections. At the conclusion of the action, let the observers ask any questions they have of the actors about their actions, comments, motivation, or omissions.

Then process the drama with the whole group. Ask:

- What did you feel?
- Which part was hardest to play?
- With whom did you sympathize? not sympathize?

Have the group share their learnings and surprises.

Exploration (20 minutes)

4. No Moral, Only Questions

Begin this step by asking: Why did Cain get angry at Abel anyway? It wasn't Abel's fault God accepted his sacrifice, was it? Was he just jealous? Why wasn't Cain's anger directed at God who was, after all, apparently arbitrary and unfair?

Then discuss what happens when one directs anger at life, the culture, accidents of birth, and so on, living by the dictum, "Don't get mad, get even." Ask: How could Cain have gotten "even" with God?

Discuss also some optional responses on Cain's part, such as anger and loathing at himself, leading to some kind of self-destructive act. You may also wish to discuss the virulence and illogic of sibling rivalry.

Note that the study book presents us with two stories featuring, in the writer's opinion, arbitrariness and capriciousness on the part of God. In the temptation story one could ask: Why did God put the tree in the Garden in the first place? Why prohibit Adam and Even from eating its fruit? Why did God have to make it so attractive (good for food, a delight to the eyes, would make one wise)? In the second story, God accepts Abel's offering but not Cain's—for no apparent reason. On p. 22, the writer says: "God's regard for Abel and his offering is simply a fact of life. Such is the mysterious freedom of God." Ask: What do you make of this?

Note that John Calvin says there was a reason for God's action: Abel's faith. (He bases this on Hebrews 11:4.) Ask: Is it more or less helpful to believe that God had a reason for accepting Abel's but not Cain's offering?

Response (10 minutes)

5. Discussing the Assignment from the Previous Session

Remind the participants of their assignment, which was to ask themselves: "The last three times I have gotten angry, what values were being threatened?" Invite people to share as much of their answer to this as they are comfortable with. Note that we cannot simply "will" ourselves not to feel anger. We may, however, exercise some choice in what we do with our anger. Romans 12:15 says, "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep." Invite the participants to consider this action as an alternative to what Cain did and to consider it as an alternative for themselves.

Closing (5 minutes)*6. Closing Prayer*

Pray Psalm 17:1–9 as a litany prayer. Begin with “Let us pray.” As the leader, read the first verse and have the group read the second verse. Continue reading alternate verses in this way to the end of the psalm. End with “In Jesus’ name, Amen.”

7. Assignment

Have the participants read Unit 4 and Genesis 9:1–17. Also ask them to consider these questions:

- Is the story about punishment, grief, or something else?
- What are the requirements of God’s covenant with Noah?
- What does God promise?
- Do you believe this promise?

Unit 4: God’s Covenant with Noah (Genesis 9:1–17)

Key Idea: “This story is not concerned with historical data but with the strange things which happen in the heart of God that decisively affect God’s creation.”—Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis, Interpretation*, p. 74

Advance Preparation

Bring a supply of paper, crayons, and markers for use in step 7.

Opening (10 minutes)

1. Prayer

Use the following prayer, one of your own, or ask one of the participants to pray:

O Lord, water has ever been the vehicle of both your salvation and judgment. You promised Noah you would never destroy the earth with water again, but keep us mindful that Isaiah said it would be the fire, next time. You seek “those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false, and do not swear deceitfully.” Make us so. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

2. Leftovers

Check to see if there are any questions or comments left over from the previous session.

Presentation (15 minutes)

3. Questions for Reflection

Turn to the Questions for Reflection section on p. 38 of the study book. Divide the total group into three subgroups. Assign each subgroup one of the questions to discuss.

After sufficient time for discussion, have each subgroup report their findings back to the total group. Allow time for questions and comments.

Exploration (20 minutes)

4. The Flood as the Tears of God

Genesis 6:6 says, “And the LORD was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.” Note that in reference to this verse, the writer of the study book says on p. 31, “And the flood that follows is the outpouring of the tears of God.” Ask: What difference does it make to speak of the flood this way rather than as the just punishment for human sin and violence?

