

The Beginning of All Things – Genesis through Deuteronomy Fall, 2015

The Beginning of All Things – Genesis through Deuteronomy Have you ever wondered what the scriptures teach about the origin of the universe? What about the patriarchs, who were they, and why are they important? What relevance does the account of the exodus of the Hebrews from the land of Egypt have for Christian growth? What can the seemingly tedious ceremonial laws of Leviticus as well as the long list of names in Numbers teach us about godly living? How should a believer read and reflect on the five books of Moses collectively called the Pentateuch (or Torah)? How do these five books “fit in” to the over-arching story of scripture? These questions and more will be explored as we seek to understand this section of God’s Word.

The objective of this class is: to gain an overview of the first five books of the Bible (otherwise known as the Pentateuch), and understand the relation between these foundational books to Christ and Christian living.

Last week we saw the maturation of the Abrahamic covenant as revealed by God after the *akeda*, the binding of Isaac as a sacrifice and God’s gracious redemption on Mt. Moriah. The God of creation swore an oath to the patriarch Abraham, an oath that would become the foundation for God’s covenantal relationship with his people in future generations. Today we will explore the continuation of the promises of God throughout the later Patriarchal period and conclude our study of the book of Genesis.

Point One: The Preservation of the Promise through Isaac – After the momentous occurrence of the final test of Abraham as explained in chapter twenty-two, two notable events occurred: 1) Sarah died, and 2) Abraham sends his servant to the land of his nativity (Haran) and seeks a wife (Rebekah) for Isaac. The death of Sarah following closely behind the events of chapter twenty-two, marks the end of an era. Abraham ceases to be the central character and the attention is increasingly placed on Isaac, the son of the promise. As mentioned last week, we have no further reference in scripture that God appeared to Abraham again after the testing of the *akeda*. The remainder of Abraham’s actions (with exception of sending his servant to the land of Haran to pick out a suitable wife for Isaac) are made as if it were in passing. However, before we move on to explore God’s dealings in the life of Isaac, we must examine the context of the two notable events mentioned above.

With Sarah’s passing, we witness the grieving prophet seeking to do something he had never attempted heretofore. Abraham asks the Hittites, the inhabitants of what would later be renamed, Hebron, for permission to purchase a piece of the land of promise so that he might bury his dead. The Hittites appear more than willing to give Abraham whatever land he chose because they considered him a, “...*prince of God among us...*” Nevertheless, Abraham was insistent upon paying for the land. This is notable because it is the first piece of the land of promise that would be in the possession of Abraham and his descendants after him. Isaac, Jacob, Rebekah and Leah would all be buried in the cave of Machpelah. The fact that this is the first piece of the Promised Land owned by the Jewish people is significant, particularly because of the reason it was purchased and the timing of its purchase (after the testing of Genesis twenty-two). To be buried in the land of promise meant a permanent departure from the people and culture of the past, and a definite affirmation of the hope of the future. The author of Hebrews tells us, “*By faith he (Abraham) went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God*” (Hebrews 11:9-10). The City that God would build versus the City built by man becomes an important motif throughout the Torah, and is beautifully addressed by St. Augustine in his famous work, *City of God*.

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After the burial of Sarah, Abraham sent one of the eldest and most respected servants of his household to Haran to select a wife for Isaac. There is one statement that the aged prophet makes to the servant that is particularly telling in light of the fact that Isaac had apparently never been to the land of Haran, and had no previous ties or connections with the land. Abraham commands the servant, *“But if the woman is not willing to follow you (back to the land of Canaan), then you will be free from this oath of mine; only you must not take my son back there”* (24:8). Abraham was emphatic that his son should not be carried back into the land of his forbearers. This is an interesting statement in light of the fact that Jacob would later make the journey back to the land of Abraham’s birth and there he would be greatly blessed of God. It is also telling that Abraham *sent away* for a wife for Isaac. There is no indication that Rebekah was a worshipper of the one true God prior to her marriage to Isaac, so why was it so important that Isaac marry a daughter from the land of Abraham’s nativity instead of one of the Canaanite women? This selection among the daughters of Abraham’s close kin was not unique to Isaac and Rebekah, it will later reappear when Jacob is to be married. However, there seems to be a departure from this requirement with the twelve sons of Jacob, some (At least Judah and Joseph) of whom married Canaanite and Egyptian women. One distinctive in the life of Isaac compared to the lives of the later Patriarchs, is that he never left the land of Canaan. In fact, when Isaac considers going to Egypt during a time of famine, God explicitly tells him not to do so (26:1-5). This command was not binding on later Patriarchs, since it was when Jacob was in the act of fleeing away from the land of Canaan that God appears to him and conveys the Abrahamic covenant to him.

