

An Introduction

Good day everyone, Marge Hanna here, joining you for your Introductory day wherever you are meeting. I am sitting in my lounge room in Kingston, Tasmania, just south of Hobart with a lovely beach to walk on, and Mount Wellington as always, dominating the skyline behind us. I've been in Tasmania since my husband Graham and I came to Australia with our three young sons in 1975. I moved to Kingston several years ago now to be near one of their three families.

I've been connected with CWCI and KYB for over 35 years of my time in Australia, on committees and boards, and also most enjoyably leading KYB and KYBTOO groups, first in Hobart, then Launceston and after Graham died, back down here in a unit in Kingston. We meet fortnightly and are only a small group, but we do enjoy searching out God's word together.

My grandchildren are now all adults with one great-grandson bringing in the new generation too. Families are so very important, aren't they?

God's Big Picture

Sue Gleeson, in the study book which you may already have in your hand, has prepared great material for us to search out the truths and applications that arise out of a *fascinating* family story. It's full of characters, and, over the weeks you'll get to know them quite well. You'll see how all the circumstances, the ups and downs and sometimes hair-raising situations into which they all get themselves, how these are taken, and used by God.

God not only turns even the worst of those situations around, to teach both the individual and the whole group the lessons they need to learn, but also to bring rich blessings to them all. And as the story unfolds you will see how God, who, as Sue says, is really the chief Character in this story, is all the while working out his purposes for their good, and his glory. There is a great nation to be built and settled, in the future, in this land of Canaan.

Canaan is to be the place where, even further in the future, a baby will be born. The earthly father, another Joseph, is told that he is to name the baby, 'Jesus' for this child will save the people from their sins. The whole of the Old Testament scripture points to a cross, on a hill, outside a city called Jerusalem, in Canaan.

Also, there are people in Canaan and in Egypt who right at the time of our story need to be introduced to the one, true God. As this family obediently worships, lives and flourishes, under God's gracious hand and becomes a nation, they are to be a model and a blessing to *all* nations.

God had called Abraham to leave his home-town, Ur of the Chaldeans, a very large and prosperous city in Mesopotamia, where Abraham had been born, grown up and married his wife, Sarah. Abraham was given firm promises by God that we read of in Genesis 12:1-3. He was to travel to an unknown destination that God promised to show him and then he was to settle there. You might like to turn to it, Genesis 12:1-3

pause.... The LORD had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.

²"I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you;
I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.

³I will bless those who bless you and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

The Story Begins!

Now the beginning of the story was when Terah, Abraham's father, took his family and went on the long journey to Harran over 1000km north of Ur.

The plan *had* been to go on to Canaan, but they became settled there in Harran. It was a thriving city at this time, on the caravan routes used by traders, as well as travellers, like themselves, from Ur and Babylon in the south, and from Aleppo in Syria to the south-west and Nineveh to the east. Maybe for Terah it had a familiar feel to their own pagan home-city. But Terah died there and Nahor, Abraham's brother, settled permanently in that region.

However, after some time, probably more than a year, Abraham took Sarah and his nephew Lot and set off again to Canaan in obedience to God. This journey was one of around 640kms.

And God continued to speak! Over the years he repeated these promises made to Abraham and to his son Isaac, and then spoke specifically to Jacob who was the father of the young man with whom we are to spend the next few weeks. Joseph!

Where are we?

Now I am sure that in the back of many Bibles there will be a map of this whole area of the Middle east in the time of the Patriarchs, those family members from Abraham down, and so to Joseph.

Why don't we pause now so that you can have a look at a map and also see if there is one that includes Egypt. Then perhaps you might like to pray that God will open up his word to us.

Pause disc

Did you find Ur and Harran?

The city of Ur had a population of at least a quarter of a million people and was part of a sophisticated and cultured society. There is evidence of commerce and the manufacturing of goods and trading with other parts of the known world. It is most likely that goods from India and other places were carried up-river to Ur, from the Persian Gulf.

More than 300 hundred gods were worshipped, and a blue and silver temple stood on top of a tower 150 feet above street level. Idols were made here and sold, and markets, a library and schools surrounded the temple area.

It was from this pagan atmosphere and lifestyle that great-grandfather Abraham was called by God. The gods of Ur and Mesopotamia did not speak a word. They could not, but the God who called Abraham to leave this world of degrading religious practises, of magic, of ritual prostitution and bondage – this God *did* speak, as he had been speaking to his people since he created them.

