

“Let’s start at the very beginning, a very good place to start.”<sup>1</sup> Superb advice from one of the most famous movie songs of all time. Fitting...Genesis means “beginning.” Some more advice, this time from the person who wrote half of the books in the New Testament. As a Christian, I would advise to start reading the Bible at the beginning of the book of *John*, because that starts with Jesus, who existed in the beginning of time, and through whom all things were created. From there you will be introduced to God the Father and the Holy Spirit. From that viewpoint, the Old Testament is a revealing of God the Father, Jesus, and Holy Spirit through the history of the ancient Jewish people.

As you read the New Testament, you might notice we writers seldom reference the first ten chapters of Genesis unless we use them to support the fact that Jesus is the Messiah, and all that follows from that fact. When we do reference the first ten chapters of Genesis, we accept them at face value to be true.

You may remember I was also a Jewish scholar. As a Jew, I would advise to start reading the Bible at the beginning of *Genesis*, because that book starts with the beginning of the creation of all material things. From there you will immediately be introduced to God and his Spirit. From this viewpoint, the Old Testament is primarily a revealing of God and his nature, and the history of the ancient Jewish people.

What *Genesis* said about physical creation and history made sense to the Jews of my time, so we had no reason to question any of it. Scholars, priests, common folks. We all accepted the Scriptures to be sacred and true. Things existed, so they must have been created. We were where we were, so history must have progressed in a reasonable manner from creation to get us to that point. God is all-powerful, so he must have been the creator and directed history to get us to where we were. Our oral and written records confirmed not only our beliefs, but what made sense to us.

All of our Jewish worldview begins with the first sentence of Genesis, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” God exists, God is all powerful, God created everything so he owns everything, God exists outside of time and physical constraints, God is in control. For his own reasons, God chose to create the heavens and the earth...and mankind.

God exists, God is all powerful, God created everything, God is in control. It’s about God, how could I ever forget that? You don’t, do you?

<sup>1</sup> The first two lines of “Do-Re-Mi”, sung by Julie Andrews in the *Sound of Music*

Imagine the earth in complete darkness. Giant oceans in disorder, the Spirit of God hovering above. Darkness. Seemingly never to end.

Darkness. Let ...there...be...light. With one thought, one breath, a few words, God creates light! Light! No big fanfare, there is...light. Because God wants it to exist.

Night and day. Sky and water. Seas and dry land. Vegetation, plants and trees. Time. Sun and moon. Birds, sea creatures, fish, wild animals and livestock. All these things, God creates.

God creates something out of nothing. Order out of chaos. Beyond comprehension. And, you know what? It is good. God says all of those things are good. How is that for a modest God? Good? That's it...good?

Yes, good. Because what comes next is better. God says his next creation is not just good, but it is very good! It is so good that God entrusts the rest of his creation to it.

After God creates almost everything on earth, he creates the first man, Adam, from the dust of the earth. God breathes his life force into Adam, and he becomes living being. God places Adam in a very special garden, the garden in Eden. You might not be so impressed with a garden that is watered by four rivers and has all kinds of trees with everlasting amounts of fruit. We people who grow up in deserts with scarcity of food are truly envious of Adam and appreciate why he would never want to mess up his good deal by disobeying the one command God gives him...not to eat the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Things were so good for Adam that he never knew he was alone, but God knew it. God knew that it was not good for Adam to be alone. God caused Adam to fall into a deep sleep, took one of his ribs, and made a woman from the rib. God brought the woman to Adam, and he named her "woman" since she was taken out of him. He did not name her Eve until much later. Both the man and woman were made in the likeness of God.

From that time on, Adam knew he would not be complete unless he was with Eve. He was incomplete without his rib. They were so close that they are described as being one flesh, completely inseparable. Well, almost inseparable. Their downfall started when they were separated.

The serpent came to Eve and tricked her into taking the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. She ate the fruit and gave some to Adam for him to eat. Their eyes were opened to their nakedness, and they made clothes to cover themselves.

Of course, it wasn't long before God found that they had broken his command. Adam blamed Eve, and Eve blamed the serpent. After making them clothes, God kicked Adam and Eve out of the Garden...forever. Before doing so, God placed curses on them and the serpent.

The serpent was cursed to crawl on his belly, and to be enemies with the descendants of Eve from that point forward. Eve was cursed to have painful childbirths, and to be ruled over by her husband. Adam was cursed to have painful toil while trying to make a living. Prior to that time, working in the garden was a pleasure. Adam was also cursed to have a lifespan...and then, die and return to the dust of the earth.

God made them clothes. He knew they must not be allowed to eat from the tree of life, so God drove Adam and Eve from the garden... forever.

New Testament writers did not refer very much to the first ten chapters of Genesis. I did refer to this incident of Adam and Eve's disobedience a few times. I mentioned that Eve was the one who was deceived and became a sinner, but women will be saved through childbearing if they continue in faith, love and holiness.<sup>2</sup> I wrote that sin entered the world through Adam, death entered through sin, and Adam is a pattern for Jesus.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, I wrote that in Adam all die, through Christ all will be made alive.<sup>4</sup>

Can't you imagine Eve's surprise when her belly started getting bigger and bigger and bigger. First time in the history of mankind that had happened. Then, with a whole lot of pain, she had a baby...a little man she named Cain. Later, she had a second little man, and named him Abel. Cain, the oldest son, worked as a farmer. Abel was a shepherd. Both Cain and Abel brought some of the fruits of their labor as offerings to God. We are not told why, but God was pleased with Abel's animal offering, but not Cain's grain offering. Might have been the type of offering, might have been their attitudes, might have been something else.

In a classic case of blame transferal, Cain attacked his brother and killed him. When God confronted Cain by asking where his brother was, Cain responded with the infamous line, "Am I my brother's keeper?" God placed a curse on Cain that kept him from being a farmer, and forced him be a wanderer. Cain was worried about other people hurting him, so God placed a mark on Cain that acted as a sign of protection from other people.

It's remarkable that Cain was more worried about other people harming him than he was having to leave the presence of God. Well, I guess it's not that remarkable. People throughout the ages have been more concerned about their present circumstances than enjoying the presence of God.

Where did these other people come from? I don't know, and nobody else does either. It is one of the mysteries of *Genesis*. Where did Cain get his wife? I don't know, but he did get one.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Timothy 2:14

<sup>3</sup> Romans 5:12-14

<sup>4</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:22, 45

Five generations after Cain, a son named Lamech was born. Lamech had two wives and three famous sons. Lamech bragged to his wives that he had killed a man for wounding him, a young man had injured him so he murdered him. He said he had avenged himself seventy-seven times. I wonder if that was where Jesus got the idea that we should forgive people seventy-seven times?<sup>5</sup>

Adam and his close descendants lived very long lives. Adam lived 930 years and had many sons and daughters. Adam's son, Seth, lived 912 years. Methuselah lived 969 years, the oldest of all of them.

I skipped over one passage that I should go back to. Genesis 4:25-26 says that Adam and Eve had a son named, Seth. Seth had a son named Enosh. During that time, "people began to call on the name of the Lord." Through the ages, scholars have argued over the exact meaning of that phrase. I don't have a final answer, but it is clear that the people of that time knew about the Lord, and his presence was near enough to them that they called on his name. They were not ignorant of the Lord.

The people had no excuse to become completely wicked. Wicked enough that God regretted having made human beings. From creation to regret. What would God do about that? Plenty, but that is a story for someone else to tell.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 18:22

Who was Noah's oldest son? Let's see, most of the time the three sons are listed as Shem, Ham and Japheth, right? Typically, lists like this are done in birth order, so Shem must be the eldest, right? Nope.

It takes a little detective work, but you can determine that Japheth was the oldest.<sup>1</sup> Shem was second, and Ham was the youngest.<sup>2</sup> This order is confirmed by the order of the table of nations in Genesis 10, where I am listed first. Me, Japheth, yes, I'm the firstborn son of Noah. I'm not one of those birth order crazies, but in our case, birth order is important.

And we're bonus babies. You know, babies born to parents well after they think they will never have another child. My brothers and I are big-time bonus babies. All born when our father was more than 500 years old!<sup>3</sup>

Dad is rather well known even in your time. Noah, maybe you've heard of him? He is a farmer and a preacher by profession, but you know him better as a boat-builder.<sup>4</sup> Reputation justified; there is no record that his preaching did any good to anybody outside of our family. He must have done something right though, because he found favor in God's eyes.

East Saint Louis, one of the most dangerous neighborhoods in the US. Relatively gentle compared to some cities in other countries, however. And these... no worse than my neighborhood. They have gangs, we had Nephilim.

During my time, the sons of God saw the daughters of humans were beautiful, and they married the ones they chose. Their offspring were The Nephilim. Certainly, this brings up loads of questions for modern readers but just know, it was bad. How bad? The Lord saw the wickedness of people was so bad that all inclinations of their hearts were *only* evil *all* the time. The earth was filled with violence. It was so bad that the Lord regretted that he had made human beings. He was so troubled that he said he would wipe out the human race and all land creatures.

<sup>1</sup> Genesis 10:21. However, some translations can be interpreted that Japheth is not the oldest.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 9:24

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 5:32

<sup>4</sup> 2 Peter 2:5

My father was a righteous man. He walked faithfully with God. I'm not saying he was perfect, but he had a faultless reputation among his people. God came to him and said that he was going to wipe out all the people and the earth. However, he would have mercy on my father and our family.

God said he was going to bring floodwaters to destroy every living creature on the land. Wait a minute, you might say. I thought it was rain that caused the flood. Well, at the time God first told my father, he talked only of floodwaters. You see, we understood floodwaters, but there is no Biblical record we even knew about such a thing as rain.

God's salvation plan for our family was for us to build a big boat that would hold not only our family but representative animals of every kind. How big of a boat? About 450 feet long, 75 feet wide, and 45 feet high. About the square footage of half of a football stadium, and a height of more than four stories.

The Bible does not specify when Noah started building the Ark, but based on the fact that all of his sons were to have wives, and we were born 100 years before the flood, you can guess that Noah built the ark for maybe fifty or more years.

Here, let me set the scene for you. A five hundred and fifty year-old man building an humungous boat in the middle of nowhere. The toughest people in the world walking by and making fun of him. The old man preaching to them between his hammer and axe swings. His old wife bringing him food from time to time. His three sons and their wives vacillating between helping him and hiding their faces from their friends. Every day. For decades.

Dad was tougher than anybody who came by. He never wavered. He never quit preaching. He never quit working. My father completely believed God. He knew the stakes were high for his family. What a man!

Over the decades, the boat began to take shape. Three decks, with rooms on each deck. Coated with tar inside and out. It had a roof, one small window, and a door on the side. Storage rooms and eating troughs and mangers.

One day, we got the message from God to start gathering food, both for us and the animals, and put it on the boat. Soon, animals started showing up. Animals of every kind. Many types had never been seen by any of us. The more animals that arrived, the more scared our neighbors became. God did not allow any of animals to be harmed by the neighbors. Maybe that Noah guy isn't so crazy after all. But they weren't too worried, there still wasn't any water. Smelly, yes. Noisy, yes. Floods, no.

