



*Becoming Fully Devoted Followers
by Studying the Followers Before Us*

WEEK 5
ABRAHAM'S SONS

JANUARY 29 - FEBRUARY 4, 2007

DAY	DIRECTED READING	DEVOTIONAL READING	<i>THROUGH THE BIBLE READING</i>
Monday	Genesis 30-31:3	Psalm 21	Genesis 30-31
Tuesday	Genesis 32:1-2, 9-12	Psalm 22	Genesis 32-33
Wednesday	Genesis 37	Psalm 23	Genesis 34-36
Thursday	Genesis 41	Psalm 24	Genesis 37-40
Friday	Genesis 42-43:1	Psalm 25	Genesis 41-44



Glenkirk
church

Connecting people to abundant life.

READ

Genesis 25:19-34

Psalms 21

REFLECT

Isaac is something of a departure in the Genesis story of Abraham's immediate descendants. On the one hand he is the child of promise, the subject of much planning and anguish on Abraham's part, and of the severest test Abraham experienced. On the other hand, the stories about Isaac are mostly about his connection with his father Abraham or his son Jacob. Even though he is the focus of God's plan for Israel and indeed for the world, he himself appears almost as a transitional figure between generations, reflecting the concerns and actions of others more often than acting himself.

Isaac is the first person to receive circumcision at his birth as a sign of the covenant (Gen 21:4). This, as well as God's "testing" of Abraham through the command to sacrifice Isaac, affirms that Isaac and not another is indeed the one through whom God will fulfill his promise to Abraham that "in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed" (22:15-19). Abraham is very careful, in selecting a wife for his son, to keep the promise of God from being diluted or ignored: Isaac's wife is to come from his own family (not as Esau's wives, Gen 26:34-35), but she must be willing to leave her home and live in the land of promise (Gen 24:1-9). The long and delightful story of the trip of the anonymous servant of Abraham, and his way of finding a suitable wife for Isaac (24:10-67), highlights the winning qualities of this woman who is to become part of the history of the promise. When we hear that Isaac, upon meeting her at long last, accepted her and loved her (24:67), it seems to reflect upon the wisdom of Abraham and the servant, and the excellencies of Rebecca, as much as anything else. He is a lucky guy, and he knows it.

As Isaac becomes the patriarch of the family after Abraham's death, he certainly moves into a clear leadership role. As Abraham had to do,

he must maintain strong relationships with the surrounding peoples, who otherwise might threaten his growing tribe. He tries the same subterfuge that his father did, of passing off Rebecca as his sister because he had no sister to offer to ensure a treaty, and he too is caught at it, and for him too the result is increased wealth (26:1-11). He ensures the legacy of the wells he inherited from Abraham: he “dug again the wells of his father,” a phrase that has spurred many sermons about the value of harking back to the vital resources of tradition (26:18). Under his care, the people of promise become less nomadic and begin to find permanent roots in the south of the land, especially at Beersheba. In consolidating and extending his inheritance from Abraham, Isaac has provided a season of peace and growth for the tribe that will contrast markedly with the upheavals that will come under Jacob and Joseph. As a respecter of the past, he has kept tradition fresh; as a steward of the future, he has prepared the ground well for the Lord’s work in the next generation.

The Psalm for today is written about such a ruler as Isaac, who knows his God and knows his role as the protector of the people and of the legacy of God. “For the king trusts in the Lord, and through the lovingkindness of the Most High he will not be shaken” (Psalm 21:7). The result of the effective leadership of this king is not his own glorification, but the glorification of the Lord who called him and supported him: “Be exalted, O Lord, in Thy strength. We will sing and praise Thy power.” (Psalm 21:13)

RESPOND

Make a short list of 3-5 things you respect the most about the way your mother and/or father dealt with life. Do the same thing for a respected spiritual “parent.” How are these gifts of inheritance being kept alive in your relationships with others?

PRAY

Lord, We thank you for your faithfulness, that is from generation to generation. But we thank you also that your faithfulness is for us today. As we are faithful in the small things, we know you are being faithful in the great things.

D.D.

READ

Genesis 16 and 21:8-20

Psalm 22

REFLECT

Before we move on to look at the descendants of Abraham by his son Isaac, it is worthwhile looking more closely at Isaac's older brother Ishmael, as well as Ishmael's mother, the servant Hagar. It is easy to ignore the attention given to them in the Bible, and the care with which their particular situation is handled.