Also ask: In what sense was this outcome (that is, human sin and violence) a surprise to God, especially after what happened in the garden with regard to the tree of knowledge? Then discuss the absence of forgiveness in this story—that is, why didn't God just let bygones be bygones? Ask: What does this say about the seriousness of sin and violence and the judgment of God?

5. So What Changed?

Ask the participants: True or false? After the flood, humankind learned its lesson and ever afterward loved holy, righteous, and faithful lives

The answer, of course, is “false.” Given this, ask:

- What difference does this story make for us as people of faith?
- What does the covenant of Noah say about the God we worship?
- If such a covenant removes the fear of punishment, what is the basis for Christian behavior, ethics, and holy living?

6. Divine Amnesia

Discuss the concept of divine “amnesia” (see p. 36 of the study book). Then ask:

- How does this category help us interpret events like the flood, the holocaust, and other moments of terrible violence and suffering?
- How is it a way of accounting for horrendous evil while holding on to the notion of a loving, caring, powerful God?

Response (10 minutes)

7. Personal Application

Turn to the Questions for Reflection section on p. 38 and discuss question 4. Pass out the paper and crayons and markers. Invite people to draw a rainbow and to think about a conflict situation they would like most to see affected by the rainbow promise. Have them write the name of the conflict situation under the rainbow's arc. Let people share their drawings if they wish.

Closing (5 minutes)

8. Closing Prayer

Pray Psalm 66:1–12 as a litany prayer. Begin with “Let us pray.” As the leader, read the first verse and have the group read the second verse. Continue reading alternate verses in this way to the end of the psalm. End with “In Jesus' name, Amen.”

9. Assignment

Have the participants read Unit 5 and Genesis 15:1–21. Ask them also to consider the following statement and question:

Genesis 12 begins with “Now the LORD said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.’” Verse 4 says, simply, “So Abram went.” In what way is this a model of faith for everyone?

Unit 5: The Covenant with Abram (Genesis 15:1–21)

Key Idea: Faith is not belief but trust. The issue in this text is whether Abram can trust God—that is, bring himself to await God’s promised future even when present conditions make that future unlikely—and whether God can be trusted.

Advance Preparation

Read Romans 4:1–8 and Galatians 3:6–9, and think about how they relate to the scriptural text for this session. Bring paper, crayons, markers, and clay for use in step 6.

For your own background information, look up the following words in a Bible dictionary or theological dictionary:

- covenant
- faith
- trust
- righteousness
- goodness
- *sola fide*

Opening (10 minutes)

1. Prayer

Pray aloud this prayer based on Hebrews 11, use one of your own, or ask a participant to pray:

O God, faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. By faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible. By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain's. Through this he received approval as righteous. By faith Noah, warned by God about events as yet unseen, respected the warning and built an ark to save his household. By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. He believed, and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness. O God, let us have such faith. In Jesus' name, Amen.

2. Leftovers

Check to see if there are any questions or comments left over from the previous session.

Presentation (15 minutes)

3. Comparing Genesis 12:1–4 with Genesis 15:1–6

Divide the total group into two subgroups. Have one subgroup look at Genesis 12:1–4, the other at Genesis 15:1–6. Ask each subgroup to answer the question: What is *faith* in these verses? Then bring everyone back together and have the two subgroups report their conclusions. List these on newsprint.

Exploration (20 minutes)

4. Good Little Boys and Girls

At the top of a piece of newsprint, put “Good Little Girls and Boys.” Have the group list what that meant when they were growing up. The list might well include things like following rules, being quiet, not getting into trouble, not inconveniencing adults, not questioning adult values, and so on. Draw some conclusions about this view of *goodness as something one does*, a kind of behavior. Ask: What sorts of rewards and punishments did you get for conformity or non-conformity to these standards?

Then write this question on another sheet of newsprint: What is the usual understanding of what it means to be “righteous”? Invite the group to list the things that come to mind. The list may include things like being good, doing good, being law abiding, exhibiting certain behaviors, being spiritual, fulfilling the law, following the ten commandments, and so on. Ask: What general conclusions can we draw from this about what being “righteous” generally means? (Hint: The answer probably touches on the belief that one becomes righteous by doing certain things or following certain rules.)

