

The Chosen Church - Getting to Know the Patriarchs

“The Chosen Church” sermon series was originally written and preached between May and December of 2020. It covers the age of the patriarchs, a period of approximately 360 years, and focuses primarily upon the lives of Abraham, Issac, Jacob, and Joseph. Their stories are found in Genesis 12-50. The series consists of 32 messages, which form the chapters of this book. Though Old Testament Israel and the New Testament Church are clearly distinct, the title of this series - “The Chosen Church” - is purposefully meant to emphasize the continuity of purpose between the ancient Hebrews and modern-day Christians.

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Abram's Calling and Sojourn (Genesis 12)

Originally Preached 5/10/2020

Then Jesus again spoke to them, saying, 'I am the Light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the Light of life.'" - John 8:12

This morning we are beginning a new series of sermons in Genesis, starting with chapter 12 and continuing through the end of the book. Over the next several months, we will carefully study the lives and adventures of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and many others. I am calling this series "The Chosen Church: Getting to Know the Patriarchs". These were the people through whom the nation of Israel was established. The events that take place during this series cover a period of about 360 years, from roughly 2160 BC to 1800 BC.

I have named this series "The Chosen Church" as a deliberate attempt to show similarity and continuity between the people of God in the Old Testament and those in the New Testament. While Israel and the church are clearly different from one another as evidenced in a number of ways, both serve (or served) as God's representative people during their respective era. Both were tasked with similar responsibilities and missions. As such, there are many lessons that the modern church can learn from the successes and failures of ancient Israel.

From the time of creation until the calling of Abram, there was no distinct people group that represented God. Those who believed in Him and worshipped Him as LORD did so on an individual or familial basis. There was no formal or expansive community of God's people. However, this arrangement dramatically changed during the age of the patriarchs. In His time, God providentially chose a particular people from among those living on the earth to be His own. It all began with a man from Mesopotamia named Abram (Genesis 11:26-32).

Abram was the son of Terah. He and his family lived in Ur, a prominent city of ancient Chaldea, which was located along the Euphrates River about 150 miles northwest of the Persian Gulf. Today, the ruins of this site have been found in southern Iraq. Abram married a woman named Sarai, but she was barren and they had no children. Sensing the LORD's direction, Abram and his wife, father, and a nephew named Lot moved northward along the Euphrates to the city of Haran in the region of Paddan-Aram. This is in modern-day Turkey, near the Syrian border. After living there for a few years, Terah died at the age of 205. This is where our story begins...

I. ABRAM IS CHOSEN (v1-3)

After his father's death, the LORD spoke to Abram while he was still living in Haran. His message consisted of 3 parts. The first of these was a calling to go. God instructed Abram to leave his homeland, the place where he'd grown up and where his extended family still dwelt, and to instead journey to an unknown land. God promised to direct Abram to this place and reveal it to him when he arrived.

The second part of God's message to Abram was a personal promise. The LORD had chosen Abram to be the patriarch of His own special people. God promised to make of Abram's descendants into a great nation. Abram's name would become great, well-known and highly honored. In addition, the LORD would richly bless Abram and cause him to prosper. Abram would be a blessing to others.

The third part of God's message was a general principle relating to Abram and his family in the generations to come. The LORD would bless those who blessed Abram's children, and would curse those who cursed them. Through Abram and the nation that would rise from his lineage all of the peoples of earth would be blessed.

It is highly likely that, prior to his calling, Abram and his family did not know or worship God. There is no indication that Abram was a man of faith at this point, or that he'd done anything to merit the LORD's favor. Yet, based solely upon His own sovereign will, God uniquely chose Abram and called him to abandon his idolatrous roots. Today Christians might equate this to divine conviction falling upon a lost sinner and calling him to repentance.

II. ABRAM TRAVELS THROUGH CANAAN (v4-9)

Having heard the calling of God, Abram responded in obedience and faith. Now 75 years old, Abram and his wife Sarai, along with their nephew Lot, gathered all of their possessions and left Haran. Sensing the LORD's direction, they ventured southward and soon crossed into the land of Canaan. After travelling through it for some time, they made camp near the ancient city of Shechem. While they were settled there, the LORD again appeared to Abram at the oak of Moreh. He promised to one day give this country - the land of Canaan - to Abram's descendants. In gratitude, Abram built an altar there and worshipped God.

From there, Abram and his family continued southward surveying the territory that would someday belong to his posterity. They came to a mountain situated between the cities of Bethel and Ai. It was an ideal place to stop, so Abram set up camp there. He built another altar and again called upon the name of the LORD. Abram almost certainly praised God for the undeserved blessings that had been lavished upon him. Afterwards, they continued southward through the region of Canaan headed toward the Negev desert. Thus, they crossed over the entire region.