As we noted last week, Abraham and Sarah attempted to manipulate the fulfillment of God's promise for a child by deciding to use Hagar as the surrogate mother. Since this was not the way God had planned to bring about His word, the situation led to unbearable tensions in the family, before and after Isaac was born. When it became clear that Hagar was actually with child, Sarah became fiercely jealous and treated her with such harshness that Hagar tried to escape into the wilderness (Gen 16:4-16). It was the Lord who met her, and spoke to her, asking her to return and submit to the couple that had used her so despicably. In that conversation, Hagar responded to the Lord by naming him with a new name, "The God Who Sees." Commentators note that she is the only person in all of Scripture who suggests a name for God; in other cases, it is God who discloses appropriate names to His people for their prayer and worship (such as in Exodus 3:13-14).

After the birth of Isaac, the child of promise, Sarah again developed such animosity for Hagar and her son that she demanded they be sent away. This time the Lord concurred (Gen 21:9-14), and He also ensured their survival by His personal presence and provision (21:15-21). Furthermore, he made a personal promise to her that Ishmael too would be the father of a huge nation. After recording the death of Abraham, Genesis records the "generations of Ishmael," that is, his descendents, listing no less than twelve tribes of the Arab peoples (25:12-18).

Why does the Bible give so much prominence, even honor, to Hagar and Ishmael? One part of the answer that is sometimes given is that it

points to the greatness of Abraham. But really the Scriptures are never about the greatness of people, but rather the extent to which people are willing to forego greatness and allow the Lord to be glorified. A better reason may be that Ishmael's story serves to remind Israel that God's choice to bless them could have gone another direction. No tribe really distinguished itself as inherently great and worthy of God's blessing. It was always God's initiative that gave a people the sense of His presence and blessing. Ishmael serves to remind Israel that no one is worthy of the blessings of the Lord.

I find it interesting to read the story of Ishmael over against the Psalm for today. The 22nd Psalm is most notable for supplying the words of Jesus in the cross: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" As a prayer within the tradition of Israel, it is almost blasphemous, avoiding that offense only by affirming the faithfulness of God even in the context of despair (Psalm 22:1, 11, 24). But here is what I notice: it could well be the cry of a Hagar or an Ishmael, wondering why the line of promise should bypass them rather than include them. But this Psalm, expressing the depth of despair, also points to the resolution of it: it points to the cross of Jesus, which would allow peoples from all tribes and nations to come and find life in the blessings of God. The pain of Ishmael's exclusion would be taken on by God himself, in death and resurrection, so that fellowship and purpose could be restored to Ishmael's people the Arabs – as well as Europeans, Africans, American Indians, and every tribe and nation under heaven (Rev 7:9-10).

RESPOND

It is easy within families for certain members to be privileged over others as representing more promise or gifting. The pain that results can affect even adult relationships. But Christianity provides, as part of its great power, a perspective from which such held-over animosities may be diluted or eliminated, as God's love helps us to heal and to extend love in fresh ways.

PRAY

"Oh, the love that drew salvation's plan; Oh, the grace that brought it down to man; Oh, the mighty gulf that God did span – at Calvary."

D.D.

READ

Genesis 27:1-28:5, 10-22

Psalms 23

REFLECT

Jacob and Esau are the two sons of Isaac. They are twins, and their relationship to each other will be defined not only by close kinship but by conflict. Jacob, as the younger twin, emerged from Rebecca's womb clutching Esau's heel, and his name ("Jacob" means "heel-grabber") implies he will supplant his older brother in position and influence (Gen 25:21-26). Once again, an important theme of this generation of biblical characters has to do with the tensions that emerge when God fulfills his plan through the younger brother (as with Ishmael and Isaac).

Jacob's success over Esau is predicted in a word to Rebecca from the Lord, when she inquires why there is so much strife in her womb. The Lord tells her that the twins represent two nations, and that the younger twin/nation will be served by the older twin/nation. Esau is known as the father of the land of Edom (25:30), and so the ongoing historical clashes between Israel and Edom were seen as an outworking of this personal animosity.