5. Being “Declared” Righteous

Discuss Genesis 15:6 and what it means to be declared righteous. Ask: There was no Law of Moses or Ten Commandments yet for Abram to follow, so what made him “righteous”? After some initial discussion, divide the group into two subgroups. Have one subgroup look at Romans 4:1–8 and the other look at Galatians 3:6–14 for insights into the above question. Bring everyone back together to share their insights.

Then discuss the relationship between “promise” and “barrenness,” that is, the difficulty in believing in a promise when all the evidence indicates the promise cannot be fulfilled. Discuss the practical implications for such faith for everyday living.

Response (10 minutes)*6. Who Can Trust? Who Can Be Trusted?*

Tell the following to the group:

Faith is not belief but trust. To have faith is to trust in someone or something. The issue in Genesis 15 is whether Abram can trust God—that is, bring himself to await God’s promised future even when present conditions make that future unlikely. Put directly, Abram faces the question of whether God can be trusted. The message of the Bible is: Humans invariably let us down; God alone remains faithful.

Then invite the participants to use the supplied materials to draw a picture or make a sculpture depicting an incident in their own lives of “promise” and “barrenness,” illustrating some dilemma of faith they had to face. Have them share their work in groups of three.

Closing (5 minutes)*7. Closing Prayer*

Pray Psalm 27:7–14 as a litany prayer. Begin with “Let us pray.” As the leader, read the first verse and have the group read the second verse. Continue reading alternate verses in this way to the end of the psalm. End with “In Jesus’ name, Amen.”

8. Assignment

Have the participants read Unit 6 and Genesis 18:1–33. Also ask them to answer these questions:

- Why did Abraham have to bargain with God regarding saving any good people in Sodom?
- Why couldn’t God have just aimed the thunderbolts better, so as to strike the guilty but leave the innocent untouched?

**Unit 6: God Visits Abraham and Sarah; Abraham's Intercession
(Genesis 18:1–33)**

Key Idea: Faith is not a reasonable act. The promise of the gospel is not a piece of conventional wisdom that suddenly makes logical sense once you understand the terms.

Advance Preparation

For your own background information, look up *hospitality* and *judgment* in a Bible dictionary or an ordinary English language dictionary.

Opening (10 minutes)

1. Prayer

Use the following prayer, one of your own, or ask one of the participants to pray:

O God, keep our minds alert and our hearts open to recognize your word and accept it. In Jesus' name. Amen.

2. Leftovers

Check to see if there are any questions or comments left over from the previous session.

Presentation (10 minutes)

3. A Dramatic Story

Ask for volunteers to read Genesis 18:1–33 dramatically. You will need the following voices: narrator, Abraham, Sarah, the visitor(s), and God.

After the reading, invite the class to respond to what they heard. Ask: What struck you? What issues stand out? What new perspective did you get?

As an alternative, you may want to try a role play of Genesis 18:1–15 in which a CNN reporter interviews Sarah about her take on the visit of the strangers and her response to the suggestion that she should have a child. (If you do this, first let the participants look over Genesis 18 and pp. 49–50 in the study book.) The reporter's questions might include things like, "How'd you like Egypt?" and "What's the deal with Hagar?" The goal here is to get at the humor and humanity of the story.

Exploration (25 minutes)

4. Hospitality

Point out that the background to this story is the ancient Near Eastern tradition of hospitality to the stranger. Have someone read aloud Matthew 25:35 and Hebrews 13:2. Then ask:

- What are the grounds for showing hospitality to strangers in this story?
- What is the prevailing attitude toward strangers in our culture? What would be a sensible or responsible hospitality for our times?
- What ways does our church display or not display hospitality? What concrete steps could our church take to improve showing hospitality in our community?

5. Sarah's Laughter

Note that one pivotal point in the story is when Sarah laughs. Ask:

- Why did Sarah laugh?
- Why is this taken as a commentary on her faith in God to keep promises?
- Should we blame her for this all too human reaction?
- What are some of the times in your own life when you laughed too soon, so to speak?
- Genesis 18:14 says, "Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?" How far does that go?

6. Bargaining with God

Read aloud Genesis 18:16–33. Then discuss the following questions:

- What is the general attitude of retribution assumed in the story of the destruction of Sodom? (Hint: People do evil; God punishes them.) Why is Abraham's questioning of God so surprising?
- Why is Abraham's suggestion—that if there are fifty good people in Sodom, God should spare the city—such a rebuff to the common understanding of God's role as punisher?
- We often hear people say that God is a God of wrath in the Old Testament and a God of mercy in the New Testament. How does this story contradict such a notion?