When my father turned six hundred years-old, God instructed the eight of us to go into the boat with seven pairs of some types of animals and birds, and one pair of other types of animals. It took seven days for us to get everything loaded and onboard. When the last animal walked onto the boat, God closed the door and sealed us in. We were good to go.

Imagine us in the boat. Suspense levels pegged. We realize we have no sails or rudders. We are completely at God's mercy. We have no control. We sit in the darkness and quiet. My father prays and prays. Nothing happens. Dead quiet. Nothing happens. Nothing.

Is that a scratching sound? A rattling sound? Rain?! So that's what rain sounds like. Louder and louder, the rain pounds the boat from every direction. The flood waters slap against the bottom of the boat. After a few hours, a different kind of pounding. Dad bursts into tears. The neighbors! Our neighbors are drowning, they are finally ready to believe him. Frantic to enter the ark and get salvation. Too late. We can do nothing. Screams fade, and the boat shudders as it lifts off the ground.

The springs of the deep and the floodgates of the heavens were opened by the Lord. For forty days the flood increased. The waters rose until they covered the highest mountains by more than twenty-five feet. Every living thing that lived on the earth died. Every. Single. Thing.... except those of us on the ark.

We floated for one hundred and fifty days. God shut off the springs and flood gates of heaven. He sent a wind to drive back the waters. We landed on the mountains of Ararat, and the waters continued to recede.

After forty days, Noah opened the window and sent out a raven. It couldn't find a place to land, it came back. Days later, Noah sent a dove, but it returned, too. He waited another seven days and sent the dove again. The dove returned, an olive branch in its beak! We knew the waters had greatly receded. A week later, Noah sent out the dove, it did not return.

Later, when the land was completely dry, God commanded us to leave the ark with all the animals. We did, with instructions for all of us to be fruitful and multiply. Noah sacrificed a few of the birds and animals, which pleased the Lord.

The Lord gave us dominion over the animals but instructed us not to eat any animals with blood still in them. We were also instructed not to take the life of humans because we are made in the image of God.

God gave us an unconditional, one-sided promise. He gave his promise to all humans and animals. He said he would never again destroy all life with flood waters. As a sign of this promise, he placed a rainbow in the sky. Every time we see a rainbow, we remember that promise.

Ok, all the evil people were gone. Time for a fresh start. We messed up pretty quickly. No sooner had we gotten off the boat than my father planted a vineyard. At the first harvest he got drunk and passed out naked. My youngest brother saw him, and made fun of him in front of me and my brother, Shem. Shem and I honored our father, we averted our eyes and covered him with a garment.

When our father found out what his youngest son had done, he placed a vicious curse on Ham. He pronounced that Ham's descendants through one of his sons would be the slaves of my descendants and Shem's descendants, and that my territory would be enlarged.

My father lived 350 years more after the flood, and died at the age of 950 years. You can't even begin to imagine the stories grandpa told his grandsons and great grand sons and great great grandsons, and then they told their sons, grandsons and great grandsons.

What happened to the three sons of Noah? All people on earth were our descendants. I had seven sons, and they had many sons. The maritime peoples came from my family.

Shem's family became known as Semites. He had five sons. Many nations came from his descendants, including the Israelite nation from Abraham. And this was why Shem was typically listed first in the order of sons. The Bible was written by the Israelites, who came from Abraham, who came from Shem.

Ham had four sons. His grandson Nimrod was a mighty hunter and the creator of many of the early civilizations, such as Babylon and Uruk, Akkad and Ninevah. The Philistines and Canaanites were descendants of Ham. Those descendants would become mortal enemies of the Israelites, descendants of Shem.

So, there you have it, one of the most famous stories of the Bible. But hundreds of ancient civilizations had flood myths and stories? That's what you're thinking. Some of you, anyway. Of course, they did. And where did those civilizations come from? They are descendants of my brothers and me. The flood story was passed down, on and on, told to our children and all of their descendants. Lots of stories, one flood.



I'm about to tell you some things about myself that will probably mess with your tidy little theological picture. Of course, you can avoid any uncomfortable thinking by assuming that the book of *Job* is just poetry. In fact, I recommend you do just that. After all, you don't want to suffer any mental strain or discomfort, do you?

You see, your finest scholars know very little about the book of *Job*, so how important can it be? The first line of the book says that its story takes place in the land of Uz. Uz? What kind of name is that? Sounds like a bad cough... Your best scholars don't have a clue where that land is located, or if such a land ever existed.

That probably leads you to conclude that the story is very old, maybe in a time long before Abraham. Don't waste your time trying to figure it out. Nobody knows when the story took place. Some of your researchers did make this observation... since Job had camels, the story took place in a time and place after camels were domesticated. That's a great clue. Even if that is right, it just points to Asia, the Middle East, and northern Africa after 3000 BC. Now that really pins it down!

And the people in the story! Who really believes that those characters really existed? There are no records that they did exist outside of the Bible. You don't know where, you don't know when, you don't know if the people existed! Seems to me like a total waste of time for you to learn about something that clearly needs more vetting; the book of *Job*.

Ok, I can't resist it. My pride is making me tell you my favorite story about myself. I know, I know, you think pride comes before the fall. Not so in my case... I've already fallen.

Back to the land of Uz, wherever that is. A man named Job lived in the land of Uz. This man was blameless, he was as righteous as a man could get. He revered God and shunned evil. Boring. How boring that Job was. He shunned evil, shunned me.

This Job was some kind of rich by any measure. He had seven sons and three daughters. He owned seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, a thousand oxen, and five hundred donkeys. He had a large number of slaves and servants. That dude was rich, richest man there was. And respected! Everybody respected him.

Now, many rich men have had messed up families, but not Job. His kids loved one another and loved to have big parties. Did I mention Job was a fanatic? He was so fanatical that after one of their parties he would sacrifice to God on their behalf just in the off chance that one of them

had sinned and cursed God. It was his regular custom. Fanatic! I hate people who have it all together.

Now, time to mess with your theology. If you don't believe this next part, look it up. Job Chapters One and Two. You will find it there.

One day the angels come before the Lord, and I come with them. The Lord says to me, "Where have you come from?" Get that? The Lord and I have a conversation... maybe not like best buddies, but certainly face to face. I am in the Lord's presence and I certainly am not pure or sinless or anything like that.

"Here and there, roaming all over the Earth," I answer, setting a little trap.

Falling into my trap, God says, "Did you notice my servant Job? He is so special, nobody like him. Blameless and righteous. Fears me, shuns evil."

"Of course he is. You protect him and his family from everything. He is crazy rich and has an amazing family. It's great to be Job...but...take away everything he has and he will surely curse you to your face."

Trap Sprung. I love it when I put God in a no-win situation. Doesn't happen often, but I sure do it this time.

God says, "OK, it is within your power to take everything except his health."

So, what do you think about that? Without hesitation God allows me to harm his precious little Job, and his family. What kind of loving God is that?

In my long, long life, I don't think I ever had so much fun as what came next. I planned, and planned how to take Job's stuff. All of it.

I waited until his precious children were having a party at the house of the oldest son. Then, BAM! I had the vicious Sabeans attack and take all of the oxen and donkeys, and kill the nearby servants. I had fire come down from the sky, so it would look like it came from God. It burned those sheep into little crispy critters, and killed the servants as well. I sent the crazy Chaldeans in three raiding parties to steal the camels and kill those servants. All his stuff, right? Not yet!

I sent a mighty wind from the desert that caused the house to collapse on Job's children. Dead. All of them...and the servants. Delicious! Everything Job had...gone. But that's not the best part.

With every horrible event, I allowed one servant to survive. They rushed, one-by-one to tell Job. I made sure they arrived one after the other. In forty-two seconds, they told Job what had happened. Now that was fun!

All those innocent children and servants, killed for no reason.

Job got up and tore his robe, and shaved his head. I expected him to cut his throat, too. But no....he fell to his knees and worshiped the Lord. He said the craziest things: "I came to this world naked, and I will depart the same way. The Lord gave and the Lord took away. Praise the name of the Lord." In all this, he did not sin by blaming God. And, after God allowed me to do that to him!

A few heavenly days later, the angels and I come to present ourselves to the Lord again. Like old friends, God asks me where I've been. Same answer, same trap set. Same response from God about Job...but God adds, "Job still maintains his integrity, although you incited me against him to ruin him without reason."

Oh, I have a reason, but Job surely could not know that.

I tell God, "The stuff was nothing, really. Life, that's what's important. Take that away, and he will curse you to your face."

Falling into my trap again...I think...God says, "Job is in your hands, but you must not kill him."

Kill him? No way. I will make him suffer more than any man has ever suffered. That will surely cause Job to curse God.

How to make Job bodily suffer? In your wildest dreams, you cannot imagine what I imagined. So, here is what I settled on...cover him with excruciating sores and boils from the soles of his feet to the top of his head. Start with that, and then watch him get worse with time. His skin will rot, his breath will stink.

Nobody will want to be around him. He will be banished from society, banished to live with the crazy people in the garbage dump, lose every bit of self-respect and dignity he ever had.<sup>1</sup>

I will make sure he loses everything... everything. Except one thing. His wife.

<sup>1</sup> Various verses throughout the book show that all of these things happened to Job.

I wanted to go to my tent and kill myself. But I couldn't. We had lost everything. We had no tent. We didn't even have a knife that I could use to slash my miserable throat.

A few months ago, my husband and I were the richest people within hundreds of miles. We had more sheep, camels, oxen and donkeys than we could keep track of. In our world, wealth was measured in livestock, not gold. We were fabulously wealthy.

But not just wealthy in livestock, but in family. We had three daughters and seven sons. Every family member loved one another. Every family member was healthy. Every family member worshiped God.

Then...gone. Everything, gone. My husband and I lost everything. My husband continued to faithfully worship God. Through it all, I admit that I grieved with all my heart, but I followed my husband's example and worshiped God. Well, I tried to worship through my tears and doubts.

People that once feared us, now jeered at us. People who were jealous of us, now laughed at our distress and poverty. People who were once our friends, abandoned us. There was no way it could get worse. And then it did.

My husband broke out in the most painful sores imaginable all over his body. I mean from the soles of his feet to the top of his head. He could not sleep, he could not find any comfortable position to sit or lie down. When he tried to eat or use the bathroom, he screamed in agony and pain. Living torture.

The man I loved more than my own life...suffering. I wanted him to die so he could have relief. I begged him to curse God in hopes that God would take his life. And take it all away. After all, if God punished him like this when Job was righteous, surely he would kill him when he wasn't righteous. I begged... begged.

No. Job would have none of that. He just said, "You are talking foolishly. Should we just accept the good from God, and not trouble?" He still refused to accuse God. He did not sin in his response.

Day after day, Job sat in the dust and ashes, and scraped his sores with broken pieces of pottery that we found on the ground. It seemed to me that the more he scraped, the worse his sores got. But it gave him something to do while he contemplated on what had happened to us.

