

WHAT THE BIBLE IS ALL ABOUT - WHERE AM I IN GOD'S BIG STORY?

God Works Through Families

Genesis 25:19-34

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We are all shaped by family and we're all looking for family (a quote by the late Kenneth Chafin). Think about that statement for a moment. Both sides of it are true. And a survey of the Bible will prove it. As we read the text for this morning, those of you who pay attention will notice this is the third time this summer that Jacob has been our subject. But really, Jacob is simply our starting point, then we're clicking and zooming out much wider, a larger map of the Bible.

The family tree, which is mentioned in our text, is worth noting. Abraham, the father of Isaac, the father of Jacob, the father of the 12 sons (thus the 12 tribes of Israel, with a couple of small adjustments). This family tree takes up the entire section of Genesis 12-50. Genesis 1-11 was a sort of prehistory; now in chapters 12-50, a chosen couple leads to a chosen family, which leads to a chosen nation, which leads to salvation for all humankind.

So let's shake this family tree and see what falls to the ground. In the text that we read this morning, we see Jacob, once again taking advantage of his brother Esau's weakness, extorting him out of his birthright, his privileges as the first-born. Mark this well. This is Jacob's pattern.

Using people, conniving, always looking out for himself. But Jacob gets a taste of his own medicine. In Gen. 29, he falls in love with Rachel and works seven years for her hand in marriage. But guess what. Rachel's father tricks Jacob into working longer! Jacob the trickster got tricked. The cheater became the cheat-ee.

But now the scene shifts. Many years have passed. Jacob is married and has many children of his own. Twelve sons, right? But he also has a daughter named Dinah. In Gen. 34, we read of the tragic rape of Dinah by a man named Shechem. Jacob was heartbroken. But two of his sons, Levi and Simeon (one older than Dinah and the other younger), gets revenge by killing not only Shechem, but all the men in his city. Brutal retaliation. This escalation of the cycle of violence upsets Jacob (34:30). But what could Jacob say? He had himself always taken things into his hands many times!

But Jacob's heartache isn't over. Gen. 37 begins the story of Joseph, Jacob's favorite, Daddy's pet. And Joseph's brothers are jealous. They sell their brother into slavery and tell Dad that he has been eaten by a wild animal. Years passed before the family ever reconciles. And that drama takes up the rest of the Book of Genesis.

Now I want to push the pause button and have us reflect on what we've heard. Many of you are acquainted with systems theory, a way of thinking about how families and groups relate. Sometimes, counselors will administer genograms, a mapping of a family tree and the common themes, expectations, spoken and unspoken rules of families across generations. Peter Scazzero, in the book *The Emotionally Healthy Church*, says that followers of Jesus can learn from this and discover unhealthy patterns which we pick up and pass on. And we'll never break free, he says, until we understand this.

For example, look at the family tree of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob again. From what you know of the Bible, look at some of the recurring themes of sin and failure. 1) Lying, deceit, manipulation (Abraham and Sarah, Jacob over and over again); 2) Parents favoring one child over another (Jacob favored by his mother, Esau by his father; Joseph by his father); 3) Jealousy and rivalry among siblings; 4) Grudge-bearing, getting even, violence.

Now I want to go on record as saying this family tree has the blight! They are a mess! But aren't we all! Do you want me to put your family tree up here? I think the term "dysfunctional family" is overused. It implies there are any families that are functional! I think of the times that I have failed to be the husband I should be. And when our kids were growing up? I was too absent, too impatient, too full of my own stuff I was working through. So I take comfort in this family tree. God used them. Maybe God can use me. Us. We are here today because God worked through this imperfect family begun by Abraham. God uses families. God uses imperfect families.

In Scazzero's book [pp. 93, 100-101], he talks about re-rooting the family tree. It gives a new meaning to John 3 about being born again. In the transforming power of Jesus Christ, we experience re-parenting. We are birthed into a new family. That means we can no longer say, "Well, I can't help it. That's the way I was raised. That's the Johnson temper in me; I can't help it. My parents made me this way." Through Jesus, large, untouched areas of our lives can be changed.

A John Updike novel, *In The Beauty of the Lilies*, is a saga which spans a family's history through four generations, over most of the 20th century. It begins with Clarence, a pastor, who loses his faith. It deals with the question, What happens over time, over decades, when a parent has no faith to pass on to children? And their children...and their children...and theirs. Each generation becomes more lonely and empty. Yes, we're all shaped by family and we're all looking for family. The Abraham family, the Jacob family, the Jesus family--we're not perfect. But if we'll let God work, God can use us.