Response (10 minutes)

7. Corporate Judgment: The Other Side of the Coin

Tell the participants:

The assumption behind Abraham's bargaining with God appears to be that a few righteous people can hold back the judgment of God. One might ask, why didn't God just aim the thunderbolts more accurately, striking the wicked and missing the righteous? The assumption is that when God's judgment falls, it is corporate, not individual, taking the good along with the bad.

Then ask them to think of circumstances—either personal, local, or national—where this was the case. Have them share their responses with one another.

Then ask: How does this view give us hope and energize our efforts to struggle against the forces of injustice, intolerance, and oppression in our towns and cities?

Closing (5 minutes)

8. Closing Prayer

Pray Psalm 130 as a litany prayer. Begin with “Let us pray.” As the leader, read the first verse and have the group read the second verse. Continue reading alternate verses in this way to the end of the psalm. End with “In Jesus’ name, Amen.”

9. Assignment

Have the participants read Unit 7 and Genesis 22:1–19. Also ask them to consider this question: If the ram had not been caught in the thicket, what would Abraham have done?

Unit 7: The Testing of Abraham (Genesis 22:1–19)

Key Idea: “In the end, our narrative is perhaps not about Abraham being found faithful. It is about God being found faithful.”—Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis, Interpretation*, p. 194

Advance Preparation

For your own background information, look up the words *providence*, *temptation*, and *sacrifice* in a Bible dictionary or theological dictionary.

Bring paper, crayons, markers, and clay for the participants’ use in step 6.

Opening (10 minutes)

1. Prayer

Use the following prayer, one of your own, or ask one of the participants to pray:

O God, when we hear the story of the sacrifice of Isaac, sometimes we identify with Abraham, sometimes with Isaac, and sometimes with the ram caught in the thicket. Help us to remember that our society often sacrifices those unable to protect themselves. How often we pray, “The Lord will provide—only let it not be me!” In Jesus’ name, Amen.

2. Leftovers

Check to see if there are any questions or comments left over from the previous session.

Presentation (15 minutes)

3. Questions for Reflection

Have participants discuss the Questions for Reflection on p. 65 of the study book. Record their comments on newsprint.

Exploration (20 minutes)

4. What Is This Story about?

Divide the group into triads (groups of three). Ask each triad to answer the question: What is this story about? Then ask them come up with an appropriate title, such as “The Testing of Abraham,” or “The Sacrifice of Isaac,” or “You Can Always Trust God,” and so on.

Invite each triad to share their conclusions with the total group. Encourage each threesome to try to convince the others of their own conclusion.

5. *Testing and Providing*

Begin this step by asking:

- Why did God test Abraham?
- Why does God test us?
- Just what is being tested?

Have the participants consider the idea that God tests us so that God may provide for us.

Note that this story makes clear that God is both a tester and a provider—yet in the Lord’s Prayer, we pray for provisions (“Give us this day our daily bread”) but not for testing (“Lead us not into temptation”). Ask:

- Is it human nature to want the God who provides but not the one who tests?
- How might this be true in your own life?

Response (10 minutes)

6. *A Test of Faith*

Ask the participants to use the materials provided to draw a picture or sculpt a figure that illustrates a test of faith, either in their personal life or the life of the world. Have them share their work in triads.

Then ask the participants to consider the idea that God does not burden us with more than we are able to bear. Have them meditate reflectively on their artistic creation while you read aloud Romans 5:1–5.

Closing (5 minutes)

7. *Closing Prayer*

Pray together the Lord’s Prayer.

8. *Assignment*

Have the participants read Unit 8 and Genesis 28:10–22. Also ask them to consider this question: Have you ever had any dreams that changed your life?

Unit 8: Jacob's Dream at Bethel (Genesis 28:10–22)

Key Idea: The wonder, mystery, and shock in this narrative is that God is present in such a decisive way to the exiled one, binding the divine Self to this treacherous fugitive. Jacob's character leaves no doubt that the choice of Jacob as bearer of the promise was solely God's.