III. ABRAM JOURNEYS TO EGYPT (v10-20)

God had specifically led Abram to the land of Canaan. This was the place where he'd been called to go. Yet, not long after his arrival, a severe famine arose. Fearing starvation, Abram made the fateful decision to journey on to Egypt. There is no indication that he sought God's direction before choosing to move. Instead, it seems that Abram considered his circumstances without respect to God's counsel, and acted on his own initiative.

As they neared Egypt, Abram instructed Sarai to pretend that they were brother and sister rather than husband and wife. He was afraid that the Egyptians would be awed by her beauty, would kill him, and take her for themselves. Sure enough, when they arrived the Egyptian Pharaoh was taken by Sarai's good looks, brought her into the palace, and treated Abram well on account of his "sister". Pharaoh even gave Abram many sheep, oxen, donkeys, camels, and male and female servants.

At some point, Pharaoh unknowingly took Sarai as his own wife. Then the LORD began to strike his household with great plagues. Somehow Pharaoh discovered that Sarai was, in fact, Abram's wife. He was infuriated that they'd lied to him and brought about this terrible calamity. Immediately Pharaoh sent them away, going so far as to have them escorted by his servants out of the country to ensure they'd left.

CONCLUSION

There are several lessons we can learn from this passage, and as we close today I'd like to highlight a couple of them. Take notice that it was God who called out to Abram. The LORD initiated it. He did so not because of Abram's worthiness, but rather in keeping with His own perfect and arbitrary will. Like Abram, we cannot approach God or serve Him unless and until He first calls us to Himself. Even then, our only obligation is to answer in faithful obedience. Therefore, all of our worship, love, and devotion is merely a response to God's unmeasured goodness, mercy, and grace.

Also, it is easy to misstep when following the LORD. Abram had rightly listened to God's voice when traveling to Canaan. He even built a few altars there as tangible evidence of his faithfulness. But in the face of difficulty, Abram momentarily took his eyes off of God. This led him to Egypt, where he and his wife lived under false pretenses in the presence of Pharaoh. Things ended very badly, and the effects of this decision are still being felt today. We will discuss this more thoroughly later in this series. Nevertheless, it is important that we make choices based on God's guidance rather than our own.

Do you sense God's calling in your life? If so, say "yes" to Him right now. He can and will take you to amazing places! And if you've wandered down the wrong path, chasing after your own will, repent. It's not too late to turn around and come back to God.

Abram and Lot Separate (Genesis 13)

Originally Preached 5/17/2020

Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. - Philippians 2:3-4

Last Sunday we began our new sermon series titled “The Chosen Church: Getting to Know the Patriarchs”. Over the remainder of this year, we will take an in-depth and up-close look at the men and women from whom the people of Israel were descended. A patriarch is defined as “the male head, father, and or founder of a family or tribal line”. The patriarchs of the Hebrews include Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

In our previous message we met Abram and his wife Sarai. They were originally from Ur, a prominent city in Chaldea, but had recently moved to Haran along with Terah, Abram's father and Lot, his nephew. After Terah died, the LORD spoke to Abram and called him to go “to a land that I will show you”. Following God’s direction, Abram traveled south to Canaan. While camped at the oak of Moreh, the LORD promised to give Canaan to him and his descendants.

A famine arose and Abram unwittingly decided to continue on to Egypt. While there, he and his wife pretended to be brother and sister for fear that Pharaoh might harm them. Pharaoh was smitten by Sarai’s beauty and treated them both well because of her. However, when he found out that Sarai was actually Abram’s wife, he angrily sent them away. Fortunately he didn’t have them killed for lying. God lovingly protected them from such an abrupt end.

So Abram and his family return from Egypt, retracing their steps northward back through the Negev desert to Canaan. Perhaps by then the famine had subsided, though the Bible doesn’t mention it. Although their venture into Egypt was misguided, they had acquired an even greater number of possessions while living there. I suppose every dark cloud has its silver lining...

Today’s message picks up the story right here. It is called “Abram and Lot Separate”. Turn with me to Genesis chapter 13 and let’s continue our study.

I. A PROBLEM ARISES (v2-7)

Abram and his family passed through the Negev and came to the mountain between Bethel and Ai where they had camped previously. In fact, Abram had built an altar during his original sojourn

through Canaan. Abram worshiped God there once more, perhaps repentant of his wayward trip to Egypt.

In ancient times, wealth was measured by the amount of possessions that a person had. Both Abram and Lot had become very rich and had accumulated many herds, flocks, and servants. In fact, together their livestock were so numerous that the pastures could not sustain them all. To make matters worse, their herdsmen were beginning to bicker back and forth contentiously about the limited space and resources that were available. On top of this, the native Canaanites and Perizzites already occupied and utilized much of the land for their own animals. This was becoming a real problem that caused great strife within the family.