The surprising thing about Jacob's emergence into his place in God's plan is that it involves so much of Jacob's own craftiness and duplicity. He gets Esau to bargain away his birthright by catching him in a moment of hunger; or rather, it might better be said that he manipulates the circumstance to get Esau to show that "Esau despised his birthright" (25:30). More clearly reprehensible is his deception of his blind father Isaac, with Rebecca's assistance, in which he also obtains Isaac's generational blessing, intended for Esau (27:1-41). Here the future of Israel seems to unfold not because of Isaac but in spite of him. It is Rebecca that received the prophetic word of Jacob's ultimate triumph, and it is she that runs the risk of a curse (27:13) in order to bring it about.

We saw last week that Abraham and Sarah, in the previous generation, had also tried to manipulate the plan of God through the

conception of Ishmael. This story seems to offer the other side of the coin: Rebecca again manipulates circumstances, but in this case it results in fulfillment. Does this encourage us to do the same, to try somehow to manipulate God into showering His blessings upon us? Not in the least, since Jacob's deception forced him to flee house and home until he could return and look Esau in the face – and until he himself had been the victim of the costly deception of his uncle Laban (29:21-30). Jacob's story would not be over until he had risen above all his manipulative impulses, and had learned to live simply in the will and the grace of the Lord (49:28-33).

What of Esau? I have the manuscript of a sermon preached by my great-great-grandfather in 1863, in which he argues that Esau must have heard all his life not only of his birthright but also of the Lord God of Abraham and Isaac. Thus in despising the birthright, he showed contempt for the Lord as well. This is probably close to the intention of the story. Jacob for all his underhandedness ultimately gave his life in service of the Lord. Esau for all his simple and frank enjoyment of life ultimately turned away from service of the Lord. The two figures continue to remind us that in life there is only "one thing needful" (Luke 10:42), namely, to receive the grace of God as it is extended to us, and to expect that our lives will be changed forever.

RESPOND

Many of us can look back on certain of our choices with regret, feeling that we bypassed something the Lord was doing. But these Bible stories indicate that the Lord has a deeper grasp of circumstances than that, and that He is able to carry on His plan for us perfectly well simply as we yield to His love today. What good news this is! "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want."

PRAY

Lord, We thank you for the depths of your grace today, and confess our full dependence on you for the best that life has to offer. (Close by praying Psalm 23 as a prayer.)

D.D.

READ

Genesis 30:1 – 31:3

Psalm 24

REFLECT

The middle period of Jacob's life is defined by his lonely departure from Isaac's household and his 14-year stay with his uncle, Laban, back in the area of Haran, and his return to Canaan as the father of a huge and wealthy family. On the one hand, this part of the story continues to be driven by tales of deception and duplicity: Laban deceives Jacob into serving him for seven extra years (Gen 29:21-30), and Jacob manipulates the flock of Laban in order to achieve a greater, stronger herd for himself (30:37-3). The account of the conception and birth of the 12 sons of Jacob, and his daughter Dinah, seems to be a nightmarish revisiting of the jealousies of Sarah and Hagar. Behind all of this is the need for Jacob to compete and defeat his brother Esau, as well as to cope successfully with his uncle Laban. As these "foes" are met and resisted, Jacob comes into a new third stage of his life, that of the aged and wise patriarch.

On the other hand, the middle period of Jacob's life, in all its imperfection and humanness, is also bookended by encounters with the Lord, and reiterations of the promise made to his family. Upon leaving Isaac's home upon Rebecca's advice, Jacob stops to sleep in a deserted spot, and has a dream of angels ascending and descending a staircase (28:10-17) – what has since become famous as "Jacob's Ladder." The Lord promises land and descendants, and personal provision as he travels. Years later, when Jacob is reentering Canaan, and wondering what his reception will be from his wronged brother Esau, he engages in a mysterious wrestling match with "a man" who is unable to defeat him, but leaves his thigh dislocated. Jacob will not release him until he blesses him – and here we glimpse that this "man" may be an angel (Hosea 12:4), and perhaps in some way God himself (Gen 32:22-32). The Blessing is a renaming: Jacob, the "heel grabber," will be known as Israel, "the one who strives with God." Jacob has successfully met the

tests of his life as represented by the threats brought by other men, and he has transcended them. He is now focused on the real life-partner worth relating to: God Himself. This change is reaffirmed when he returns to the site of the dream of “Jacob’s Ladder,” and builds a permanent altar to God there (35:6-15). Psalm 24 even knows him as the prototype of the worshipper who comes to God without deceit! (Psalm 24:4, 6)