Before I continue the book of *Job*, let me acknowledge that I mostly drop out of the story from here. It is mentioned once more that I am alive, and I am an important, although unnamed, person at the end of the book. However, what I am about to tell you about myself is conjecture based on a few clues in the book of *Job*.

As much as Job suffered for what happened to him, I know he suffered more because the same disasters had happened to me. He loved me more than he loved himself. It broke his heart to know my heart was broken.

In spite of all the disasters that had happened, Job and I loved and trusted each other deeply. Together we tried to understand why things had turned out the way they had. We had deep discussions... whenever Job could talk through his pain.

Had one of us sinned so badly that God was punishing us? We were sure that we had not. But we also had to admit that we had not been righteous enough for God to have previously been so generous with us. Perhaps behavior was not the complete basis for how God treated people? But if that was not the basis, what was it? We could not fathom what it could be.

Perhaps one of our children had sinned badly, but we could not believe that God would punish us for someone else's actions, even if it was one of our children.

In the end, we were baffled. We realized we did not have nearly enough information about God to understand what was going on. And we had no idea how to get more information about him. We so wished we could talk to God and ask him about himself? How would that have been? A couple of beggars in a garbage dump talking face -to-face with God Almighty.

Now, back to the book of *Job*... from a distance, a large dust cloud. Slowly moving our way. Not a dust devil. Eventually we saw a large retinue moving our way. Moving toward our garbage dump on purpose.

From a long way away, I began to recognize former friends of ours riding on camels with their servants behind. I ran to them and stopped them as far away as possible. I did not want for my husband to be completely humiliated or them to be embarrassed.

They explained how they had heard about our troubles and came to see what they could do. They asked where Job was, I pointed to him. They could hardly recognize him. They were so sad that they wept, tore their robes, and sprinkled dust on their heads. Soon, they looked almost like my husband.

Leaving the servants at a distance, we walked to Job. I walked away, and they sat on the ground with him. For the next seven days and nights none of them said a word, because Job's suffering was so intense. Once a day, their servants brought a little food and water, but even then they did not speak.

Can you even begin to comprehend having three friends who love and treasure you that much? They traveled from a far distance, and rather than seeking rest for themselves, they did all they could to be sensitive to Job. It was a demonstration of respect and love that astounded all of us who saw it.

I believe they would have sat in silence another week, but my husband broke the silence to speak. Through his cracked lips and parched throat, the words, barely recognizable. And they were not words of welcome to these precious friends. No, he cursed the day he was born.

I understand you modern people have a phrase to use when you threaten or warn somebody... "She will wish she had never been born." Well, that phrase probably came from my husband's curse. He wished he had never been born. Never married. Never had children. Never known God.

He wished that day had never existed. And if it did exist, that he had died at birth. That no mother had been there to nourish him. Then in his death, he would be asleep and at rest with the formerly wealthy of the world.

At death, even the wicked and slaves enjoy their rest. All are free from their earthly burdens. Job says he yearns to be dead, but death will not come for him. His life consists of moans, and groans. He has no peace, no quietness, no rest. What he fears has come upon him.

I couldn't bear it anymore. I break down, inside and out. My husband is a broken man, and I can take no more. Then, I find that my husband is NOT a broken man, and I can take a LOT more.

Job:

My theology was perfect... A few months ago. It was tidy, buttoned-up, and irrefutable. It matched that of my close friends. All of us were rich, all of us were sure that we were right. In fact, my theology matched that of many, many people throughout the centuries... and many, many, *many* people of your day.

The nice thing about my theology was its simplicity. It exactly matched my life experience. And, that was its final proof of being right. It matched my experience and the experience of my friends.

Here was my entire theology in a nutshell: God blesses the righteous, and God punishes those who do wrong. So, if you are rich, you must be righteous. The richer you are, the more righteous you must be. If you are poor, you must have done something wrong. The poorer you are, the worse your deeds must have been. If you've done something wrong, you might fix it quickly by making a sacrifice to God.

How about that? It might sound silly to you, but I bet you've believed that same theology, at some point in your life, maybe even now? Especially if you happen to be rich in money or family or health. Rich people tend to like this theology. And by rich, keep in mind that on a world scale, less than 3% of the American population is considered poor.

I was the perfect example of this rich is blessed theology being... correct. I was the most righteous man in the world. Really. Even God said so. And I was the richest man in my known world. Really. The one data point that I was absolutely sure of aligned with my theology. God rewards the righteous and punishes those who do wrong.

Forty-two seconds! My bulletproof theology was shot down in less than a minute! Forty-two seconds was the amount of time it took four messengers to deliver the news that I had lost everything dear to me, except my wife and health. And, I lost my health soon after that.

This is how I knew, beyond a shadow of doubt, that my theology must have been wrong. I had not changed one iota of my behavior! Nothing I did caused my blessings to turn to calamity. I didn't know where my theology had gone wrong, but I absolutely knew one thing...it was wrong. I didn't know what theology was right, but I did know mine had a flaw. Or at least, it was so incomplete as to be wrong.

Therein was my big problem. If my theology was wrong, and I didn't know what was right, how could I fix my problems? And I really wanted my problems fixed. My wife and I were destitute, I was in debilitating pain, and all of my children were dead. I wished I had never been born.

Then, my three best friends showed up. I expressed that same sentiment to them. They could take one look at me and know that my wish was an expression of truthfulness. I wished I had never been born. In their love for me, they tried their best to help me. The big, big problem? Their view of the world was one I knew to be wrong. My friends Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. Wrong. All wrong.

You should read my book. The book of Job Chapters Four through Thirty-One to enjoy possibly the most eloquent debate in history, but I will give it to you in a summary fashion.<sup>1</sup>

Eliphaz: Obviously, you've done something terrible.

Me: No, I have not.

Bildad: Yes, you must have!

Me: No, I did not.

Zophar: Clearly, you have.

Me: Clearly to me, I have not.

Eliphaz: Of course, you have!

Me: Of course, I have not.

Bildad: Don't be silly. You've done something awful.

Me: Nope.

Zophar: There is no other possible explanation.

Me: I don't know what it is, but there must be another explanation.

Eliphaz: This is ridiculous. You obviously have done something wrong!

Me: It is ridiculous that you keep insisting I have. I know I have not.

Bildad: We can't reason with you. You are impossible.

Me: In the most articulate way possible, I'm telling you that I did not do anything wrong.

As you can imagine, the repetitive dialogue came to an end. They thought they were right, because they could not imagine they could be wrong. And, they thought I was righteous in my own eyes, but not in reality.

<sup>1</sup> Taken from *Notes on Job*, by Scott L. Johnson



While we were talking, our young friend Elihu showed up. The more he heard our dialogue, the more frustrated he became. He knew I was wrong, but my three friends had been incapable of refuting my position. So, with the multitude of words and certainty of youth, Elihu tried to refute my position. As you can guess, he made a mess of it. Like my three friends, a lot of what he said was true, but there was a hidden flaw in his thought process.

We sat in absolute silence and frustration. They could not imagine how I could refuse to accept their point of view. In their minds, their wealth and health proved that they were wiser and more righteous than me. In my mind, their wealth and health made them so prideful that they could not see the possibility they could be wrong.

I knew they were wrong, but I did not have a solution to my distress. They felt so sorry for me, and I felt so sorry for them. And...I felt sorry for me. And for my wife.

Satan:

The Bible does not say what I am doing while all this is going on. But...you can imagine that I am gloating and planning, practically celebrating. Job is almost ready to give up on God. I can sense it. I am about to win my contest with God!

Job's friends played right into my hands. They won't be able to convince Job that he is wrong, but I believe they will be able to inject doubt into his mind. Once the doubt starts, it won't be too long before it grows; he begins to doubt his faith in God. Blaming God will be only one small step away.

I know that I will win from here because Job and his friends are asking the wrong question for the wrong reason. And, nobody is there to point that out to them. They think that if they understand the reasons why Job has misfortune that they can easily fix it. That is wishful thinking and an unrealistic belief in how much control they have!

And, they think there is a *simple* reason for why Job has had these tragic things happen to him. They have to believe there is a *simple* reason, otherwise it is unlikely they can fix the problem, and they all want the problem fixed.

But, the problem of pain and suffering is not simple. I've got more fingers than you, and I don't have enough fingers to count all the many causes of pain and suffering. Let's see, there is (brightens up) me! People cause their own pain and suffering more often than they know. Other people cause it. It's the nature of life as God has designed it. Where you are born, your family, your community, relationships, those sorts of things. Aging. Disease. Natural disasters. There are so many causes that it's actually pretty amazing that there is not more pain and suffering in the world.

And then there is the big one that nobody wants to admit. Sometimes God allows pain and suffering to occur for reasons known only to him. Might be for someone's good, someone else's

good. And my least favorite, the one humans just cannot grasp; so God will be glorified through the pain and suffering.

In fact, this whole experience with Job has taught me something. I can use pain and suffering to keep people from glorifying God! Doubt him! Blame him! Why didn't I think of that before?

Just a few more hours, and I will show God how Job blames God for all his troubles. Job blaming God. Nothing can derail this from happening. I am in complete control.

Job:

“And then God showed up.” Have you heard people say this before? Because they say it a lot. Things were in a mess, “and then God showed up.” I lost my job, “and then God showed up.” You should have been with me when God showed up.

I was sitting on the ground with my four friends, just sitting, in complete frustration. We’d been sitting for more than a week. We were tired, hungry, and... we stank. I was in such relentless pain ...I can’t even describe it. We were at a total loss of how to talk to one another, and then God showed up.

Out of a storm, God spoke to me. Me. I was going to get my chance to talk to God. Unbelievable. To explain to him that I had done nothing wrong, and get all of my pain and suffering to go away. At least, that is what I thought for a brief moment.

With God’s first words, I realized that one of my worst fears was true. I was trying to analyze my problems but I was unable to do so, because... I was absolutely lacking in knowledge. I had no knowledge of how the world worked or the nature of God who controls the whole world. I had no knowledge, and I had no understanding.

“Who is this that questions me by words without knowledge? Put on your protective gear like a real man, and answer me. (sarcastically) I’ll ask you questions and you instruct me!

“Where were you when I laid Earth’s foundations, who determined how big it should be, and what does its foundations rest on? Tell me, if you know and have understanding!”

I cringed. And that was just a few sentences in. I began to have an inkling of how big God is, and how small I am. But God didn’t even slow down. He wanted to leave an understanding with me that I could share with people of all ages.

“Where were you when the morning stars sang together?

“Who told the sea where to have its borders, or its waves to stop?”

“Since you were born, did you ever start a day by causing the dawn?

“Have you explored the springs at the bottom of the sea or walked on its bottom?”

“Have you seen the gates of death?”

“Where do light and darkness live, and how do you get there?”

“Have you seen my storehouses of hail that I reserve for times of trouble?”

“Does rain have a father, or ice a mother?”

“Who sends food to lions and ravens? Do you know all the ways of all the wild animals?”

“If you want to contend and argue with me, answer!”

Ok, what could I say? What would you say? “Lord, I am so small. I have no answers.” I was hoping God would just forgive me and move on. But he had to make certain I got it.