A Relationship Broken

In fact, Genesis 1 tells us that God spoke the entire *creation* of the cosmos into being. And he continues to speak, now through his written word, as the Holy Spirit enlightens our minds to understand it. So, as we get to know him, he communicates, and we respond. Back in the garden of Genesis 2, that was the fellowship he had planned, not as an 'extraordinary' or mystical experience for the few, but for all his family members.

The Bible tells us that we are *not* the result of a series of accidents of nature, but the *special* creation of the living personal God into his beautiful cosmos, and where he set us down on this big blue planet, we call earth, our home. We were created to love him and to love each other. We are made in his likeness, in his image, and that is why we are so important and precious to him.

That's another way of saying that God created us to have a real relationship with himself. In this study you will come across some very difficult and messy relationships in Jacob's family – and *this* is the family into which Jesus, the Son of Man would eventually be born, to live and die, and restore the most precious of all relationships, that one that is between each believer, and God the Father himself.

It was back at the beginning of Genesis, in the garden, that we read how God began that process of the repairing of the relationship that was broken. Satan, that snake, who had suggested to Adam and Eve the first “fake news” of God's reasons for forbidding them to eat the fruit of that *one* tree in the whole garden, followed it up with the deliberate lie that their disobedience would not cause them to die. They listened to that fake news and lies, and desired what God had not intended for them, total independence from him.

By their disobedient action that day they told God in effect ‘I'll do it my way’ ‘I'll be the captain of my own ship, thank you’ And we all know how that ended – their world and ours, torn apart by hatred, selfishness, greed, and lust, and all that spoilt the beauty of life in God's good world – sin, in all its ugliness. It was a way of death, not just physical, but the death of that relationship with God they had once enjoyed. Adam and then all mankind – as Adam's name means – continues to experience both physical death and separation from God.

A relationship to be restored

But Adam and Eve heard God tell Satan what was in store for him. Satan's head would be crushed by an offspring of Eve. Satan may attack the heel of this future one, but he would not prevail. A Saviour, who would indeed be an offspring of Eve, would come and purchase our salvation.

God did not forget his promise, and over time he continued to speak to individual members of families. He spoke to Noah, and Noah's son Shem became the ancestor of the Semitic people, the Semites, who inhabited a large area of what we call The Middle East and one day long, long, after the flood and in a time of pagan idol worship in that city of Ur, he spoke to Abraham. You can see Abraham's family tree in Genesis 11 all the way back to Shem.

You might like to have a quick look at that now. No need to read it all but just see how the line comes down to Abram, as he was then called, and his brothers Nahor and Haran. It's all in verses 10–32. Note how long they all lived, especially Shem. Some quick arithmetic is needed to see at what age most of them died!

Pause disc.....

God's call on the 'unlikely'

God continued to choose one man in a family to call out specifically. And it was not always the firstborn son, but often another son who perhaps at first glance was the most unlikely choice. And God kept on speaking and it was Jacob's second youngest son, Joseph, who was now to come to know this God who speaks.

And that is all ahead of us in our study! And it is a fascinating story of how a family, torn apart by all the results of sin in each individual's life, is under God's good hand. They are moulded and changed, so that *first of all* the family is *preserved*, and then is richly *blessed* to prosper and become that nation that God would use to bless the entire world. God's sovereign plans were not to be thwarted!

Understanding their times and ours!

Now, I don't know about you, but I find it really hard to get a handle on those BC dates. Counting backwards has never been one of my skills, so where do I start to get an idea of *when* all this happened? Time-lines, informative as they certainly are, just don't help me to visualise where these 4 generations *are* in the Old Testament history, in relation to us. It was a very long time before Jesus came, in very ancient times wasn't it? Well yes.... and no!

We are *not* given times and dates in the pre-history of our planet's creation, but we do have all those genealogical lists that crop up from the beginning of Genesis and sometimes seem to be an interruption to the story! But actually, they are the story! They are a part of the history of 'us', as the people of God.

Most scholars place the call of Abraham and so the life of the patriarchs we read of in Genesis, from the 21st down to the 19th centuries BC. However, some place them much *later* and therefore, closer to the time of Christ. Archaeology continues, and new discoveries will no doubt reveal more information in coming years.

So, how can we helpfully visualise, taking that first view, the 'when' of what we are going to study.

Here is a suggestion! I have to confess I think best in pictures! Feel free to 'doodle' along with me if you would like to!