So, why was it so important that Isaac not be allowed to leave Canaan even to find a wife? Scripture does not say; however, the author of Hebrews does make the point that, *“...if they (the Patriarchs) had been thinking of the land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a City”* (Hebrews 11:15-16). In the desire for a better country – a heavenly one, we cannot assume that what God allows to transpire in one generation will consequently determine what he allows in another. I am, of course speaking about providence, and not morality. God’s moral law never changes. God’s providential governing of His creation may mean that in one generation he forbids entry into Egypt, and in the next requires it.

God’s covenant with Abraham is continued in the life of Isaac as indicated in Genesis 26:2-5, 23. Note that this is not a new covenant that God makes with Isaac. God does not make a new covenant (or an additional covenant since each builds upon the one that precedes it), until the Mosaic covenant in the book of Exodus. Instead, the Patriarchal period is marked by the conveyance of the Abrahamic covenant from one generation to the next. The elements are the same as is God’s gracious election of each recipient of the covenant. However, much like Sarah before her, Rebekah is barren. The most ordinary of the covenantal promises (the birth of a son) is something that once again, the next generation of God’s people must look to him and him alone to provide. God does. He answers the prayer of Isaac by giving Rebekah twins: Esau and Jacob. Though Esau is born first, God reveals from the beginning that his covenantal relationship will be with Jacob (25:23). Through a series of questionable events, Jacob steals both the birthright as well as the covenantal blessing from his brother and (unlike Isaac) was sent to Paddan-Aram to find a wife.

Point Two: The Preservation of the Promise through Jacob – Jacob is by far the most interesting of the Patriarchs, and it is clear that his election by God precedes his worship of God. After being sent away to Laban (Rebekah’s brother) in Paddan-Aram, Jacob has a vision that foreshadows the coming of Christ,

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the central figure of the Abrahamic covenant and the true meaning of the promised seed. In the course of his journey to Haran, he lays down outside a city called Luz and has a dream of a ladder reaching from earth to heaven and the angels of God ascending and descending upon it. God himself stood above it and confirmed the three-fold blessing (land, seed, and blessing) of the Abrahamic covenant with Jacob (28:10-17). After he awoke, Jacob erected an altar and made a conditional promise to God. He said, *“If God be with me and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father’s house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God...”* (28:20-21). He called that place Beth-el or *house of God*. For the first time in Covenantal history we see the correlation between the land of promise and the house of God. The true intent of God’s gracious design behind the Garden of Eden echoes through the Patriarchal period: he longs to be with them and be their God, and they his people.

After a very riveting period of twenty-one years in Haran, Jacob is commanded to leave Haran and return to the land of Canaan. At this point, he is a very wealthy man with flocks, herds, two wives (and two concubines), eleven sons, one daughter, and several servants. The nebulous of the great nation promised by God to Abraham was starting to form, not in the land of promise, but in the land of Abraham’s people. There are two notable episodes that we will briefly discuss for the sake of time. The first occurs after Jacob flees from Laban, his father-in law and is about to meet his estranged brother, Esau (who threatened to kill him after he stole his father’s blessing). Chapter 32 verse 1 states, *“Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him. And when Jacob saw them he said, “This is God’s camp!” So, he called the name of that place, Mahanaim”*. He named the site Mahanaim to memorialize the fact that his camp shared the site with God. This phrase “two camps” reappears at least twice in the 32nd chapter and influences how he prepares to meet his brother. Such an event is noteworthy because of the existential meaning of God cohabitating with his people. This co-dwelling becomes more apparent when we move into the book of Exodus and God accompanies the children of Israel throughout their desert wanderings.