“Will you condemn me so that you appear right? Do you have strength and power like me? Can you bring down the wicked and destroy them?”

“Can you control the behemoth, or catch the leviathan with a fishhook? Will the leviathan follow your every command, and play with you like a pet?”

God did not stop. He went on and on. With every word, his great power washed over me, and my great weakness.

So, I confessed and repented. The only proper response to God. “I know that you can do all things, and none of your purposes will be thwarted. I said things which I did not understand, but now I see you. I despise myself and repent.”

Now, I’m not saying it all came clear to me, but you can tell from my response one thing – once I understood the awesomeness of God, I knew all things are about him, and not about me.

God turned his attention to Eliphaz. He told Eliphaz how angry he was with him for speaking incorrectly of God. He instructed him and the others to take seven bulls and rams and offer them as a burnt sacrifice, and that I was to pray for them. He agreed to accept my prayer, and he did. Through all this he justified my heart by saying that I had spoken correctly about him.

I was in unspeakable pain, still, but I did not ask him to take it away from me. I figured that he still had a reason for me to be that way. Perhaps, the reason was so that my rich friends could ponder on the question of how I could be righteous, but still not have health or wealth. Maybe it was so they could wonder how they would react if they lost all they had.

I will end my story here. God did not tell me why I lost everything, but he also did not tell me why I had been given everything in the first place. I never learned how God makes his decisions,

but I did learn to trust him no matter what decisions he makes. He showed up, and I will worship him for who he is.

Job's Wife:

Job prayed for his three friends, they gathered up their possessions and went back to their homes. They came to bring comfort and restoration to Job, but they also received great blessings by learning about God and having a new worldview.

That night, Job and I lay near to one another watching the star-studded sky. We remembered the words God had spoken about the stars and the sky, and laughed that we knew something about the constellations nobody else knew. We were still poor, we still stank, but we were content with our lives. We knew that God was in control. When we went to sleep, I murmured, "The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away." In the darkness, my husband responded, "Blessed is the name of the Lord."<sup>1</sup>

The next morning, we could see that Job's sores were starting to heal. We took the small gold pieces that his friends had left and bought a house. All of Job's brothers and sisters and old friends came to visit and console us. Each one of them gave us money and a gold ring.

Over the next few years, the Lord gave us twice as many possessions as we had before. More importantly, I bore seven more sons and three more lovely daughters – Jemimah, Keziah, and Keren-happuch. They were the three most beautiful women in the land, if I do say so myself. Job started a new tradition in our land by giving the daughters equal inheritance as the sons.

Job lived 140 years, and saws four generations of his descendants. Every night of our lives, we gathered the family together to remind them of the time of our misfortune. We reminded them that they are to be righteous as a part of worship to God. That God is in control, not us. We recite in unison, "The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away. Blessed is the name of the Lord."

<sup>1</sup> Job 1:21

It's true that people after the flood of Noah died at a much younger age than before the flood. But what is more meaningful is that they lived shorter and shorter lives after the flood, *and* often had children at a much younger age.

Noah lived 950 years and had his first child when he was 500. His middle son, Shem, lived 500 years, and had his first child at 102. A few generations later, Shelah lived 403 years, and had his first son at 30 years old. Many generations later, my grandfather, Terah, lived 205 years and had his first son at 70 years old. I expected to live for 150 years, and have my first child at 30 or so. It was becoming increasingly important to have your children earlier, because you didn't know how many more child-bearing years you could count on to have a son to carry on the family heritage. Very important.

Family heritage was important, and so the subject of marriage was important as well. In your time, it is uncommon for people to marry blood relatives any closer than second cousins. This is both for legal reasons and because of the higher likelihood of genetic problems.

In my time, it was very common for close relatives to marry. We had a much lower incidence of genetic problems, and we lived in small communities, so the variety of choice was smaller.

My name is Lot. My grandfather was Terah. He had three sons Abram, Nahor and Haran. My father was Haran, and he died at a young age after having me and my two sisters, Milkah and Iskah. My sister, Milkah, married our Uncle Nahor. My Uncle Abram married a woman named Sarai. We all lived in the city of Ur, in the land of the Chaldeans, later known as Babylon.

My grandfather decided to take me, along with Uncle Abram and Aunt Sarai, to the city of Harran, located in modern Turkey. We left Uncle Nahor and Aunt Milkah behind in Ur. After many years, my grandfather died, leaving Uncle Abram, Aunt Sarai and me. They were childless because Aunt Sarai was unable to have children.

When Uncle Abram was in his early seventies, the Lord came to him and commanded him to take everything he owned and go to Canaan. Canaan is approximately the land known in modern times as Israel and the State of Palestine. The Lord promised Uncle Abram that he would become a great nation, would be famous, and would all peoples on earth would be blessed through him. Many descendants, much wealth, and a blessing to all peoples on earth.

So, we packed up everything and we traveled to Canaan with all of our stuff, servants, and slaves. When we arrived at Shechem, north of Jerusalem, the Lord promised to give the land to

Abram's descendants. We built an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to Abram and promised many descendants with their own land, much wealth, and a blessing to all peoples on earth. Now... just when all this would happen is what I wanted to know.

Things didn't go so well for a while. A famine came, so we went south to Egypt hoping to get relief. By this time, we were a wealthy, enormous group of people. Abram was fearful because his wife was so beautiful and he was worried the Egyptians would kill him to take her. So, he cautioned her to tell everyone she was his sister. This was a half-truth. Abram later confessed Sarai was his half-sister.<sup>1</sup> The important hidden fact was this, Sarai was his wife, and anybody who violated her would be committing adultery, a very grievous sin.

Well, things went as Abram expected. Pharaoh fell for her and took her into his household, and made sure Abram was well compensated. But the Lord inflicted serious diseases on Pharaoh and his household, so Pharaoh figured out the truth. Although Pharaoh was angry with Abram for his deception, he still let us all go with everything we had accumulated. As we left Egypt, I wondered why God would want to honor such a deceptive, dishonest man as my uncle.

My choice of land was brilliant...from a financial standpoint. It was disastrous otherwise. I pitched my tents near Sodom. I wanted to be near enough to take advantage of its resources and attractions, but far enough away that the evil there would not engulf me. Evil doesn't work like that, though.

The first thing that overwhelmed me was war. Five kings from distant lands came to war against the kings of my land. My kings lost, and the five kings carried off the goods to nearby cities, all of my possessions, and all of my family.

I found out one advantage of having a rich uncle. Abram gathered 318 of his trained fighting men and chased down the five kings. He attacked them and won, and returned with all of the captured people and goods.

On the way home, Abram encountered the mysterious Melchizedek, the king of Salem and priest of God. He brought out wine and bread and blessed Abram, and Abram gave him a tenth of everything he owned. This little story is a key component of the book of *Hebrews* in the New Testament.

Now, I'm going to skip a few years ahead in Abram's life, so I can finish my story. You would think that I learned my lesson about the dangers of where I lived, and that I would've gotten out of Dodge, well, out of Sodom. But in my pride and greed yet again, I chose to stay. I didn't realize that the depravity of the people of Sodom was so bad that they had deeply angered God, which is always a very dumb thing to do.

<sup>1</sup> Genesis 20:12

The Lord revealed to Abram, whose name had been changed to Abraham by God himself, that he was going to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah since their sins were so awful. This set up one of the most interesting negotiations in the history of the world.

My uncle said that it would be un-Godlike for God to destroy the city if it had fifty righteous men in it. God agreed not to destroy it if fifty righteous men could be found. Thinking he found a foothold, Abraham negotiated the number from fifty down to forty-five... down to forty... down to thirty... down to twenty... and down to ten. I think it's possible that Abraham hoped there were maybe that many in my household, and that would be enough. Anyway, Abraham got God to agree not to destroy Sodom if only ten righteous people could be found. God decided to test the city so he sent two of his angels to Sodom. I was sitting in the city gate when they arrived. I didn't know they were angels because they appeared as normal men. As guests to the city, I begged them to come to my house and spend the night. They intended to spend the night in the city square, but I convinced them to come to my house. As their host, I was completely bound to feed and protect them under any circumstance. The city square was definitely not safe, but I believed my own house to be safe.

When night fell, all the demons of hell broke loose. The men of the city, young and old, surrounded my house. Every... man... in the city. Abraham's negotiation with God was useless. They began calling out, "Where are the men who came to your house. Surrender them to us so that we may all have sex with them!"

I went outside, barring the door behind me, and begged them not to do such a wicked thing. I offered them my two virgin daughters instead, even though they were pledged to be married. It wasn't that I didn't value my daughters, but my duty to protect my guests was paramount.

The mob started calling me a foreigner, berated me for judging them, and began threatening me. As they moved to rush the house, the two men inside my house, pulled me back in and barred the door again. I expected the noise from the pounding on the door to be deafening, but there wasn't even a feeble knock. Nothing. The two men had struck the crowd outside with blindness. They couldn't find the door! Screams filled the night air.

The two men told us God was going to destroy the city immediately. They instructed me to take all my loved ones out of the city. We didn't really believe them and we were prideful, we prepared slowly. In frustration and with great mercy, one of the men grabbed my hand, and the hands of my wife and daughters and led us out of the city. He warned us to flee for our lives, not looking back, and not stopping on the plain. I was so ignorant, I asked to be allowed to stop in this one small town, Zoar. That request was granted, and the men agreed not to destroy Zoar.

We rushed to Zoar, reached it as the sun rose over the land. The Lord began raining down burning sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah, destroying everything on the plain. The noise, heat and smell were unbearable. The temptation to turn and watch was almost unbearable for all of



us. My wife could not withstand it. She turned, she looked, and, and, and...became a pillar of salt.

You would think that I would've become the most repentant man on the face of the earth. But if you think that, you are wrong. God had saved me from sure disaster more than once... never because of my good character or high morals. He saved me because of his mercy and love for my uncle, not because of anything I had done.

My daughters and I moved to a cave in the mountain country. I guess I could have gone to Abraham and asked for his mercy, but I was too proud.

Remember it was not unusual for our close family members to marry and have children. Well, I told you that so you could have a better understanding of what happened next. My two daughters realized that they had no children, and there were no eligible men around, and if I died the family line would come to an end.

Their solution to their problem would reverberate forever. They got me drunk and slept with me. I was so drunk that I did not remember what I had done. Both of my daughters became pregnant by me.

The son of my older daughter became the founder of the Moabites. The son of my younger daughter became the founder of the Ammonites. May not mean much to you because there are so many "ites" in the Bible, let me put it in context. The Moabites and Ammonites were the eastern neighbors to the land of Israel. For most of Israelite history, the Moabites and Ammonites were bitter enemies of the Israelites, came close to destroying them on several occasions. Who were the Israelites? The descendants of my Uncle Abram. My uncle who I had followed across thousands of miles and was my closest family member. I had no father, he had no son. Yet, anyway. Because of my sin, my Uncle and I go down in history as bitter enemies.

The Jewish people descended from Abraham. It is not unusual for them to call him “Father Abraham.” I smile when I hear that term. I also called him Father Abraham. He was my father. My name is Isaac.