Advance Preparation

For your own background information, look up the words *theophany* and *emmanuel* in a Bible dictionary or theological word dictionary. Bring paper, crayons, markers, and clay for use in step 8.

Opening (10 minutes)

1. Prayer

Use the following prayer, one of your own, or ask one of the participants to pray:

O God, we who ourselves are on a journey empathize with the treachery of the exile Jacob. We are either the victims or the perpetrators of such deceit and disappointment. We give you thanks for Jesus Christ, who is the ultimate embodiment of your presence, the one against which all other appearances of God must be measured. In Christ's holy name, Amen.

2. Leftovers

Check to see if there are any questions or comments left over from the previous session.

Presentation (15 minutes)

3. Questions for Reflection

Discuss the Questions for Reflection on p. 73 of the study book.

Exploration (20 minutes)

4. An Unsavory Character

Note that there are two foci in this text: the character of the man Jacob and the promise made by God. This step begins with Jacob. Ask: What sort of a person was Jacob? Why is he about the last person one would expect to experience the immediate presence of God, let alone be chosen by God as the heir to the promise? What does the choice of this loser tell us about God?

Point out that Jacob is a man on the road. More than that, he's on the lam, fleeing his past. Ask: Who else, both literary and historical, fits this category? Are there ways that you fit it?

Then ask: How does one arrange to encounter the immediate presence of God? What can you do to bring it about? (The answer, of course, is "nothing." It just happens to you.)

5. *The Promise*

Invite the class to name the items of the promise to Jacob. List these on a sheet of newsprint. (See p. 68 of the study book for reference.)

6. *The Really Startling Thing*

Note that the study book says on p. 67:

What startles Jacob, and us, is not that God spoke, but that God chose this time to speak to one who was treacherous, deceptive, and unworthy of the speech. God is bound to Jacob. God makes outrageous and unconditional promises to a person and changes the course of history in doing so. Such is the character of God.

Discuss the ways God surprises us: coming to us in unexpected ways, through unexpected people. Invite the participants to suggest examples from history, their own lives, and the lives of people they know. Then point out the biggest surprise of all: God being born in a manger!

Then discuss sinful Jacob's response to God's appearance and promise. Since God had already made an unconditional promise to him, Jacob did not have to do anything to win God's favor. Ask: What motivated Jacob to respond the way he did, honoring God with a shrine and living his life in humility and faith (for the most part)?

7. *Good News/Bad News*

Begin by asking: What's the good news of being God's chosen people? Then ask: What's the bad news?

On a sheet of newsprint, write: "God's chosen people are chosen for . . ." and have the class make suggestions. If the following do not appear, add them:

- suffering
- witness
- being God-bearers
- testing
- showing faith
- remaining faithful even when things go bad
- suffering for the "glory of God" (not that suffering *per se* glorifies God, but faithfulness in spite of suffering does)

Discuss each of these, offering as many examples as come to mind.

Point out that being chosen to sit at the right and left hand of a human king brings prestige and position, but the story of the sons of Zebedee says something different about being a follower of Christ. Then have someone read aloud Matthew 20:20–28 and Mark 10:35–45. Note that tradition has it that they got their wish, though not the way they expected: Each was crucified for his faith.

Response (10 minutes)

8. Encountering the Holy

Read this passage from p. 71 of the study book:

Those who experience the Wholly Other are moved to a painful awareness of creatureliness in the face of tremendous mystery (see Isa. 6:5). They experience a profound sense of awe: of being simultaneously repelled by and drawn to the presence of God, dreading this power and yet fascinated by it. Finally, the experience moves them to action (see Isa. 6:8). . . . Overwhelmed by the awesomeness of the Holy One, [Jacob] cannot be merely an interested spectator. He is drawn into the holiness of God and moved toward change in his own life.

Then invite the participants to use the materials you have provided to describe, either in words or pictures or sculpture, any such experience they have had. Have them share their creations and their stories in groups of three.

Closing (5 minutes)

9. Closing Prayer

Pray Psalm 23 as a litany prayer. Begin with “Let us pray.” As the leader, read the first verse and have the group read the second verse. Continue reading alternate verses in this way to the end of the psalm. End with “In Jesus’ name, Amen.”