The second notable occurrence immediately follows the one mentioned above. While he is dwelling within *his* camp, there appeared a man who wrestled with him throughout the night. Who this man is, the scripture does not say. We have every reason to believe him to be an angel or some other being sent by God because Jacob sought a blessing from him. One would only seek a blessing, the lesser from the greater; Jacob knew he was in the presence of one greater. The only blessing he received was indicated by a change of his name from Jacob (cheater) to Israel (one who strives with God). Jacob called that place, Peniel – meaning, *the face of God*. Here we have the *cheater* seeing the *face of God* and becoming *one who strives with God*. In a microcosmic way, this is Jacob’s redemption. From this point forward in scripture he is referred to interchangeably as Jacob and Israel. When Jacob later journeys to Bethel (for the first time since returning from Haran), he is visited by God and God confirms the covenant and himself changes his name to Israel (35:9-15).

Before we move away from Jacob and look at the life of Joseph, one final point should be made particularly in reference to the true meaning of Jacob’s dream as recorded in Genesis 28. There is a very real sense in which a Messianic expectation is here relayed to the Patriarch and insight into God’s covenantal purpose if conveyed. In **John 1:50-51**, Jesus after having identified Nathaniel as, *“...a true Israelite in whom there is no deceit...”* informs him, *“Truly, truly I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”* By this statement, Christ is identifying himself as the ladder connecting heaven and earth, and the only bridge between God and

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man. Because of the New Testament's use of the Old we have the benefit of seeing a foreshadowing of Christ's role as Mediator in the Abrahamic covenant relayed to Jacob.

Point Three: The Preservation of the Promise through Joseph – By the time Jacob is dwelling in the land of Canaan, and after the death of his father, the accordion effect continues as God broadens his scope of relationship from individuals (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob), to a community, the twelve sons of Jacob and their descendants. It is true that God's promise was preserved through all twelve of his sons to the extent that Jacob's sons were heirs of the covenant, but there is no indication in scripture that God appears to any with the three-fold covenantal blessing conveyed to Abraham. In fact, the only one of the twelve sons of Jacob that received any direct communication from God was Joseph. It was Joseph, the beloved son of his father, the dreamer, who had a series of dreams in which God was providentially disclosing his plan to preserve the covenant community through him and thereby preserve his covenantal promises to them and their descendants. Thus, prior to his death Joseph told his brothers, "...God will visit you and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, Isaac, and to Jacob...God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones from here" (50:24-25).

The unique nature of the conveyance of the covenant from Abraham to Isaac and then to Jacob entails God personally appearing to all three and confirming the three-fold promise that he swore by oath to Abraham in Genesis 22. By the time of the late Patriarchal period, such a personalized conveyance was not to be seen, and this would remain the case for a period of 430 years until the redemption of the Children of Israel from Egypt. From the time of Joseph onward, the faith of Israel was nourished by a re-telling of the relationship between God and their forbearers. His name and identity was so personally interwoven with the experience of these three men that until the time of the Exodus He is evoked by the name of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The disclosure of the NAME of Lord God of Israel would have to wait a later time. With each covenantal dispensation, God discloses more of himself to His people, but each disclosure is made within a relational context. He is creating a precedent from Adam until now as a God who wishes to be known and with whom man can have a relationship. To know God outside of a relationship with His creation is not possible either then or now.

Conclusion: As we conclude our study of the book of Genesis it should becoming increasingly clearer that God is the central figure of the Pentateuch. Genesis *witnessed* the beginning or origin of all things – creation, fall and the promise of redemption. The book closes with a promise – *God will surely visit you...* Next week we will see that promise fulfilled.

Questions:

What has been the most memorable feature of our study of the book of Genesis?

In what ways does the church today affirm or deny our ability to know God apart from him relationally disclosing himself within the context of his covenant community?

What is your impression of the Patriarchal period?

Do you think it is easier to have faith in God today than it was during the Patriarchal period?

How was the doctrine of election revealed within the book of Genesis?

Do you have any question(s) about the book of Genesis that have not been addressed in this class?