

KYB study: Genesis 25-36-God builds a people.

1. Introduction

Welcome to a new term of KYB and the beginning of our third series on Genesis. My name is Maree Stavert. I am a KYB leader and it has been my great privilege to be part of the editing team for this study.

My favourite novel (and movie) is called *To Kill a Mockingbird*. It is a book about some children in a small town in the American South during the 1930s. It is a great story, told from a child's point of view, with a child's innocence and sometimes clear vision. It is often very funny. But there is a much deeper level to this story, because it exposes the ugliness and injustice of racial inequality.

C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* is similar: a great adventure story about four children who enter another world, but at a deeper level the story helps explain the nature of the gospel.

Why do I mention these books? Because the central part of Genesis is a great story also. If you have never read it before, can I suggest that when you go home, you sit with a cup of tea or coffee and read chapters 25-36 straight through. If you have enough time you could start back at chapter 12.

For many of you the stories may already be familiar. I remember once at church, Genesis was announced as the new sermon series and one woman said '*Why are we doing this? I learnt all these stories in Sunday School!*' I should probably add that for this woman, Sunday School was a very, very long time ago, so even the stories probably needed revision. But like *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, there is so much more to Genesis than great stories. We want to explore that depth and importance for us this term. Working on the study was a great feast and blessing for me. It is my prayer that it will be for you too.

2. Background

Let's start with the basic background questions we ask of any Bible book or passage.

a) What is the time setting?

Well, Abraham, in the section immediately before our study lived about 2000 BC, give or take a century or so. So this section, dealing with his sons and grandsons, begins perhaps about 1900 or 1800 BC.

b) Where is the story set?

You might find a map helpful for the study; many bibles contain some at the back. The action takes place mostly in central and southern parts of Canaan, Israel today. We will meet Shechem in the middle of the land and Bethel only a little further south. The Mamre/Hebron area, where Abraham and Sarah were buried, is in the south, later called Judah. Isaac was based mostly in the far south region near Beersheba where there were wells. It is in the northern part of the Negev. Negev is a word which means both dry and south. This helps us understand the circumstances behind some of the Isaac stories.

The second centre of action is outside the land. Jacob travelled from Canaan back to northwest Mesopotamia, that is the land between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, to Harran, the home of Abraham's extended family. It is often referred to in Genesis as Paddan Aram, which means Plains of Aram. Aram is the ancient name for Syria. So Paddan Aram is Syrian plains. It is a bit under 1000km from Beersheba to Harran (today in Turkey near the Turkish/Syrian border), a long journey. When Jacob returned to Canaan he travelled via Gilead, now the northern part of modern Jordan, to the Jabbok river, a tributary of the Jordan river, which he then crossed to enter the land.

I find looking at a map helps me to step a little into the shoes of the bible people. It helps me to remember that these were real people living in real places, because those places are still there today.

c) What type of writing are we looking at?

The bible contains letters, poetry, prophecy and so on. This is narrative; as a true story it is history, but not in the sense of great kings, battles and the rise and fall of empires. It is a family saga, the story of what seems like a fairly ordinary family over several generations. We will hear how they deal with all the joys and challenges of life: love and marriages and children, drought and famine, grief over lack of children, family dysfunction and breakdown, difficulties with neighbours, greed, people trying to manipulate one another. Sounds pretty much like life today, doesn't it! All this makes it an interesting read, but why is such a story in the bible? This takes us to the question of who wrote it, when and why.

d) Writer?

Genesis doesn't say, but ancient tradition says it was Moses, using the oral and written records of his people. This would mean the book was written somewhere between 1400-1200 BC. Moses was writing for the people of Israel as they wandered in Sinai after the Exodus, before entering Canaan to claim it as their home. Deuteronomy 31 speaks of Moses finishing writing down the book of Deuteronomy, to be kept with the ark of the covenant, and to be read aloud at the Feast of Tabernacles to men, women and children, and resident strangers as well, so that they would learn to fear the Lord their God.