Much of what I will tell you came from my father and my mother, Sarah. I couldn’t tell you from experience, because I was not born until my father was 100 years-old. Let me back up a few years before that to tell you about the story.

The story starts with a very peculiar event. The Lord came to my father in a vision, and told him that he was my his shield and great reward. As if he needed reminding, my father told the Lord that he was childless and his servant would be his heir. The Lord told him that his servant would not be his heir, but God would provide him his own son. He lead Abraham outside to see the sky, and said his descendants would be as numerous as the stars. The next sentence in the Bible doesn’t make much sense until you realize Abraham and Sarah were far past child-bearing age. It says, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” My father had complete trust in God, which makes the next scene a little mystifying.

The Lord told Abraham that he had brought him out of the land of the Chaldeans to let him take possession of the land of Canaan. “Lord, how can I know that this will happen?” Abraham questioned him. And this is where is gets a little peculiar. Well, maybe more than a little peculiar.

The Lord told Abraham to bring him a three-year old heifer, goat and ram, along with a dove and a young pigeon. Abraham did so, and cut the heifer, goat and ram in two, arranging the halves opposite each other. Near dark, Abraham fell into a deep, trance-like sleep. The Lord told him that his descendants would be slaves in a strange country for four hundred years before coming out with great possessions, along with some other strange promises. When darkness fell, a smoking firepot with a torch appeared and passed between the pieces. Weird! Well, weird to you, but not to Abraham.

That strange ritual meant that the Lord had made a unilateral, unconditional promise to Abraham that he would have many descendants, and they would inherit a vast amount of land centered around the land of Canaan. He didn’t say when or how this would happen, but promised it would happen.

I need to drop back a little further in time to when Abraham was about eighty-five years old. My mother, Sarah, was childless and knew she was past child-bearing age. She convinced my

father to impregnate her Egyptian handmaiden so he could have an heir. Abraham slept with Hagar, and she quickly got pregnant. This made Hagar arrogant, haughty, and she despised Sarah.

Sarah got so angry that she began mistreating Hagar, badly. So badly that Hagar left the camp and went into the desert. The angel of the Lord found her by a spring, and commanded her to return to the camp and submit to Sarah. He encouraged Hagar by telling her that her descendants would become too numerous to count, although they would live in hostility with their relatives. She returned to the camp, and bore Abraham a son, and they named him Ishmael. Ishmael, my half-brother.

When my father turned ninety-nine, God appeared to him again, and reaffirmed his covenant to make my father into the father of many nations and the possessor of the land of Canaan as an everlasting possession. And, that he would be the god of Abraham's descendants. However, Abraham and his descendants must keep the covenant by being circumcised. That very day, my father, Ishmael, and all the male members of the huge household were circumcised.

God also told Abraham that he and my mother would have a son from whom nations and kings would come. My father fell facedown, but inwardly he laughed. He knew that a hundred-year old man with a ninety year-old wife could not have a son. God mandated that he name this son, Isaac, and that God would have a covenant relationship with him. God said he would make Ishmael into a great nation, but Isaac was to be the son of promise, the son of covenant. Isaac, that's me. I was born a year later.

Eight days after I was born, Abraham circumcised me as the Lord had commanded. My mother, Sarah, was thrilled to have birthed me. She bragged that God had brought her laughter and knew everyone would laugh along with her. Well, not everyone. Hagar and Ishmael were not exactly happy that I was born.

On the day I was weaned, Abraham threw a great feast. My mother saw Ishmael mocking me, she was furious. She demanded that Abraham send Hagar and Ishmael away so there would be no dispute about the inheritance.

Abraham was resistant because Ishmael was his son, but God told him to do as Sarah asked. God reaffirmed that he would make Ishmael into a great nation because he was Abraham's son, but said that it would be Isaac through whom Abraham's descendants would be established.

Abraham sent Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness. Although they had a very tough time, God protected them, and was with the boy as he grew up. His mother, who was from Egypt, found an Egyptian wife for him.

My childhood was rather boring and uneventful. My father was rich and well-respected, so we could move from place to place with little trouble. The years slid by until one fateful day. The day when God tested my father.

“Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah. Offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell you.”

The next morning, Abraham loaded his donkey with firewood, and took me and two servants to Moriah. On the third day, God pointed out the mountain of sacrifice to Abraham, and instructed him to leave the donkey and two servants behind. He told them to stay behind while he and I would go worship, and then we will come back. Did you get that...WE will come back. Abraham's complete faith never wavered.

Abraham loaded the wood on my back, while he carried the knife and fire. From that, you can gather I was at least an early teen. I had seen my father sacrifice before, so I knew something was odd. I asked my father, “Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” He answered that God would provide it, so I walked on, in complete innocence and trust.

When we reached the place God had specified, my father built an altar and placed the wood on it. So far, so good. Then things went crazy. He had me lie on my back and close my eyes. He bound me with ropes, picked me up, and placed me on the altar. I never said a word, but my eyes had a look of innocence, surprise, trust, and questions all at the same time.

Silence.

My eyes fly open to see my father, knife raised high over head to cut my throat. The knife came toward me... “Abraham, Abraham,” a voice from heaven cried out, “Do not harm your son. Now I know you honor and trust me because you have not withheld your son, your only son.”

He passed the test. Abraham passed the test, and I had a front row seat! His level of faithfulness led to him being the father of the Israelite nation.

We heard a noise, turned and saw a ram caught by its horns in a thicket. My father released me, and we sacrificed the ram. Once again, the Lord reaffirmed his covenants with Abraham.

That's the story as you usually hear it. Believe me, you cannot even imagine what my father thought. Sacrificing your only son, knowing you could never have another. Burnt offering, like the pagan sacrifices of children that God seemed to hate. Never to have the descendants God had promised. Awful thoughts, like you and I would have had. But Abraham was different than you or me.

But let me give you some more information that the Apostle Paul revealed in the New Testament. Abraham took all of the facts into account. He trusted that everything God had promised would come true. So, Abraham reasoned that it was ok to sacrifice me, because God would raise me from the dead.<sup>1</sup> Never been done before. No evidence it could happen. But

<sup>1</sup> Hebrews 11:19

through his great faith, Abraham reasoned out that answer. As Paul would later write, Abraham was fully persuaded that God had the power to do as he had promised.<sup>2</sup> Paul also wrote that God did raise me from the dead, figuratively speaking.<sup>3</sup>

My mother died when I was about twenty-seven years old. My father purchased the Cave of Machpelah for her place of burial from the Hittites. The cave became the burial place for our family that is still revered today. That cave is in the modern city of Hebron.

My father lived almost four decades after my mother died. He married a second wife who gave him six more sons, who had a great number of descendants themselves. While Abraham was still living, he gave gifts to his sons, but sent them away to the east so they would not interfere with my inheritance. At his death, he left everything he had to me. That made me a very rich man.

My father died at the age of one hundred and seventy-five. My half-brother, Ishmael, and I buried him with his first wife, Sarah, in the Cave of Machpelah.

I knew my father for seventy-five years, and the one event that still amazes me is when God told him to sacrifice his only son, whom he loved. He did not question, he did not hesitate. I hope you will notice somebody else who did not question or hesitate to sacrifice his only son, whom he loved. Only in that event, the son was sacrificed and came back from the dead, literally, to be the start of a new nation.

<sup>2</sup> Romans 4:21

<sup>3</sup> Hebrews 11:19

Have you ever known someone who seemed to get all the breaks whether they deserved it or not? That person was my father. Have you ever known someone who seemed to get all bad breaks whether they deserved it or not? That person was me. I am Esau, son of Isaac, son of Abraham.

What do you know about the things my father did? Isaac had two sons, Jacob and me. Other than that, what do you know? If you are a good Bible student you probably know two stories, both of which do not show my father in a good light. Before I tell you those stories, let me tell you how my father and mother became husband and wife.

My grandfather was Abraham. In his old age, he learned that his brother, who had stayed back in Chaldea, had many sons and daughters. As Abraham aged, he obsessed over the likelihood that his son, Isaac, would probably marry a local Canaanite girl. Abraham made his senior servant swear that he would make sure that Isaac married someone from Chaldea and from his family. He made the servant swear that he would not take Isaac back to Chaldea, but would personally go and bring back a woman for him.

The servant took ten camels loaded with valuable presents and went back to Abraham's country of origin. As the servant reached the town named after Abraham's brother, he had the camels kneel near the city well. Near evening, it was time for the women to draw water from the well.

The servant prayed to God to be kind to his master by providing a wife for Isaac. He specifically prayed for a woman who would offer to give him water and water his camels, too. Before he had finished praying, a young woman came and did exactly. The woman was beautiful. The servant put a gold ring in her nose and put two gold bracelets on her arms.

Turns out she was a perfect candidate. Her name was Rebekah, and she was the daughter of Abraham's brother. She offered the servant one of the family rooms to spend the night. Of course, the servant praised God for answering his prayers. The servant should have also prayed for patience for what came next.

Rebekah had a greedy brother named Laban. When he saw the expensive gold jewelry, he rushed to find the stranger and bring him and the camels to the house. After the camels were fed and watered, and the stranger's feet were washed, food was offered. The stranger vowed not to eat until he told his story.

“I am the servant of Abraham, your relative” he said. Then repeated the whole story from start to finish, not leaving out any detail. He hoped to get a good reception by making it clear that Abraham was rich. Very rich. Obviously, the servant had not learned to negotiate well!

At the end of his story, the servant asked if Rebekah was the right woman for Isaac. The smarmy Laban answered that the situation must be from the Lord. For the servant to take Rebekah back to Isaac for his wife. The servant was overjoyed. He showered presents on Rebekah, her brother and mother. Then, they all had a big party.

The next morning, the servant was anxious to be on his way with Rebekah. Laban and his mother asked for them to stay ten more days, hoping to cajole more gifts from Abraham’s servant, who still had much treasure left. When the servant protested, they took the problem to Rebekah, who agreed that she should go without delay. So, they blessed Rebekah, and sent them on their way. You can be sure that Laban regretted his inability to get more gifts.

On return to Abraham, the servant met Isaac on the way. He told Isaac everything that happened, and Isaac took Rebekah as his wife. And he loved her.

Through none of his own efforts, my father ended up with a gorgeous wife that he loved. At forty years old, he gets his beautiful bride.

For twenty years, Rebekah could not get pregnant. So, Isaac prayed on behalf of his wife... and... she became pregnant. With twins, no less. Easy, peasy for Isaac.

Not so much for his wife. The twins fought within her. When she inquired of the Lord what was happening, he revealed that two nations would come from her twins. One would be stronger. The older twin would serve the younger.

The first twin to come out was red. Covered with hair, hairy as a garment. They named him Esau. That's me. I was destined to be ruled over by my brother, even though I didn't deserve it.

My twin was holding onto my heel as I was born, so they named him Jacob which means “heel grabber.” Destined to rule over me, even though he didn't deserve it.

I grew up to be a skilled hunter. My father, who loved wild game, loved me. Jacob was content to stay in the tents, and our mother loved him. One day I came in famished from a long hunt. I told Jacob to give me some stew before I died of hunger, but he required me to give him my birthright for the stew. Thinking I would die, and the birthright would be worthless, I traded my birthright for the stew. It was good stew. Decent, anyway.