10. Assignment

Have the participants read Unit 9 and Genesis 32:22–32. Also ask them to consider the idea of “God-wrestling” as an apt description of adult Bible study.

Unit 9: Jacob Wrestles with God (Genesis 32:22–32)

Key Idea: Wrestling with God means refusing to give into the inevitability of things-as-they-are becoming things-as-they-must-be.

Advance Preparation

Prepare a brief review of the career of Jacob as trickster, highlighting various reasons why he should be afraid of Esau. Bring paper, crayons, markers, and clay for the participants' use.

Opening (10 minutes)

1. Prayer

Use the following prayer, one of your own, or ask one of the participants to pray:

O God, Jacob moved from being Jacob, the “trickster,” to being Israel, the “one who wrestled with God.” Give us the courage to become God-wrestlers, even if it leaves us limping. In Jesus' name, Amen.

2. Leftovers

Check to see if there are any questions or comments left over from the previous session.

Presentation (15 minutes)

3. Questions for Reflection

To get the participants into the story, review the career of Jacob as trickster. Point out the various reasons why he should be afraid of Esau.

Have someone read aloud Genesis 32:22–32. Ask: What we know for sure? What we do not know (for example, the identify of the being who wrestled with Jacob)? Record the responses on newsprint. Then have the participants turn to the Questions for Reflection on p. 81 of the study book and discuss the first three questions.

Exploration (20 minutes)

4. We Are Jacob

Point out that the study book says on p. 76, “We are Jacob.” This means at least four things:

- We have to figure out what to do with the past.
- We procrastinate.
- We strategize and justify.
- We accept things-as-they-are as the-way-things-must-be.

Invite the class to use the materials you have provided to describe in story, picture, or sculpture how these four statements apply to them. Have them share the results in groups of three.

5. *Resisting the Inevitability of the Present Situation*

Read the following analysis of Genesis 32:22–32 to the group:

Jacob's wrestling was not just a spiritual struggle between himself and God. It took place within the context of his treachery against Esau and his fear of Esau's just revenge. Jacob had to get through his guilt and fear of Esau and get to the question: "Why does it need to be this way?" For Jacob, this primary question would lead inevitably to others:

- ? "Why do I need to cheat my brother in order to make my way in the world?"
- ? "Why are we so pitted against each other?"
- ? "Why should I need to win the blessing of the first-born?"
- ? "God said I ought to win the blessing. But I ought to be a decent person! How can I do both?"

For us, the question might become: "Why are we pitted against each other for love, for money, for prestige, for power, for land, for markets?"

To wrestle with God is to wrestle with things-as-they-are. Only when he did that was Jacob able to turn the war against his brother from hate to love. When you find yourself in a situation that makes you cry out, "Why does it need to be this way?," one response is to give in to inevitability and say, "Because that's just the way things are." Another response is to say, "It doesn't have to be this way." But that requires a wrestling with self and God, with things-as-they-are. Hope lies in this direction, but it may leave you limping.

Then ask the participants to apply the analysis to the following situations:

- The struggle between the Palestinians and Israelites in the Middle East
- Current national controversies
- Current church controversies
- A situation in their own family or life.

Response (10 minutes)

6. *"Jacob" into "Israel"*

Point out that Jacob moved from "trickster" to "God-wrestler," and that his change in name reflects this change in identity. Then have participants turn a sheet of paper sideways, draw a line down the middle, and label one side "Jacob" and the other "Israel." Ask them to represent on the paper in words or pictures a situation when they were "Jacob" (unwilling to move off things-as-they-are) and one when they were "Israel" (wrestling with God until they found a new identity). Have them share their work in triads as time permits.

Closing (5 minutes)*7. Closing Prayer*

Pray Philippians as 2:1–11 as a litany prayer. Begin with “Let us pray.” As the leader, read the first verse and have the group read the second verse. Continue reading alternate verses in this way to the end of the psalm. End with “In Jesus’ name, Amen.”

8. Assignment

Have the participants read Unit 10 and Genesis 45:1–28 and 50:15–21. Also ask them to consider the question: If God can bring good out of evil intent (Gen. 50:20), why bother to try to do good?