II. A SOLUTION IS FOUND (v8-13)

Abram approached his nephew Lot and proposed a solution. He did not want the hardship and ill-feelings that were building between them to fester. So, Abram suggested that they separate from one another. Each would go in differing directions to find for themselves places to settle that could sustain their many animals. One would go to the right and the other to the left.

Though he was the elder, Abram graciously offered Lot the first choice of where to go. Lot gazed across the vast country that spread out before him, and saw that the valley of the Jordan River was lush, well-watered, and bountiful. He chose to settle there. Leaving his uncle behind, Lot traveled eastward toward Sodom and Gomorrah. Thus, they separated from each other and Abram remained in central Canaan. Though the land where Lot had chosen to settle seemed ideal, the men of Sodom were extremely wicked and sinful.

Lot's decision to make his home in Sodom and Gomorrah seemed somewhat selfish and ambitious. He took what appeared to be the very best land for himself, leaving his older uncle Abram to settle elsewhere. In time, however, young Lot's choice would come back to haunt him and his family. "There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death." (Proverbs 14:12)

III. A PROMISE IS CONFIRMED (v14-18)

After Lot departed, Abram and his wife were alone. Then the LORD spoke to Abram again, asking him to gaze northward, southward, and all around. All of the land which he saw, the entire country of Canaan, would someday belong to His descendants. It would be an eternal inheritance. This had been God's promise to Abram earlier, and now the LORD was confirming it a second time. God reminded Abram that he would become a great nation. His lineage would be innumerable, like the dust on the earth. This was an amazing prediction, especially considering that Sarai was barren and the aging couple had no children.

God encouraged Abram to walk through the land of Canaan and to view it all for himself. Therefore, Abram and Sarai kept moving and came to the city of Hebron. They set up camp there and dwelt by the oaks of Mamre. Again Abram built an altar and called upon the name of the LORD. Though he had strayed by going to Egypt, he was now back in the land where God wanted him. His faith was renewed and his devotion to God was stronger than ever.

Isn't it reassuring to know that the LORD doesn't abandon His promises to us when we temporarily go astray? He doesn't expect us to be perfect; in fact, He knows full well that we aren't. Yet, God remains faithful to us even though we are often unfaithful to Him. His word is true and dependable, and his promises are irrevocable (Romans 11:29).

CONCLUSION

Abram trusted that God would take care of him and provide for his needs. Therefore, Abram did not insist on getting his own way as it pertained to settling in Canaan. Instead, he humbly allowed his nephew Lot to have first choice of the land. Abram was satisfied and content with that which received, knowing that God would prosper him wherever he went. The key to his success was not found in earthly things, but rather in his faithfulness to God. Likewise, we should defer to others when appropriate and place their needs before our own. We too can have the assurance that God will take care of us.

As we close, let's review a few lessons from today's message:

If at all possible, don't fight with your own family (or with anyone else for that matter).

When making decisions, don't insist on your own way. Be thoughtful of others.

Trust God and be content with what you have and are given.

Things aren't always as they seem, and what appears best may not necessarily be best.

Who you surround yourself with is more important than where you live.

God always keeps His promises to us, even when we make mistakes.

May I ask you this morning, is there anything in your life that you need to separate yourself from? Perhaps there is some nagging sin that continues to create problems and cause dissatisfaction in your life. During the invitation today, I'd invite you to part ways with it. In God's strength, say good-bye to whatever it is and move on in another direction. Give it to the LORD and let it go. You'll be better off for doing so.

War in Canaan (Genesis 14)

Originally Preached 5/24/2020

The horse is prepared for the day of battle, but victory belongs to the Lord. - Proverbs 21:31

Good morning. A few weeks ago we began a new sermon series called “The Chosen Church: Getting to Know the Patriarchs”. Over the next few months we will carefully study the lives of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. We will discover how God used these men to produce and establish His chosen people Israel.

Today’s message is named “War in Canaan”. It is the 3rd sermon of this series. It focuses on Genesis 14, which contains the first mention of warfare between kings and armies recorded in the Bible. Prior to this time, God had not chosen or designated a special people of His own. Thus, none of the wars fought before this one had any direct bearing on the LORD’s name or reputation. But now that He had closely aligned Himself with Abraham and his descendants, God had a vested interest in the outcomes of these battles.

By the end of last week’s message, Abram and Lot had separated from one another. Lot took his family and possessions eastward toward the Jordan valley and settled in the bustling city of Sodom. Meanwhile, Abram and Sarai remained in central Canaan and settled near Hebron. Both men were new residents in the country. They were likely unaware and unfamiliar with the broader political strife that was going on there. But trouble was brewing...