In hindsight, I treated my birthright as worthless, when it was far from that. The firstborn had the right to take over authority over the entire family, and to receive a double portion of the inheritance. I gave up something hugely valuable for something of temporary worth... I hope you have never done that. I hope you never will.

Now, for the two stories that tell of about the only two things my father did that are in the Bible.

There was another severe famine in our land. The Lord instructed Isaac to stay in Canaan and not go to Egypt as Abraham had done. Isaac went to Abimelek, king of the Philistines in Gerar. Like his father in Egypt, Isaac feared for his life because his wife was so beautiful. Like his father, he pretended that his wife was his sister. Like his father, the king found out and was royally upset. Like his father, the king put Isaac in a position to be fabulously wealthy. He became so wealthy that the Philistines required him to move away, and they made a treaty with him because he had become so powerful.

Even though he behaved dishonestly, Isaac became fabulously wealthy. "He came out smelling like a rose." I believe is the saying.

Now, the second story. It is a sad, sad story. At least to me. My father was very old and nearly blind. He asked me to go kill some wild game, prepare him his favorite food, and receive my blessing from him before he died. We loved each other, and I couldn't wait to do what he asked.

Unfortunately, my mother overheard our conversation. She conspired with my brother to take my blessing, and have it bestowed on him. They killed a goat and seasoned it to taste like wild game. She had Jacob put on some of my clothes so he would smell like me. And, she put goatskins on his arms and neck so he would feel hairy like me.

Jacob did just as she said. When he went to my father, my father was suspicious. Jacob lied that God had given him favor to find the wild game quickly. My father recognized the voice as not being mine, but felt his arms and was deceived. At last, he just flat out asked. "Are you really my son, Esau?" Jacob, the lying rat just said, "I am."

Jacob fed him the fake game and brought him wine. When my father smelled my clothes, he was convinced. He... gave... Jacob... MY... blessing. A blessing that meant he would be successful and I would bow down to him.

Jacob barely left the tent before I returned, game in hand. My father began to tremble violently, he realized Jacob had deceived him. I broke down, wept bitterly. It was the second time Jacob had stolen from me – my birthright and now my blessing. I begged for my father's blessing, but there was not much left for me. Jacob had taken it all. My father could only bless me that at some point I would throw off the yoke of serving my brother.

That day, I swore that I would kill my brother when my father died.

My mother was told about my oath. She sent Jacob far away.



To spite her, I married several Hittite and Canaanite women that she hated. She desperately wanted her sons to marry somebody from her own clan. Well, at least she wanted her *favorite*, Jacob, to do that.

So that's it. That's about all the Bible has to say about Isaac. A fairly inconspicuous life compared to his father, Abraham, or his two sons. He died at one hundred and eighty years and was buried with his family. And that's about all it says about me. I loved my father. And he loved me. But I was the one who could never catch a break.

Would I have married Jacob if I had known he was under a death sentence for committing fraud twice? Probably, he was very handsome and clever.

Would I have married Jacob had I known what would happen with our children? Probably, actually yes. Would I have married Jacob if I had known he had favorite family members? Again, probably, I was one of those favorites.

My name is Rachel, and I was almost Jacob's first wife.

Here is the story of how we met, Jacob and I. It was a day like all the others. I was a shepherdess tending my father's sheep. I arrived at the community well, and just like always, I would have to wait a long time before it was my time to water my sheep. I knew this. There was a large stone rolled over the mouth of the well, and the other shepherds would not remove it until they watered their own sheep. I would have to wait. I always did.

However, this handsome stranger waved me over, rolled the stone away, and watered my sheep. He told me the other shepherds had told him who I was. Then, he revealed that he was my cousin, Jacob. His mother was the sister of my father, Laban. He could not have been more unexpected if he had arrived from the moon. We cried, and laughed, and kissed, then I ran home to tell my father.

My father rushed to meet Jacob, and brought him to our house. Jacob told us about Abraham, Isaac, Rebekah. He brought us up to date on the family. Well, that's not exactly true. He brought us up to date on the things he wanted us to know.

He did not reveal the turmoil in his family caused by his father having a favorite son, Esau, and his mother having a favorite son, Jacob. He did not reveal that he had fraudulently taken Esau's birthright and blessing. He did not reveal that upon the death of their father Esau had threatened to kill him. We were left with the impression that he had come to find a wife from the distant family, just as his father had found a wife from the distant family. None of this was lost on Laban who remembered the expensive gifts he had been given when he gave away his sister Rebekah.

None of this was lost on me and my older sister, either. We were the only two daughters of Laban, and knew we were prime candidates to marry Jacob. I felt good about my chances

because, frankly, I was pretty and... My sister, Leah? Well, bless her heart, she was sweet but had, ummm, eyes... weak eyes.

Sure enough, Jacob fell for me. He didn't have enough money for my dowry, so he offered to work for Laban. For seven years. For free, if Laban would give me as his wife. I was thrilled to hear that they made that deal.

The seven years flew by because of our love for one another. At the end of that time, Laban gave a feast for all of the people, he brought his daughter to Jacob's tent to consummate the marriage.

I was a wreck. My father, my smarmy father had tricked Jacob. He forcefully kept me away, and took my sister to Jacob's tent instead. When the morning broke, it was obvious that Jacob had married my sister. Jacob was furious, he objected! My father's response was that it was their custom to marry the oldest daughter first. Jacob could have me if he worked another seven years, for free. The cheater had been cheated. My father had cheated Jacob as much as Jacob had cheated his brother, Esau.

Jacob agreed to the deal, so my father married me to Jacob, too. Now Jacob had four women in his life: me and my servant, Bilhah; Leah and her servant, Zilpah. Clearly, his love for me was much greater than his love for my sister, Leah. Leah, the Loser. Leah, the Lesser.

Do I sound bitter? Just wait, it got worse, much worse. In ways that would change the world.

The Lord saw that my sister, Leah, was not loved, he enabled her to conceive first. And second, and third, and fourth. Each time she hoped that Jacob would love her more than me, but he didn't. Reuben, Simeon, Levi Judah, these were Jacob's first four sons. She stopped conceiving, but I didn't start.

Jacob did not giving me children! I was enraged, so I gave him my servant, Bilhah, as a surrogate. Bilhah got pregnant and had his next two sons, Dan and Naphtali. The battle was on.

Leah gave Jacob her servant, Zilpah, as a surrogate. She had Jacob's next two sons, Gad and Asher.

Surprisingly, Leah had two more sons, Issachar and Zebulun. She hoped beyond hope that her six sons would cause Jacob to love her more than me, but that did not happen. Nothing changed when she had a daughter, either. Dinah.

Ten sons and one daughter. None from me. Then, God graciously listened to my prayers. Me, Jacob's favorite, finally got pregnant. I had a son and named him Joseph. Jacob now had eleven sons and one daughter.

Through a series of conniving back and forth, both Laban and Jacob became rich. But as things often go, Laban was angry that Jacob got rich, it was clear that it was time for us to separate. We basically packed up and left in the dark so Laban would not stop us. All would have been well, probably, except that I slipped into my father's house and stole his household gods.

Three days later, my father learned we had left. He and his relatives chased us for seven days before catching us. Before he could do anything, God warned him in a dream not to say anything, good or bad, to Jacob.

My father did confront Jacob, and accused him of being ungrateful and leaving without giving him an opportunity to say good-bye. Worse, he accused Jacob of stealing his household gods. Jacob had no clue what he was talking about, he agreed that anyone who had stolen the gods could be put to death. He did not know I had stolen them. Fortunately, I was able to keep them concealed. Eventually, Jacob and my father agreed on a treaty of peace between them, and we parted ways. I couldn't wait to get to Jacob's home and meet his parents. But there were more adventures first.

We had to go near Edom, the country of Jacob's brother, Esau. Jacob sent an offer of peace by messenger, hoping we could just pass through the country. The answer... Esau is headed your way with four hundred men.

I thought that was good news, but Jacob had to finally confess to all of us how he had stolen Esau's birthright and blessing. We knew our lives were in danger. Grave danger. Especially Jacob's.

We all prayed like crazy. Jacob split us into two groups, hoping that one would survive. Jacob sent a huge number of animal gifts toward Esau hoping to blunt his anger. He sent them separately, hoping to slow his speed and wrath.

We looked up, dust clouds of riders appeared in the distance. Jacob split us up into further groups, he kept me and my son at the rear. Favoritism once again.

Esau dismounted and, shock of all shocks, embraced Jacob, and they wept. Esau took all of the gifts and went back to Edom. Jacob escaped unscathed, after all of the damage he had done to his brother. At least he escaped at this point in time. The long-term effects would be disastrous between the nations spawned by Jacob and Esau. The Israelites and the Edomites.

The last time Jacob and Esau are known to have been together was at the death of their father. Isaac died at one hundred and eighty and was buried by his two sons.

What happened to me? Thank the Lord, I got pregnant again. Unfortunately, I had great difficulty with the delivery. The midwife told me that I had another son, but that was not enough to pull me through. As soon as he was born, I died. His father named him Benjamin. With his birth, Jacob had twelve sons.

There is so much more to tell you about Jacob, but that will have to wait. However, I do want to leave you with one consideration... advice from someone who was a favorite.

Abraham and Sarah favored Isaac over Ishmael. Their descendants became bitter enemies. Isaac learned to have favorites from his father and mother.

Isaac favored Esau, while his wife favored Jacob. Those brothers became bitter enemies, as did their descendants. Jacob learned to have favorites from his father and mother.

Jacob had me as his favorite wife and favored my children over his other children. Jacob's favoritism set off a chain of world-changing events.

In the end it all worked out, God used whomever he chose. But be aware, there are possible destructive consequences of family relations when parents have favorites among their children.

Be careful having favorites.

A group of unconscious associations or impulses having to do with the image of a father. These impulses may be positive or negative. Father complex. I'm sure you've heard of it, a term in modern psychology. There were twelve sons in my family. Eleven of us had negative father complexes. One had a positive father complex. And he needed to die for it.

Let me start with an odd story that happened at the ford of the Jabbok River. My father, Jacob, was headed to meet his estranged brother, Esau, and his 400 men. Things were more than a little tense because Esau had promised to kill Jacob the last time they had seen each other.<sup>1</sup> Jacob sent gifts to Esau in an attempt to pacify him, and then sent his family away.

The Bible says that when Jacob was alone, a man wrestled with him until dawn. The Bible does not identify the man. When the man could not overcome Jacob, he touched Jacob's hip and dislocated it. The man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." The man gave him this odd blessing, "I am changing your name from Jacob to Israel, because you have overcome God and humans." Jacob let him go, and named the place Peniel, because he said that he had seen God face to face, and his life had been spared. My father wrestled with God, and wrestling with God is no joke.

My father, Jacob, now Israel... son of Isaac, son of Abraham. God instructs him to take his entire enormous family and massive wealth and go to Bethel. At Bethel, he is to build an altar to God. Before doing so, Israel does a very important thing.