**Unit 10: Joseph Makes Himself Known; The Reconciliation of Jacob's Sons
(Genesis 45:1–28 and 50:15–21)**

Key Idea: We have in this narrative the quintessential picture of the biblical God: active, involved, engaged, and purposeful. This view stands in sharp contrast to the philosophical view of God as abstract, removed, distant, and unaffected by human affairs.

Advance Preparation

For your own background information, look up the following terms in a Bible dictionary or theological word dictionary:

- sovereignty of God
- providence
- predestination
- foreknowledge
- free will

Bring paper, crayons, markers, and clay for the participants' use. If you have not distributed the envelopes with the promises for Sabbath keeping in a previous session (see session 1), bring them to this one.

Write the following on newsprint and post the sheet where it can be easily seen.

A Dramatic Reading of Joseph's Story

Act One: Genesis 37

- Voice 1 = reads vs. 3–4
- Voice 2 = reads vs. 5–8
- Voice 3 = reads vs. 19–20
- Voice 4 = reads vs. 21–22
- Voice 5 = reads v. 27
- Voice 6 = reads vs. 31–32
- Voice 7 = reads v. 34
- Voice 8 = reads v. 36

Act Two: Genesis 41

- Voice 1 = reads vs. 53–57

Act Three: Genesis 44

- Voice 1 = reads v. 12 and v. 17
- Voice 2 = reads vs. 33–34

Opening (10 minutes)

1. Prayer

Use the following prayer, one of your own, or ask one of the participants to pray:

O God, faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Our Lord said, “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted.” Give us courage to live lives of faith, sure in the conviction of your watchful presence even when your exact purpose is hidden from us. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

2. Leftovers

Check to see if there are any questions or comments left over from the previous session.

Presentation (15 minutes)

3. *Look What They Did to Him: A Dramatic Reading*

Explain to the participants that the Joseph narrative is long and complex, and that you are going to set the stage for this session’s scripture passage through a dramatic reading in three acts. Post the newsprint you prepared ahead of time.

Then divide the class into three groups, and assign each group one of the acts. Note that Act One requires eight voices, but a person may read more than one part. Act Two requires one voice, and Act Three requires two voices. Give the groups a few minutes to read over the scripture passages and to decide who will do which part.

Announce Act One. Have members of the first group read the assigned verses. Then announce Act Two. Have a member of the second group read those verses. Announce Act Three. Have two members of the third group read their assigned verses.

Give people a few moments to respond to the story thus far. Then ask the following questions:

- What do you think about Joseph’s character?
- What does this continuing theme in Genesis of war between brothers say about human life?
- Did God *make* the brothers do what they did?
- What do *you* know that the characters in the story do not?

Exploration (20 minutes)

4. God's Story

Divide the group into groups of three, and have everyone turn to Genesis 45:4–13. Ask the participants to discuss the answers to these questions in their small groups:

- Why is this not merely a compelling story of family dysfunction and reconciliation?
- What is the view of history presented here?
- When in the process do the participants figure out that God is at work in their events? How do they know? (Note that in this narrative there are no direct conversations with God as in previous Genesis stories).
- If the hand of God is not apparent to us all along, how are we to live? How is one to know what God is trying to do? In this regard, consider the words of Gamaliel in Acts 5:27–39, especially vs. 38–39.
- The study book says on p. 86 that God's will (and sovereignty) does not compel; it invites. We obviously do resist God's will at times. Why is that, and how is it possible?
- Joseph draws the conclusion in Genesis 45:8, "So it was not you who sent me here but God." What do you think about that?

5. Forgiveness

Point out that Genesis 50:15–21 is about forgiveness. Then invite the participants to use the materials you have provided to describe—in words, pictures, or sculpture—historic, national, or personal acts that call for forgiveness. Have them share their work in groups of three.

Response (10 minutes)

6. Reviewing and Recapping

Review the ground covered in this course. Invite people to comment on their experience and to share surprises, insights, or questions.

If you have not done so in a previous session, distribute the envelopes with the promises for Sabbath keeping that were created in the first session.

Closing (5 minutes)

7. Closing Prayer

Pray Psalm 33 as a litany prayer. Begin with "Let us pray." As the leader, read the first verse and have the group read the second verse. Continue reading alternate verses in this way to the end of the psalm. End with "In Jesus' name, Amen."