I. BATTLE OF THE KINGS (v1-12)

During this period of ancient history, the lands immediately east and south of the Jordan River and Dead Sea were firmly controlled by the distant kings of Babylonia and Persia. Canaanite cities located in these weaker areas paid tribute to those who domineered over them. A powerful Mesopotamian alliance which included Amraphel king of Shinar, Arioch king of Ellasar, Chedorlaomer king of Elam, and Tidal king of Goiim held a strong grip over the entire region.

After several years, these Canaanite subordinates waged a hopeful rebellion. The Mesopotamian kings, led by Chedorlaomer, set out on a military campaign to crush the feeble uprising. In battle after battle the rebels were resoundingly defeated, including the Rephaim, the Zuzim, the Emim, and the Horites. Chedorlaomer also conquered the Amalekites and Amorites. In a last ditch effort to save the rebellion, the kings of Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboiim, and Bela joined together to fight against the combined forces of Chedorlaomer. Perhaps together, they could overcome their Babylonian and Persian oppressors.

A great battle took place in the valley of Siddim, near the Dead Sea, between these 2 large and formidable alliances. Chedorlaomer and his forces again won the day, and the men of Sodom and Gomorrah fled before them. The battlefield was covered with tar pits which themselves took many lives. Some survivors escaped to the mountains. The rebellion had utterly failed. Chedorlaomer proceeded to loot the conquered cities, taking all of their food and supplies. He also took captives, including Abram's nephew Lot, who had recently moved to Sodom.

II. PURSUIT OF THE ENEMY (v13-16)

A fugitive with knowledge of the battle came to Abram to report what had happened. Abram was living near Hebron and had become allies with a few of his neighbors - namely Mamre, Eschol, and Aner. When he heard that Lot had been taken captive, Abram knew he must act. So Abram mustered his own forces together, rallying trained men from among his numerous servants, along with those of his close friends. Together these soldiers formed Abram's own personal army.

Abram set out in relentless pursuit of Chedorlaomer. He traveled northward, chasing the enemy as far as Dan. When he finally caught up with the Babylonian and Persian troops, Abram devised an ingenious plan. Separating his forces, he attacked them from all sides by night, and was victorious. Completely taken by surprise, Chedorlaomer retreated northward toward Hobah with Abram and his men giving chase. By the time the fighting was over, Abram had recovered all of the goods, possessions, and people who had been taken - including his nephew Lot.

Up to this point, Chedorlaomer had enjoyed overwhelming success having easily crushed the entire Canaanite rebellion. Yet, seemingly out of nowhere, an unknown man named Abram arose with his own small, private army of just 318 men and defeated the mighty king. This was, without question, a providential act of God Almighty. The dominion of Babylon and Persia over the cities of the trans-Jordan region came to an abrupt end. Abram had accomplished something that the revolutionaries were unable to do.

III. DIVISION OF THE SPOILS (v17-24)

After his great success, Abram and his men returned with their spoils to Canaan. The king of Sodom, who was no doubt thankful to Abram for recovering the lost goods and peoples of his city, met him at the valley of Shaveh. Melchizedek, the king of Salem, also attended this post-war meeting. In addition to being a king, Melchizedek was also a priest of God Most High. He brought bread and wine to the ceremony. Such a man would have been quite rare in Canaan during these days.

Melchizedek blessed Abram, clearly stating that God had given him the unlikely victory. Abram recognized Melchizedek's godly authority, and gave him a tithe of ten percent of all the spoils. The appreciative king of Sodom offered to let Abram keep the rest of the goods for himself, requesting that only the captives be returned. However, Abram answered that he did not want to keep any of the remaining spoils. He had not done this for personal gain, nor did he want to be indebted to anyone. So, other than the food they'd already eaten, the shares that belonged to his allies Mamre, Eschol, and Aner, and the amount he'd already given as a tithe, everything else was restored to the king of Sodom.

Some experts have proposed that Melchizedek was actually a pre-incarnate appearance of Jesus Christ. Such a suggestion is not unprecedented. We will see Jesus appearing to Abraham in the form of a man later on in this series (Genesis 18). Perhaps He did so here as well. At the very least, Jesus is repeatedly spoken of elsewhere in Scripture as a high priest "in the order of Melchizedek" (Psalm 110:4; Hebrews 5:6, 6:20). Clearly, Melchizedek points to Christ... and perhaps even was Christ.

CONCLUSION

As we wrap up today's message, let me share a few personal observations...