The main problem we might feel in reading these stories is how to reconcile the high theology with the low humanity. Here I find of great importance what may be the most delightful aspect of these chapters, namely, the astonishing details that bring humor, drama, life, and personal nuance to these stories. Jacob’s stone pillow (ouch!) becomes a pillar to God. The strengthening of his flock is achieved through a crazy husbandry scheme. Rachel deceives her father in a ruse a man would never challenge. The men of Shechem are defeated because they are tricked into circumcision (ouch again!). It is significant to me that these stories don’t get flattened just because they are part of the “holy history.” Rather, the Lord seems to take special care to work actively, sometimes against, and sometimes through, these very human foibles. It is the interest God takes, as it were, in these people as they are, that wins Him the title of God of these people. It also wins Him the title of their Savior. He takes them as He finds them, commits Himself to them, and brings them into experiences and possibilities that they could never have achieved on their own. High theology engages low humanity where it lives, and gives meaning to the present, and hope to the future.

RESPOND

The honesty of these stories, and the integrity Jacob finally receives from the Lord (Psalm 24:5-6), challenge us to seek deeper integrity through an open relationship with the Lord, and with others. Honesty is not always honored in human society, but integrity is gold in the kingdom of God.

PRAY

Dear Lord, we thank you that you meet us where we are, and make our concerns your own. We also thank you that you help us grow to meet you, and to be there for others in your name.

D.D.

READ

Genesis 32:1-2, 9-12, 22-32; 35:9-15

Psalm 25

REFLECT

The third portion of Jacob's life, as he settles in the area of Beersheba with his large family, is marked by a deep wisdom and maturity not necessarily predictable in his younger years. This period is not without its upsets. The family jealousies ignited by Jacob's favoring of Joseph will mean upheaval, finally transferring the tribe to the land of Egypt. While he lives, Jacob provides some degree of stability or anchor to the family, representing the decency that keeps the next generation from going too far with their impulses. In his last act, he prophesies over each of his sons and the tribes that each one would foster, declaring in so many words that this wild band of men nevertheless has a place, each one, in the heart and mind of God, and each has a particular part of the future.

As we look at the rest of the Old Testament and at the New Testament for the mentions of Jacob, we find that he is remembered for this third phase, for his mature faith. The most frequent appearance of his name is as a name for the whole tribe itself; this people is known especially as "Israel," but also as "Jacob" (for instance, Psalm 14:7). The Lord is frequently designated as "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." We hear in that usage the acceptance of Jacob as a symbol of faith. The detail recalled in the book of Hebrews is poignant: "By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshiped, leaning on the top of his staff" (Heb 11:21). The young man startled into awareness by a vision of angels became the patriarch ready to worship.

Jacob is also remembered as clearly exemplifying the sinner called into relationship by God. We have seen this again and again in the

stories of how God called Israel into being: “You did not choose me, but I chose you, and appointed you, that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain.” These words express the reality of God’s initiative in creating Israel as a people to serve Him, although they come from the New Testament (John 15:16). Thus Jacob was remembered as the beneficiary of God’s unmerited grace: “‘I have loved you,’ says the Lord . . . ‘Was not Esau Jacob’s brother?’ declares the Lord. ‘Yet I have loved Jacob, but I have hated Esau’” (Malachi 1:2,3). God’s love, and not Jacob’s own worthiness, was the heart of the relationship. The covenant was a gift from God to this people, and became the basis for a rich national history.

That note is clearly sounded in yesterday’s Psalm, as we noted: “He shall receive a blessing from the Lord, and righteousness from the God of his salvation. This is the generation of those who seek Him, who seek Thy face – even Jacob” (Psalm 24:5-6). The gift of righteousness is the gift of covenant status. It is the gift of relationship where relationship would otherwise be impossible. Here is Jacob’s legacy. He came to know and to live out the gift of God in relationship. As Christians, we understand that Jesus, a son of Jacob as well as Son of God, gave His life to allow the relationship to be possible for us too. It is a gift that no one can earn, but that inevitably lifts and changes our lives.

RESPOND

The fundamental response to God’s offer of relationship is to lift ourselves to His love and His will for us. Here Psalm 25, today’s Psalm, is a powerful guide.

PRAY

“Unto Thee, O Lord, do I lift up my soul.” Psalm 25:1

- Dave Dorman