Short Pause..... to find paper and pencil if needed

Picture, 2 mountains, one on either side of a page, those triangular ones, both with cloud covering their summits. On the plain between the mountains there is a city and, on a hill just outside the city, is a cross. Now, imagine *you* are climbing up the right-hand mountain called Mount 'AD', Mount Anno Domini, the year of our Lord! As you climb you notice that the markers are not in *metres above sea level*, but in *years* beyond the time of Jesus who died on that cross.

You pass the 500-year, 1000-year, and 1500- year markers, and just beyond the 2000-year marker you stop! Now turn and look straight across the valley floor at the mountain on the other side of the valley called Mount 'BC' The cloud covering the top of Mount BC tells us that we cannot see where it all began in those *pre-history* times, just as when we look up at the top of our AD mountain we cannot tell when Jesus, will return and wrap up all of time.

But as you look directly across the valley at around the 2000-year marker on Mount BC, there is Abraham. Now we need to start looking a little *lower* down, he leaves Harran when he is 75 and, see him in Canaan at 100 years old when his son Isaac is born. Isaac is 40 years old when *his* son Jacob is born. And there, a good number of years below on Mount BC, you can see Jacob's family. He has 12 sons, with the second youngest, now 17 years old – Joseph. Quite a family! And that is where our story begins! Somewhere in the *early* 1800s on Mount BC.

This gives me a clearer perspective! The 1890s AD in my family was when some of my Dad's 3 older brothers were born, my uncles and the great, great, *great*, uncles of our youngest family member! The earliest times suggested for Abraham are not much further up the BC mountain in the scheme of things, than where we are standing today in the 2020s on the AD mountain. Certainly not back in the mists of time where I have tended to place them, and do remember, they did live a great deal longer than my relatives!

These families were approximately the same distance from the time of Jesus as we are but on the other side of the cross! Certainly, no further up the BC mountain.

If some of you have been 'doodling' along with me, you might like a couple of minutes to complete your work of art and think about the time-line of this family! Compare it with your family time-line.

Pause the disc.....

The Canaan where Jacob settled with his family

Let's have a look at what life was like both in Caanan and in the Egypt that will occupy much of the story we are to follow during this study. Those maps could come in very handy again!

On the Mediterranean side of Israel is a coastal plain which narrows as you travel further north. This was the obvious route between Egypt and Syria and on to Babylonia in the North East, but wide river mouths, sand dunes, swamps and an appropriate track through Mount Carmel at the northern end, plus the availability of drinking water all the way, all these factors had to be considered.

Israel is a very mountainous country with a central mountain range that runs like a spine from Galilee in the North down to the Negev Highlands in the South. And strangely it is across the ridge of this very hilly area that roads tended to track. There are deep wadis – rather like our gullies – that run off the range to the east and west, with the streams of water either reaching the Mediterranean or the spectacular rift valley with the Jordan river to the East. The wadis are boulder strewn, with water flowing in the winter months which made traversing them lower down the mountain sides, both difficult and dangerous,

That rift valley extends for almost 6000 km from Southern Turkey down through the Red Sea and into Africa! And 240 kms of it are in Israel. And this part of it is very famous!

There is plenty of rainfall at the Northern end where mighty Mount Hermon's snow- melt and numerous rivers feed the Jordan river and supply Lake Galilee, where the floor of the rift valley has dropped to around 210 metres *below* sea level. At the Southern end, the Jordan flows into the Dead Sea, where the *shore* is 400 metres below sea level, the lowest land on earth, and 790 metres at its lowest point. Here there is almost no rain fall.

On the other side of the Jordan the Transjordan mountains rise steeply from the rift-valley floor, and then from their summits descend much more gently as they merge into the Eastern desert. Ur was on the far side of that desert and so the route that Terah and his family took, was not across it, but around it, up north to Harran and then down into Canaan.

The place Joseph called home

But to find our family we need to take a virtual route straight back to that central mountain range and find Hebron, to the west of the dead Sea, quite high up on hills at around the 1000 metre mark. There is good rainfall here and as you go north the rainfall increases. Farming on these the hillsides, in narrow, stone walled terraces, just 15 to 30 meters wide, is typical all up through Galilee too.

These western slopes are very productive, and Hebron seems to have already been a city when Abraham pitched his quite extensive camp nearby, with flocks of sheep and goats finding good pasture. The location of this city of Abraham's time has not yet been found. This community did not see Abraham and his large household, as any threat. In fact, he was very respected in this area.