Abram and his men were not professional soldiers. There were only a few hundred of them altogether. Yet, as shocking as it might seem, they utterly routed the mighty Mesopotamian alliance. Their miraculous victory made it clear that God was on their side. When the LORD fights with and for you, the enemy has no chance. This was the first of many Biblical battles to come in which God would fight on behalf of His chosen people.

Abram practiced tithing. He gave 10% of the spoils to Melchizedek, the priest of God. This took place more than 500 years before Moses and the Hebrew children encountered the LORD at Mt. Sinai. In other words, the concept of tithing pre-dated the Law by several centuries. Contemporary Christians who argue that tithing is now obsolete because the Law is no longer in effect fail to realize that tithing was never a product of the Law.

Abram was pulled into a situation that he did not create. He wasn't originally involved in the Canaanite rebellion against Chedorlaomer. Both groups were pagans. When he finally did join the battle, he wasn't fighting on behalf of Sodom. Abram simply wanted to rescue his nephew Lot and the other captives. He fought to protect his own limited interests. Perhaps when intervening in someone else's conflict, we should take this same approach rather than taking sides with one or the other.

God's Covenant with Abram (Genesis 15)

Originally Preached 5/31/2020

Know therefore that the Lord your God, He is God, the faithful God, who keeps His covenant and His lovingkindness to a thousandth generation with those who love Him and keep His commandments. - Deuteronomy 7:9

Abram was beginning to build a notable reputation in his new homeland. He and his small army had bested the strong alliance of Chedolaomer. As such, the kings of Canaan were extremely thankful to Abram for recovering the riches that had been taken from them. Despite being held in high esteem by his neighbors, Abram still struggled to understand how God would fulfill all of the promises He'd made...

I. A PICTURE IS GIVEN (v1-6)

After defeating the Mesopotamians and recovering their captives, including his nephew Lot, Abram returned to Canaan. Peace had been established and life returned to normal once again. It was during this time that the LORD appeared again to Abram. He told Abram not to fear, promised to protect him, and vowed to reward him greatly. But Abram wondered what God could possibly give him that would last, seeing that he had no children of his own. At this point, Abram's vast inheritance was slated to be received by his chief and senior servant Eliezer. God comforted Abram by ensuring that he would someday have his own biological children to be his rightful heirs.

God had Abram go outside after dark and look up into the glittering sky. The LORD asked Abram to count the stars, if possible. Of course there were far too many to number. Then God ensured Abram that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the heavens. As the saying goes, "A picture paints a thousand words." The stars in the night sky served as a visual representation of countless children to come. Though he didn't know exactly how it would happen, Abram believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. Abram was justified before the LORD by faith (Romans 4:1-25).

II. A PREPARATION IS MADE (v7-11)

God continued speaking to Abram. He reminded Abram that He had brought him up from his homeland in Ur of Chaldea and had given him all of Canaan as an eternal possession. Abram wondered how he could know for certain that he and his posterity would possess the land. So, Abram asked the LORD for some sort of assurance. Abram believed in God's promises, but still wanted a

guarantee of certainty. This request did not offend the LORD. Instead He instructed Abram to make preparations for the initiation of a formal covenant.

God told Abram to bring Him a three year old heifer, a three year old female goat, a three year old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon. Abram gathered these animals as requested. He killed each of them and divided their carcasses in half, except for the birds. He laid the severed pieces opposite of one another, forming two parallel lines. Birds of prey, perhaps like vultures, descended on the dead bodies to pick at their flesh. However, Abram remained there throughout the afternoon and evening to drive the scavengers away.

III. A PROPHECY IS SPOKEN (v12-16)

Finally, as the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep. Terror and darkness gripped him. Once again the LORD spoke. He said, "Your future descendants will become strangers in a foreign land. They will be enslaved and oppressed there for 400 years. But then I will judge the nation whom they serve and will bring them out of it with great possessions. At that time, they will return to the land of Canaan." It was then that God's promise would come into fruition.

Just as God prophesied, the Exodus of the Hebrews from Egypt during the days of Moses took place exactly 4 generations after Abram's death. Abram died while his grandson Jacob was still young and well before he'd fathered any children. So the generations being referred to began with Jacob's son Levi, then Levi's son Kohath, then Kohath's son Amram, and finally Amram's son Moses. Until then however, the Promised Land remained in the hands of the Canaanites "until the inquiry of the Amorites was complete". For now the ordained time of God's judgment against the Canaanites was still many years away.

IV. A PLEDGE IS TAKEN (v17-21)

Once the sun had completely set and the night had grown very dark, a smoking oven and a flaming torch appeared. These 2 ghostly objects passed between the severed body pieces which formed opposing lines on the ground. Then the LORD officially pledged to give the land of Canaan to Abram's descendants, spanning from the river of Egypt to the mighty Euphrates. This vast territory would include areas that were occupied at the time by the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.