He instructs his entire household to get rid of their foreign gods and purify themselves. They give him their foreign gods and their earrings, and Israel buries them. With this act of dedication to God, the terror of God falls on all of the towns around them and nobody bothers them.

At Bethel, God reaffirms my father's name change, says that he will increase in number until a great nation and kings come from him, and that he will receive the land given to Abraham and Isaac. God doesn't say when this will happen, just that it will happen. My father set up a stone pillar as a memorial of God's promise.

At that time, my father had two wives. Leah was his first wife, and her sister Rachel was his

<sup>1</sup> Genesis 27:41

second and favorite wife. My father also had two concubines, Bilhah and Zilpah. He had sons by all of them. Twelve sons in total.

I was his firstborn son by his first wife, Leah. My father never truly loved my mother, and I'm not sure he ever really loved me, either. He certainly didn't love his two concubines. Maybe that is part of the explanation for what happened next. I slept with his concubine, Bilhah, the mother of two of my half-brothers. This was a hugely disrespectful act. My father found out about it, but didn't do anything. I guess he just didn't care that much about me or Bilhah.

That doesn't mean my father didn't love any of his children. He had a special love for his two children by Rachel, the love of his life. Joseph and Benjamin. He loved Joseph far more than any of the rest of us. In fact, he made Joseph a special ornate robe to show how much more he loved him. We hated Joseph. Every time we brothers saw the many colors and designs on that robe, we hated him even more.

Joseph told us about a dream he'd had... He told us that we were binding grain into sheaves, when our sheaves bowed down to his. We exploded. He insinuated that he would rule over us?! That was beyond disrespectful to us, his older brothers.

And it got worse. Joseph told us he had a dream where the sun, moon and eleven stars bowed down to him. This dream even bothered our father. It was a clear reference to Jacob and eleven brothers bowing down to him. We were completely done with it all.

Joseph was a little older than seventeen, and our father sent him to check on the rest of us. We were many miles away. One time, Joseph had tattled on us, so our father wanted to find out if we were misbehaving again.

In the distance, we could see Joseph walking toward us. The brilliant colors of his robe, couldn't miss them. The closer he came, the more enraged my brothers became. By the time he reached them, they had agreed to kill him. Then tell our father that a wild animal had devoured him. His dreams could never come true, they laughed.

I reached the scheming group before Joseph and heard their plot. Somehow, I convinced them not to kill him, but just throw him in the cistern... I was the oldest, so maybe that was it. I planned to rescue him later.

When Joseph arrived, we grabbed him, took off his repulsive robe, and threw him in a dry well. I left while my brothers sat down to a meal and to celebrate their shallow victory. Then they heard something, a distant noise of bells. Camel bells. They looked up and saw a caravan of Ishmaelite traders loaded with spices to take to Egypt. These Ishmaelites were distant cousins of ours.

When I returned to the cistern to rescue Joseph, it was empty! I confronted my brothers and they explained what they had done.

My brother, Judah, had a brilliant idea. Rather than killing Joseph for no gain, they should sell him to the traders as a slave. They would not be guilty of murdering their own brother and they would have money to boot. Done. They sold him for twenty shekels of silver, and Joseph became a slave.

I had no choice but to join their conspiracy.

We slaughtered a goat to get its blood. We splashed the blood on Joseph's robe, even tore it in a few places. We took it back to our father and showed it to him.

My father looked at the robe, he said that it was Joseph's robe, and some wild animal must have devoured him. We didn't even have to lie to him. Our father tore his clothes and mourned for many, many days. We tried to comfort him, he would have none of it.

Our father said that he would mourn for Joseph the rest of his life. We secretly felt justified in our action because our father loved Joseph so much, and us so little.

With Joseph gone, I hoped to be more respected by my father. I hoped to gain his trust and love. But things did not go so well for our family after Joseph was gone. I won't bore you with all the details and stories, but I will tell you one story that exemplifies how badly things fell apart for us.

My brother, Judah, moved away from the family. While gone, he married a Canaanite woman. He knew our father would never approve of that, which is maybe why he did it. She quickly became pregnant, and bore a son. She got pregnant again and had another son.

His firstborn son married a woman named Tamar. But he was so wicked that the Lord put him to death. Now, that is wicked! My brother, Judah, went to his second son and demanded he impregnate his brother's wife and raise her children so she could carry on the name of the family. His second son refused to do so. The Lord got so angry at the second son that he put him to death, too.

Judah then asked Tamar to live with him as a widow until his much younger third son grew to be an adult. Tamar did so, and all went well until the third son had grown old enough. But Judah did not give his third son to Tamar, so she did not have any children.

Eventually, Judah's own wife died. After recovering from his grief, Judah went away to be with an old friend. Tamar heard where Judah was going, put on a disguise and rushed ahead of him. She sat by the road and acted as a prostitute in her disguise. Not recognizing her, Judah hired her for the price of a goat. She also required he give her a pledge of his seal, cord and staff that he would bring the goat to her. He did, then he slept with her. When he sent the goat to her to get his pledges back, she was gone.



Three months later, Judah was told that Tamar was pregnant, so was guilty of prostitution. Enraged, he sentenced her to be burned to death. Tamar showed him his pledges. Caught. Judah realized he was the father. Judah never slept with her again, but she did have twin sons by him.

Now, why did I spend so much time telling you the incestuous story of Judah and his daughter-in-law Tamar? In the New Testament, the family lineage of Jesus is: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah, and Perez.<sup>2</sup> Tamar's twin boys were named Zerah and Perez.

My family! Twelve brothers by four women. Plenty of interpersonal conflict. Overwhelming amounts of sin and stupid choices. My family was a mess. We were a sad, sad excuse for a family with a covenant with God. And it was about to get worse. A lot worse. A world-wide famine was on its way.

God's promise to my great-grandfather, grandfather, and father to make them into a great nation seemed like a distant dream. Or a very bad joke. But God was in control, not me. Not my father, even. That alone can move a father complex into a positive direction.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 1:2-3, Luke 3:33-34

Some sayings you have that speak of people like me: Born with a silver spoon in my mouth. Born on third base and thought I'd hit a triple. Privileged bloodline, or as they say, trust fund baby. That was me. Born wealthy. Favorite son of a rich daddy. I had everything. Except one thing. Humility. God would grant me that gift through mistreatment by my family and the long years as a slave and prisoner that followed.

My first big break came when my brothers threw me into an empty well. My second big break came when, instead of killing me, they sold me as a slave to a caravan of foreign traders. My lasting memory of my brothers is watching them eat lunch while I was hauled off in copper chains.

I guess that makes them sound like a bad bunch of guys. But truth be told, they'd endured nearly twenty years of me as the insufferable, favored child of our father. I made their lives unbearable, lording my privileges over them, tattling on them, my special clothes. I even told them of my dreams where they would someday bow down to me. Of course, those dreams were to come true, but did I need to throw that in their faces?

So, there I was at the bottom of the well. I prayed to God for two things... that I would remain faithful to him, and that I would be the method by which God would fulfill his promises to my forefathers... Abraham, Isaac, and Israel. God granted me those prayers, but not necessarily in the way I meant them, or with the timing I hoped for. This is something you may have experienced in your own life.

God did allow me to remain faithful to him by unexpectedly giving me some incredibly useful spiritual gifts, and by placing me in some unique situations. The first promise that God fulfilled through me was not one that came to mind at the bottom of the well. One of God's first promises to Abraham was that for four hundred years his descendants would be strangers in a land in which they would be mistreated and enslaved. At the end of that time, they would come out of that country with great possessions.<sup>1</sup> I was the first step in the fulfillment of that promise.

What I prayed for at the bottom of the well was God's promise to my forefathers that their descendants would become a great nation. In my prayer, I meant for my descendants to be a

<sup>1</sup> Genesis 15:13-14

great nation. Instead, God meant for that promise to be fulfilled primarily through my brother, Judah. My important role was to protect Judah and make his family prosperous.

Walking a couple of hundred miles in copper chains with little food and water was the jump start I needed to gain some needed humility and trust in God. I gained more humility in Egypt. They examined me like a donkey in the public square. Fortunately, Potiphar, the captain of the guard for Pharaoh, purchased me. Funny, thinking your new owner is a lucky break, but that's what happens when you've been cut down to size.

No matter what the assignment, God gave me great favor to be successful. Potiphar soon noticed that and chose me to be his personal attendant. He put me in charge of his household and entrusted everything he owned to me. The more Potiphar entrusted to me, the more God blessed him. With me in charge, Potiphar only concerned himself with what was on the menu for his next meal.

With all due humility, I was well-built and handsome. Servant girls vied for my attention, but I had no interest in them. Unfortunately, my master's wife also vied for my attention. She bluntly invited me to her bed... day after day. Not only did I refuse, I refused to even be alone with her.

One day, I was in the house to do my work, none of the other servants were inside, and she accosted me when I wasn't looking. She grabbed my coat and demanded I take her to bed. I ran out of the house, leaving my coat behind. I guess that was the last straw for her. As they say, Hell has no fury as a woman scorned.

She called the servants in to her room, showed them my coat, accused me of trying to rape her. Later, she told Potiphar the same story. He was furious and put me in prison where the king's prisoners were held. Down on my luck... is that the phrase?

Once again, the Lord gave me great favor, I eventually became the warden's attendant in charge of the jail. Two of the king's prisoners were his cupbearer and the baker. They both had a dream. Rather interesting dream, both of them, and they were anxious to have them interpreted. I said that God had the power to interpret dreams. When those words came out of my mouth, I may not have fully realized how my whole world would change. But from then on, I would forever give credit to God instead of making myself the center of attention!

I listened to their dreams, and interpreted them accurately. I asked the cupbearer that when he was released from prison and restored to his position as the dream predicted, to please remember me to Pharaoh. I did not ask the baker for anything because his dream portended that he would soon die. He did die, and the cupbearer was released... and promptly forgot his obligation to me. Back to square one.

Two years later, Pharaoh had two troubling dreams, to put it mildly. None of the wise men or magicians could interpret the dreams. Pharaoh was getting angry, a disaster in the making,

when the cupbearer finally remembered me. Pharaoh called for me to be brought from the dungeon... after I was shaved and bathed.

Pharaoh said that he heard I had the ability to interpret dreams. Just as I told the baker and cupbearer, I said, "I cannot but God can, and will!" When you read that verse in the Bible, it sounds almost cutesy. However, if I made that claim and it didn't happen, I would have been executed, and who knows how God would have fulfilled his promises to Abraham.

Pharaoh proceeded to tell me two dreams. In the first, he is standing by the Nile River when seven fat cows come out of the river and graze. After them, seven ugly and skinny cows come out and eat the fat cows, but they remain ugly and skinny. In the second dream, Pharaoh sees seven perfect heads of grain on one stalk. After them, seven thin and withered heads sprouted and ate the first seven perfect heads.

Through me, God revealed to Pharaoh that the two dreams meant the same thing. God was about to provide seven years of excellent harvest, followed by seven years of severe famine that will overcome the first seven years. The message was provided in two dreams to emphasize that God would do it, and do it soon.