God's people needed to know the God they were to be faithful to, just as we still do. Genesis is where God reveals his character, his power and his ways of acting. And we discover that he hasn't changed. In every unit of this study, we will be asking: what is God doing in this situation, what does it show about his character and his purposes? In fact, Genesis 12-50 is all about God: about God gradually revealing himself and his character to one man, one family, one nation and revealing himself through that one man, family and nation.

3. Context - Promises

God began by speaking. What would we know of God and his nature if he had not deliberately revealed himself? In Genesis 12, he gives Abraham a command and a series of promises.

You might like to pause the CD and do 2 things in your group:

- Share with each other answers to the question: how good are you at keeping promises?
- And then read together Genesis 12:1-7.

Then resume the CD.

When I was a young mother, I remember several promise mishaps. Even when my promises were full of good intentions, I found that circumstances, forgetfulness, procrastination and personal inadequacy meant that promises were often not kept. In fact I decided it was safer not to make any promises at all to my children.

But God is not like that. As we see in that reading, He is a promise maker. And they are huge promises. Not much detail, but huge in scope. Abraham did not know this God well. *Could* he keep such promises? Would he *bother*? In other words, did he have the power and the reliable character to fulfil his promises?

By chapter 25, at the end of Abraham's life, the promises had been repeated several times and detail expanded, but had God kept those promises?

Blessing: yes, there had been amazing blessing - to Abraham, and through him, to others.

Children: in chapter 25 we read of Abraham's many sons who would form many nations as God had said. But of the promised great nation: by God's choice it was only one son, Isaac who had only 2 sons. The family did not look like a nation.

Land: the family lived in the land, but owned only a burial site which they had bought and some wells they had dug (and which locals would try to take back or destroy). But Abraham believed the promises, and that God could and would keep them.

As we begin the section which Genesis 25:29 heads 'the family line of Abraham's son Isaac', the question is: will Isaac trust these promises are also for him? Will he trust the God of his father? Will the God of Abraham be the God of Isaac? Will his sons trust this God? Will God show that he is worth trusting?

4. Characters

Isaac.

Only a few chapters are now focussed on Isaac, but we have already met him in the earlier section of Genesis. Isaac knew of the miraculous nature of his birth, fulfilling God's promise, and he had experienced a metaphorical 'second birth' in ch 22, when the Lord intervened to prevent him from being sacrificed. God provided a lamb instead of Isaac, just as Abraham had trusted he would. Isaac had also experienced God's amazing provision of a god-fearing wife, whom he came to love. In ch 24:63, he is revealed to us as a man who would go out into the fields in the evening to meditate and in ch 25:21 as a husband who would pray to the Lord for his wife, when they were in distress.

In our study this term, will this man of such promise stand out as a giant of faith? At times yes, but it may be you will be tempted to answer, no, and be disappointed, even when we see in ch 28 actions that speak of repentance. Be encouraged by Isaac's weaknesses. Why should I expect him to be a giant of faith when I am not? The much more important question is whether God will give up on someone whose faith sometimes lets him down.

I think you already know the answer to that, but Genesis is where God's faithful character is first revealed. I count on it every day. Because I let God down. There are moments of faith and then in another crisis, trust seems to disappear. Even in preparing this introduction, faith has been in short supply. Maybe I needed to find it difficult, to make me reach out to several friends to pray for it to come together; so that as it finally does, I will remember that the faithful God of Isaac is still the same today.

Esau and Jacob. The story moves quickly to Isaac's sons and then focusses in on Jacob. Many people, including many bible commentators, want to give up on Jacob. Don't do it! I know many people whose progress towards faith in the Lord has been a story of two steps forward, one step back. And we see this in the bible in Jacob. What matters is the nature of God in all this. In Genesis, we learn that the Lord is a persevering God. Look out for how he patiently draws Jacob towards himself and provides for his needs, shows the way forward. See how God takes Jacob's attempts to 'make it all happen' by his own effort with all their messy consequences and then how God uses those attempts for his purposes, to bring about his plans and keep his promises.

Rebekah, Leah and Rachel. We will see the faith and faith failings of all these women as they deal with all the joys and challenges of life. Look out for all the examples of God caring for them in their circumstances – and using them just as he does their husbands.