It was a common practice during this ancient era to forge covenants by passing between the divided pieces of an animal or animals. The slain carcasses represented the fate that would befall anyone who violated the terms of the covenant (Jeremiah 34:18-20). In this instance, Abram did not walk

through the path... only God did, in the form of a smoking oven and a flaming torch. In other words, this was a unilateral and unconditional covenant established by God alone. There were no terms placed upon Abram and his descendants. God took full responsibility for the fulfillment of this covenant.

There are several different interpretations as to what the smoking oven and the flaming torch represent. Some suggest that the oven symbolizes Egypt and the persecution that they'd inflict upon the Hebrews. They further theorize that the flaming torch represents God's presence, which would enable the Hebrews to endure the hardship. Similar language is used many years later describing the clans of Judah in Zechariah 12:6. Whatever they mean, these objects were a manifestation of God Almighty.

CONCLUSION

God had already promised to make of Abram "a great nation". He had even led Abram to the land of Canaan and swore to give it to him and his descendants as an eternal possession. But in this chapter, the LORD provided a few more specifics concerning these general promises. These details helped to clarify what God intended and how it'd be accomplished.

First, the descendants of Abram would be his own biological offspring. The nation that will rise from his lineage would not be birthed through his servant or any other non-relative. Though he had grown old and was still childless, Abram would have a naturally born son. This child would be his heir, and the heir of God's covenant promises.

Second, the land of Canaan which God gave to Abram and his family as an everlasting inheritance was given 2 specific boundaries. Its western edge would be the brook of Egypt, which was generally considered to be the border of Egypt. Its eastern edge would be the Euphrates River, which ran through Babylonia at that time.

Throughout Israel's long and vaunted history, it has rarely held dominion over this entire area. It did so only once, during the reigns of King David and Solomon. However, someday all of these lands will be restored to Israel again. God has given His word, and His word never fails.

Sarai and Hagar (Genesis 16)

Originally Preached 6/7/2020

Wait for the Lord; Be strong and let your heart take courage; Yes, wait for the Lord. - Psalm 27:14

Good morning everyone. I hope you all had a remarkable week. Today we will continue our series called, "The Chosen Church: Getting to Know the Patriarchs". This study through most of Genesis can be divided somewhat neatly into quarters, based upon the 4 main characters we will discuss - Abraham, Issac, Jacob, and Joseph. Right now we are in the first quarter, so to speak, as we focus on the life of Abraham - who was originally named Abram.

We've read that Abram trusted God even though he didn't fully understand how the LORD was working in his life. He sincerely believed that God would make his family into a great nation, just as He'd promised to do. He even believed that God would bless him with biological children of his own, despite the fact that his wife Sarai was unable to give birth. Against all odds, Abram had an enduring faith in the LORD's promises. But what methodology would God use to bring all of this about?

The following sermon is titled "Sarai and Hagar". It features 2 competing women who each play a major role in Biblical history. Their story, and the ramifications that followed, continue to have a lasting and profound effect on our world today.

I. SARAI'S PLAN CAUSES PROBLEMS (v1-6)

As mentioned in the introduction, Abram didn't have any children. His wife Sarai was barren. By this point, Abram had almost certainly shared the wonderful promises that God had made to him with his wife, so Sarai was keenly aware of God's prophecy that Abram would have a child. But how? Well, Sarai had an Egyptian handmaiden named Hagar. Sarai reasoned that if Abram was able to bear children with Hagar, the LORD's promise would be fulfilled. So she urged Abram to sleep with Hagar, a practice that was common in ancient times under these circumstances, in order to produce an heir. Abram consented with his wife's plan without any recorded objection.

After Hagar became pregnant, tensions flared between her and Sarai. Most certainly, this was an awkward situation. Sarai felt that she was being wrongly mistreated and despised by Hagar. Perhaps Hagar expressed an attitude of superiority because she was able to have children while Sarai wasn't. Whatever the case, Sarai asked her husband Abram to intervene. How would Abram resolve the conflict between his beloved wife and the woman who was carrying his child? Rather than getting involved, Abram reminded Sarai that Hagar was her servant - over whom she had authority. He

instructed Sarai to do whatever she thought was right. So Sarai treated Hagar harshly in retaliation, and the pregnant handmaiden fled.

It is worth mentioning that Hagar was an Egyptian. Thus, it is most likely that she was acquired by Sarai while she and her husband lived in Egypt (Genesis 12:10-20). A few weeks ago we discussed this story. There was a famine in Canaan so Abram and his family traveled to Egypt where they lied about their identities to Pharaoh and were eventually caught and expelled from the country. Had they never made this wayward trip to Egypt, Hagar might not have been present in their lives. Would this have changed things? Who knows?