Before Pharaoh could respond, I continued with wise advice from God. I advised him to find a wise and discerning man to take charge of the land, and commissioners under him. They should take 20% of the harvest in the first seven years, and store it up in designated cities. That grain was to be used to sustain the country in the following seven years.

It was risky giving Pharaoh that advice, because it insinuated that he wasn't capable of executing that plan himself. He was humble enough to realize he was not the right person. Looking around the room, he realized that I was right person—the most wise and discerning person in the room because God endowed me with those characteristics.

Pharaoh put me in charge of the plan. I was second only to him in the whole country. He gave me his ring, robes of fine linen, a gold chain, and rode with me in a chariot to impart that power in front of the people. He gave me a wife who was the daughter of, the priest. I go from being in the dankest dungeon to the second most powerful person in Egypt... in the world. And I'm only 30. I knew it was not through my own power, but from God's grace. I had finally learned the humility that eluded me in my childhood.

For the next seven years, I executed the plan just as God told me. I stored up grain in all of the cities of Egypt. We stored so much that we could not keep track of it all, it was like the sand of the sea. It wasn't all work and no play during this time though. My wife and I had two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. Those names reminded me of my family.

My family. Not a day went by that I didn't think of my family back in Canaan. I thought of my father, and how he loved me so much. I thought of the robe he gave me, it was magnificent. It would pale in comparison to any one of my every day robes in Egypt. It meant so much

because, I thought of my brothers. Some days, I wanted revenge for what they did to me. Other days I wanted to reward them for what they did. Some days, I just wanted to be with them and just be... brothers.

Every day, every single day, I thought of the promises God had made to my forefathers. I had two sons, would they become great nations? I had fabulous wealth and armies at my disposal. Should I conquer Canaan and give it to my father and brothers? That was certainly within my power.

Every day, I asked God to reveal to me what I should do to remain faithful to him. With my power, there were so many possibilities. But no big revelations came to me. No big dreams. Just this message – keep doing what you are supposed to do. Okay.

The good times flew by, and then the famine hit. Not only in Egypt but in many other countries. As the people of Egypt began to get hungry, they came to me, and I sold them grain. When people from other countries came, I sold them grain, too, but at a much higher price. People over the world learned— you can't eat silver and gold.

By the time the famine was over, Pharaoh owned the vast majority of everything in Egypt. Through God's guidance and my diligence, he prospered greatly. He wanted to reward me, and I knew just how he could do it.

My father is devastated. He just found out that wild animals have devoured Joseph, his favorite son. He has eleven sons left, but he can only mourn for Joseph. For weeks and months, he mourns. He will not be consoled by any of children. He says he will never quit mourning until the day he dies.

All I want from my father is for him love me for who I am. Instead, he only loves me as a substitute.

Why is Joseph such a favorite? It's a short story. My father is known as Israel, formerly Jacob. He had children by four women, but the only one he truly loved was his second wife, Rachel. He loved her from the moment he saw her. She was the last of the four women to give him a son... Joseph. He loved Joseph so much because he was Rachel's first son, and he was the first son in my father's old age.

Rachel died at the birth of her second son. Benjamin. That's me. So, my father has mixed feelings about me. Perhaps it is my fault she died.

With Joseph now gone, my father is inconsolable. He has lost his two true loves. But in the way that people who grieve sometimes do, my father begins searching for a substitute love. And he doesn't have far to look. I am Rachel's only remaining son, and Joseph's only full brother. And in the way that people who grieve sometimes do, he becomes obsessed over my well-being. He cannot emotionally afford for anything to happen to me.

My brothers shepherd the sheep over vast areas. I stay home with my father. My brothers shear the sheep and meet with foreign traders. I stay home with my father. My brothers tame wild camels. I stay home with my father. I stay safe within the cocoon of my father's wealth and power.

Nearly two decades pass since the death of Joseph. Some years are plentiful, and we get richer. Some years are lean, and we live off of our wealth. Then, one year is savagely lean. Our huge community is on the verge of starving. We have plenty of gold and silver, but we cannot eat that.

We notice a growing stream of traders from the north and east headed to Egypt. It seems that famine has struck the entire world. It is rumored that Egypt has surplus grain and is willing to sell it. At a hefty price, but that no longer matters.

My father can no longer afford to wait. He orders my ten brothers to go to Egypt and purchase grain. Me? I have to stay home.

Months go by, and we are on the brink of starvation. In the distance we see another caravan, and hope beyond hope that it is my brothers. As they come closer, we start to cheer. It is my brothers and their donkeys are loaded with grain. Our family will survive. Why aren't my ten brothers smiling? Wait, there are only nine?

That night at dinner we find out why my nine brothers are so sober. They tell a story that places my father in a terrible predicament.

The arrive in Egypt and are escorted to the all-powerful man in charge of selling grain to the Egyptians and to foreigners. In his headdress and makeup, he was hardly recognizable as a human being instead of a god they worship. He treated us harshly. Where are you from and why are you here? We are from Canaan to buy food. Are you not spies, come to see where we are weak? No, we are honest sons of one man, come only to buy food. NO! You are spies! We are your servants come only to buy food. We ten are of twelve brothers of one father. One is at home with him, and one is no more.

YOU ARE SPIES! But this is how I will test you. One will go back and bring your other brother, while the rest stay in prison. If he does not return with the other brother you are surely spies! And he put us in prison for three days.

On the third day, we are brought before him again. He tells us that the test has changed. We are to leave one brother behind, while the other nine return with grain for our family. We must bring back the younger brother to prove we are honest.

Reuben does not tell this next part to my father. In front of the powerful Egyptian, my brothers lament that this awful thing has happened to them because of what they did to their brother, Joseph. Reuben reminded them how he had tried to keep them from sinning against Joseph.

Reuben resumes his story for my father. The powerful man leaves the room with an angry, angry look. He returns and has Simeon taken and bound in front of them. They can say nothing.

The next morning, we awake to find our donkeys fully loaded with grain that we have paid for with all of our silver. We have no silver left. We leave the city without Simeon.

That night, Ephraim opens his sack to get feed for his donkey, and sees his silver laying on top. We all check our sacks and find the same thing. Our hearts sink. The Egyptian will know we stole his silver and we are not honest men. What has God done to us?

My father breaks down. He laments the loss of Joseph and Simeon. He is willing to sacrifice Simeon in order to keep me safe. Reuben offers his own sons as surety, his own sons! But my father will not relent. They are not returning and neither am I.

Months go by and the grain dwindles. Finally, we are nearing the point of no return. The brothers insist that they take me and go back to Egypt. What good is it for me to starve to death along with the others? My father finally gives in. He sends me, double the silver, and many precious gifts.

We arrive in Egypt and go straight to the man in charge. He doesn't come to see us, but sends his servant to us. The servant takes us to a home. We are shocked. We believe he is going to take our things and place us into slavery. As we approach the entrance to the house, we tell the servant our side of the story. How we paid with silver, but it was in our sacks when we returned. He shrugs and says he received our silver, so our God must have put it in our bags. From out of nowhere, Simeon appears

We prepare ourselves and our gifts. At lunch, the all-powerful man appears and asks about our father. He looks at me, and tests us to find out if I am the youngest son. Again, he gets angry and leaves the room.

We are in shock. But the surprises continue. The man eats by himself. The Egyptians eat by themselves. And we are seated at our own table. Somehow, we are seated in birth order, and my share is five times everyone else's. We eat more food at that meal than we have been eating in a week.

The next morning, our donkeys are loaded with all the grain they can carry. We know better than to insult the Egyptians by looking in them, but we are so scared. We decide to get out of eyesight before looking in the sacks. We nod at each other, thrilled to have all eleven brothers together.

We are almost ready to stop and look when we hear a thunderous sound behind us. Chariots and horses headed our way. Surely, they are not coming for us. But they are. The riders surround us and have us stand together. A man accuses us of stealing his master's cup used for drinking and divinations. We protest, we claim we have done nothing of the sort. They start searching our bags from the oldest to the youngest. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. And then they reach my bag, and pull out the cup.

They haul us back to the city. My brothers all offer to be slaves, but we are told that only Benjamin will be kept because he is the guilty one. The rest are free to leave with their donkeys and grain. Me. For the sake of my father, why me.

Judah begs for grace, and gets it. He tells the whole story of what has happened, and explains why they cannot go home without Benjamin. He begs to take my place. He talks, and talks and talks. He begs. When he finishes, the Egyptian god-man explodes. He commands all of his



servants and attendants to leave the room. Death. We are all expecting death. A death that we deserve.

The man-god starts crying. Crying so loud that everyone in the building can hear him. He takes off his headdress, and starts wiping off his makeup. He transforms himself into someone who looks like us. Using our own language and dialect, he announces himself. He says, "I am Joseph!"

We are so terrified that we cannot answer any of his questions. Now we know we deserve death at the hands of the man in front of us. Instead, we get unfathomable grace.

Instead, he pulls us close and explains things in an entirely different way.

He says that God allowed him to be sold into Egypt so he could save lives. He tells us there would be five more years of famine, and he was put in this place to save our lives by a great deliverance. What we meant for evil, God meant for good.

He tells us to hurry back to our father and explain everything to him. He tells us to bring back our father, Joseph's father, and all of our community. He will have us live in the land of Goshen where he will take care of us.

There is a rush of emotion. He hugs me, and we both weep. All of us hug and kiss and weep. He can't wait to see our father.

The Pharaoh hears the story, and loads us down with gifts and carts for our return. We don't bother to bring all of our possessions because Joseph will fill our every need. On the way out of the city, Joseph looks serious and says, with a wink, "No fighting on the way home."

As you can imagine, our father... ecstatic beyond expression. He gets to see Joseph, the one he loves so much, he gets to see him before he dies. And none of us are jealous about it.

On the way to Egypt, God speaks to my father. He tells him not to be afraid, because he will be made into a great nation there, and will someday be brought back out.

When we arrive, we realize we have 70 direct descendants of Israel, our father. Through four generations and we are only 70 people. It seems as if God is moving very slowly in making our family a great nation. We do not know that the stability of living in Egypt will cause our birth rates to soar.

We arrive in Goshen, the land the Egyptians despise because it was only good for shepherds. Joseph arrives in his chariot, and he and his father have an indescribable reunion.

Later, Joseph presents our father to Pharaoh, and he blesses Pharaoh. We are granted the land of Goshen to live in.

Over the next five years, Joseph purchases almost the entirety of the land of Egypt with the grain he had stored. He does not buy the land of the priests. He rents the land back to the people in return for 20 percent of the harvest.

Before our father dies, he blesses Joseph's sons, and takes them as his own. That is why the Tribe of Joseph is known as the two half-tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh. He blesses all of his other sons, too. With those blessings, we begin to have an inkling that our family's future lays in the family of Judah.

Our father lives seventeen more years. He makes Joseph promise that when his people leave Egypt that they will take his bones with them and bury them with his forefathers and Rebekah. Years later, on his deathbed, Joseph makes the same request. It will be four centuries later before those requests are fulfilled.