Isaac and Jacob summary

Despite all their human limitations, Isaac and Jacob both believe God's promises and the people they encounter usually make very positive comments about God, even when they are criticising Isaac and Jacob.

Later, when Moses asks God (Exodus 3:15) how to name him to Israel, God says: Say to the Israelites, 'the LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob has sent me to you.' We often focus there on his name, 'the Lord', but just as important is the way he is willing to be known through the rest of the Old Testament as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

And in the New Testament in Matthew 8:11, Jesus said 'I tell you that many will come from the east and the west (that is us as Gentile believers) and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven'. So look forward to meeting these Genesis people we are studying in heaven one day!

God

One of the things we may be tempted to do as we look at all these characters in Genesis is to weigh them up as good or bad moral examples. Are they 'goodies' or 'baddies'? There are some lessons to learn from them, but this is not one. We too easily forget that the bible shows us so plainly that we are all 'baddies' in need of God's grace.

The stories are here to show us how God keeps his promises, despite human inadequacy. The failings of God's people cannot make God fail. He will work through inadequate people.

None of the characters deserve God's grace, but the stories show us that he is a God of grace. He has been since the beginning and we are thankful because he still is.

In fact, as I said earlier, we realise that God is the chief character in our study. That is the true depth of the study.

5. Significance for us

We know that all scripture is profitable, useful for us. 2 Timothy 3:16 tells us this. But what is the particular exciting relevance of the stories of Genesis to us? You will discuss this across this term, but here are some of my thoughts:

- a) **Genesis is our heritage.** As Christians, we come to understand the character of God through Jesus, who showed us what God is like. We see the New Testament as our story, our family history, our spiritual heritage. And it is. But the New Testament teaches us that by adoption into Jesus, the Old Testament is also our spiritual heritage, our family history. In a sense,

Genesis shows the beginning of the gospel. As Christians, we are the spiritual children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Paul says in Romans 4 that Abraham is the father of all who believe.

b)

There is an old Christian song, now updated, that the children sing in playgroup at my church:

*Father Abraham has many kids,
Many kids has father Abraham,
I am one of them and so are you,
Through faith in Jesus Christ.*

They go on to do a kind of hokey-pokey dance to it to express the wonder of it. And it is wonderful. The promise of a great nation, many descendants to Abraham, finds fulfilment, not just in Israel, but in us as the people of God. The Lord said that through Abraham and his family, all peoples on earth would be blessed. We are those peoples. And that great blessing is salvation through Abraham's descendant, Jesus, and a restored relationship with the God of Abraham. Our promised land is the new Jerusalem, heaven. God's fulfilment of his promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is greater than they could ever have imagined.

c) **This section of Genesis is all about the way God builds his people.** Have you ever wished God would build our Christian communities, our churches, by the conversion of many people, hundreds, thousands? And wished he would do it quickly? Have you wondered why he doesn't usually work that way?

In Genesis, the Lord promised descendants like the stars in the sky, the sand on the seashore. But Genesis also shows us that from the beginning, God's ways are not our ways. His way of keeping that promise is not what we would expect. Abraham had 8 sons, but we do not read of the 8 tribes of Abraham. God chose to keep his promises through just one son, Isaac. Isaac had 2 sons, but does God choose to build his people through them both? It is not until Jacob's 12 sons that God begins to establish the tribes of Israel. Why wait? Were Jacob's sons more deserving than Abraham's? As you read the stories, I think you will say, no, not at all.

The Bible's picture is God's wisdom, God's timing, God's way, not ours. God is in charge. In the New Testament, Jesus said that the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, tiny, yet when it grows it becomes a great tree. Even today, God's people remain a minority in our world, and people are brought to faith one by one, sometimes very slowly. But God has kept his promise: that small family group in Genesis has become and continues to become the great people of God. What a privilege to belong to that people!

It is my prayer that this study will be a blessing for you, that it will excite you again in our faithful God who made and is keeping all his promises, and using very ordinary people of faith to do it.