Another helpful insight found in the passage is for men. Look closely at the example set here by Abram. Do not get in between women who are fighting with each other. Let them resolve it. Nothing good can come from your involvement guys! Of course I am just joking, sort of...

II. HAGAR SPEAKS WITH GOD (v7-14)

During her flight Hagar stopped at a spring of water on the way to Shur, which was in the direction of her homeland Egypt. The Angel of the LORD found her and asked her where she'd been and where she was going. Surely He already knew, but was simply engaging her in conversation. When she answered, He told her to go back and submit herself to Sarai. Most certainly this wasn't what Hagar had in mind.

The Angel of the LORD went on to say that Hagar's descendants, through this child who was in her womb, would someday become too numerous to count. He told her that the unborn baby was a boy and his name was to be Ishmael. He even told her that this child would grow up to be a wild and adversarial man, who would be in constant conflict with his brothers. Furthermore, the Ishmaelites would someday dwell to the east of Canaan.

History has proven all of this to be true. The descendants of Ishmael are one of the many familial lines that produced the Arab people. They are prominent to the east of Israel and throughout the Middle East. Many of these Arabs practice Islam, and live with a violent, never-ending animosity toward their Jewish brothers. Interestingly, the prophet Muhammad claimed to be a direct descendant of Ishmael, though this assertion was likely untrue and done purely as a means of gaining credibility.

Hagar called the Angel of the LORD the "God that sees", acknowledging that He had seen her anguish and had come to comfort her. She was amazed that she had seen God and lived. Notice that this was not just any angel, but rather the Angel of the LORD. Some believe that He was actually a preincarnate manifestation of Jesus Christ or perhaps of God the Father. The well where Hagar had stopped to rest was named in memory of this remarkable event.

III. ISHMAEL IS BORN (v15-16)

So Hagar returned to Abram and his family in Canaan and humbled herself before her mistress Sarai. After the appropriate number of months passed, she gave birth to a son. In keeping with the LORD's command, the child was named Ishmael. He was Abram's firstborn. At the time of Ishmael's birth, Abram was 86 years old. He and his family had been living in Canaan for just over 10 years, discounting their brief stint in Egypt.

I sometimes wonder how things might have been different if Hagar would have never returned to Canaan, but instead continued home to Egypt. I suppose she would have raised Abram's son as her own. Perhaps Ishmael would have never known his father at all, or been raised with any knowledge of God Almighty. He would have likely never met his younger brother Isaac, who was yet to be born, or any of his other siblings that followed. The entire course of history would be changed. Though she was imperfect, we should give Hagar some credit. She obeyed God and put the child's interests first, rather than her own. She could have easily avoided the stress and humiliation by running away, but she didn't.

CONCLUSION

It can be difficult to wait on the LORD. There are times in life when it seems that He is slow to act. Surely both Abram and Sarai felt this way. God had promised to give Abram a child, yet almost a decade had passed and still no baby. Did God forget? Maybe He changed His mind? Neither. God would fulfill His promise in the proper way and at the proper time. Unfortunately, Abram and his wife had grown impatient and were unwilling to wait any longer. The same can be said of many Christians today. We tend to be quite restless and anxious.

This story also highlights the great peril of trying to accomplish God's will in our own strength and by our own wisdom. There is no indication that Sarai or Abram sought the LORD's direction in prayer before making this fateful decision. Rather, they decided to carry-out God's divine promise through their own natural means. Though they successfully produced a son, he was not the child God promised. Furthermore, their actions led to fierce and perpetual division within the family. I am afraid we as Christians today are often guilty of trying to bring about God's will by human means. Such a strategy can never be truly successful and always causes unforeseen damage.

Finally, though Ishmael was not the promised son, still God deeply loved him and his mother. This is evident by the fact that He sought her out after she fled. The LORD loves all people and His desire is to have a personal relationship with everyone. True, Ishmael was not the chosen son through whom the covenant would be established. Nevertheless, Ishmael would become a prosperous nation.

The Sign of Circumcision (Genesis 17)

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For those who are circumcised do not even keep the Law themselves, but they desire to have you circumcised so that they may boast in your flesh... For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. - Galatians 6:13,15

God first introduced His covenant promises to Abram while he and his family were living in Haran. At that time, Abram was 75 years old (Genesis 12:1-3). Later, after he'd made his way to Canaan, God again spoke to Abram at the Oak of Moreh (Genesis 12:6-7) and pledged to give his descendants that land. Sometime thereafter, following his brief stay in Egypt, God again appeared to Abram in Canaan and reiterated His promises for a third time (Genesis 13:14-17). Sometime after this, God formalized all of these promises by ceremoniously establishing an official covenant (Genesis 15:1-21). Yet, despite all of these interactions, still the years passed by and Abram waited...