At Hebron, the produce of the hill country, wheat, barley, olives, grapes, pomegranates and other fruits could be bartered for sheep, donkeys, camels and leather goods which were brought up from the desert regions further south.

It was to Hebron eventually after much trauma in his life that Jacob returned to his father Isaac's encampment, with his now large family and settled there for some time.

It was probably from Hebron that Joseph was sent by his father to find and report on his 10 older brothers, as they had taken their flocks of sheep and goats to the region around Shechem about 80 km to the north.

You will discover in the study, that Shechem was a place one would imagine the brothers would have avoided, they would not be welcome there.

These were dangerous times, and we are shocked sometimes by what we read. We learn from this and many other instances, that the Bible writers were the *narrators* of the story, they were not *commentators* on it, and so it comes to us in unemotional terms, without their censure or condemnation of the situation they are describing.

And we do find that by the time Joseph had trudged 80kms along that ridge road and reached the Shechem area, that there was no sign of the encampment and flocks he was seeking. Someone took pity on him and asked him what he was looking for and was able to inform him that his brothers had said "Let's go to Dothan" and so it begins. We continue to be shocked by what comes next as Joseph trudges the last of those 24kms and comes in sight of his brother's tents.

But please do remember, all the while *God* is in control here, and will use every situation they all get themselves into, and turn them around to bring about *his* plans and purposes for this family.

The Egypt Joseph was exiled to

But what was Egypt like at the time of Jacob and his family?

It was ruled by the Pharaohs, the head of state as well as the religious leader. In our story the Pharaoh is not named and there is still some debate among the scholars as to which one was in power when our family encountered him! Their religion was, as the pyramids have revealed, very concerned with death and the after-life. However, much was learned about *everyday-life* at the time of the *death* of the occupant, by examining all the goods and chattels that were buried with them and so have been amazingly preserved. Their art-work too tells many stories!

Egypt's dominant feature is of course the Nile river which made life in Egypt possible at all and which flooded regularly to make the growing of crops and the feeding of livestock even a possibility on the narrow strips of land on its banks!

Like Ur, Egypt was a highly developed and cultured society. It was very prosperous, with possibly as many as nine new pyramids being built. Literature, art, and letters all were flourishing at this time of peace and prosperity.

At the Nile Delta, at the most northern part of the river, a triangular area is marked out by the Nile dividing into two main branches as it enters the Mediterranean. It is here that our family will make their home eventually, towards the end of the story. Without giving any more away for those for whom this *is* a new adventure story, the area of Goshen in the rich and fertile eastern area of the delta was an ideal place for shepherds to pasture their flocks. A good fit, for one family?

The delta is well supplied with fertile silt washed down over thousands of years, and so settlements were built on the higher ground between a network of irrigation canals. These supported crops and orchards, vineyards and fig trees, with pastures for cattle in bible times. And of course, there was an abundance of fish, in the river and the sea, and ducks and geese and wild fowl provided food a-plenty!

Asian traders as well as those from Canaan and Mesopotamia carried goods to and from Egypt. Trade was very important and camel trains plied the ridges of the mountains of Canaan, and even these, as you will see, are directed and guided by the loving hand of a Sovereign Lord whose care and plans for one special family, and one somewhat proud and tactless 17-year-old, are as detailed as they are gracious.

The story of Joseph *is* truly 'amazing'! You may know the musical version that has made this young man's life-story well-known. But as we read the *Bible* version and begin to know and see this family as God sees them, and Joseph in particular, may we see the hand of that gracious and all-knowing God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and learn the lessons along with them, that God wants to teach us.

So, let's pray together

Gracious Father, we come to you as Sovereign Lord, the same yesterday, today and forever, the One who never changes. We praise you for your good hand on your servants of old, who heard you speak, believing your promises, and obeying your instructions.

May we too see your good and gracious hand on *our* lives as we live by the power of your Holy Spirit in an attentive and obedient relationship with you. Thank you, Lord Jesus, for your death on the cross for us, in our place, so that forgiveness of our sin, and a new eternal life in relationship with our Father was made possible. Help us to listen to your Word speaking to us as we study it together. Give us open minds, willing hearts and obedient wills

We ask it in the precious name of our Saviour, Jesus Christ our Lord

Amen

Sharing instances of God's sovereign control of our lives

You might like to take a few minutes to share an experience of the Lord's overruling in the circumstances in *your* life. That time you look back on with awe and wonder as you *now* see the path on which he led you.

Thank you for allowing me to join you today.
May God bless you richly as you study together.