This morning our series continues with a message titled, "The Sign of Circumcision". We will discuss yet another encounter between Abram and God related to this ancient covenant. Perhaps this time the wheels will be set into motion and the tangible fulfillment of God's promises will begin to unfold.

I. A NEW NAME (v1-8)

When Abram was 99 years old, the LORD appeared to him yet again. As He had done on a few previous occasions, God repeated and reaffirmed His covenant promises. It had been 24 years since God had originally called Abram out of Haran. During this long span, the LORD had periodically spoken with Abram to reassure Him that the promises He'd made were not forgotten. God had sworn that Abram would be the father of a great nation which would someday dwell in the land of Canaan.

However, during this particular encounter, the LORD did something more. He changed Abram's name, which originally meant "High Father" or "Exalted Father", to Abraham which means "Father of a Multitude". Through this act, God recognized Abraham as the patriarch of Israel. His name now described him as the ancestor of the numerous descendants. It was changed so as to become an oral expression of the LORD's covenant.

There are several instances in scripture when God changes a person's name. In each case, He gives them a new identity and mission. Because a person's name is so valuable, the changing of a name is a significant event. It indicates a transformation of sorts - a passage from the old person to someone new. The Bible teaches that someday God will give every triumphal believer a new name (Revelation 2:17), which will represent the amazing change that God has brought about in them.

II. A COVENANTAL SIGN (v9-14)

The LORD then described a physical procedure which would be used to signify and set apart those who were partakers of the Abrahamic covenant. Abraham, the males in his immediate family, and those of his servants, were all to be circumcised. Going forward, all Hebrew boys were to be circumcised on the 8th day after their birth. Centuries later this tradition would be formally codified in the Mosaic Law.

God declared circumcision to be a physical sign or mark that designated His chosen people. While some other ancient cultures practiced circumcision as a rite of passage, none other viewed it as a special identification of God's children. The LORD told Abraham that if any male remained uncircumcised they would be in violation of the covenant. Such an individual was to be "cut off" from God's people - ie, the Jews.

People entered into the old covenant physically - either by natural birth or through acquisition as a servant. Therefore, the sign of the covenant was physical as well - circumcision. However, Jesus fulfilled the old and established a new and better spiritual covenant. The sign of the new covenant is baptism, which should take place shortly after (similar to the 8 day precedent) a repentant sinner is born again. Baptism identifies the newly redeemed person as a Christian and as a member of God's church.

III. A SECOND SON (v15-22)

God then told Abraham to rename his wife Sarai, which may have originally meant something like "Contentious", Sarah, which instead meant "Princess". Sarah would become the princess of many multitudes to follow. Future kings of great nations (such as Israel, Edom, and so forth) would be birthed from her lineage. When God made this bold prediction, Abraham laughed out loud and openly doubted that a woman who was already 90 years old could bear a child.

Besides, Abraham already had a son - Ishmael - who had been conceived by and born of the Egyptian handmaiden Hagar. Abraham asked God to establish the covenant through him. But God refused, and proclaimed that Sarah would bear her own child. Her son would be the promised heir, through whom the covenant of God would be perpetuated. This baby was to be named Isaac, which means "He who laughs". While God would certainly remember and bless Ishmael and his descendants, He specifically and exclusively chose Isaac from among Abraham's children to be a patriarch of His people.

God told Abraham that Sarah would give birth to their new son, Isaac, in about a year. Seeing that a human pregnancy only lasts 9 months, Sarah was not yet with child at the time of this declaration. The couple would have to look beyond their present age and condition, embrace and believe in God's word, and then act accordingly so that this miracle child might be conceived. Unlike with Hagar and Ishmael, these things would take place in accordance with the LORD's direction and blessing.

IV. AN OBEDIENT ACT (v23-27)

After speaking with God, and in keeping with His divine instruction, Abraham prepared himself and his family for circumcision. He and his son Ishmael, along with every other male in his household and among his many servants, were circumcised that same day. As stated earlier, Abraham was 99 years old. His son Ishmael was 13 at the time. Thus, these men became the first of many to come to be initiated into the Abrahamic covenant through circumcision.

Without being overly graphic, circumcision is the removal of the foreskin from the male penis. The foreskin serves no meaningful bodily purpose, and can be safely removed without excessive pain. Obviously, this procedure will temporarily limit a man's ability to work or move and will cause some discomfort. Usually circumcisions heal in about 5 to 7 days. Medical studies have shown that there may even be some healthy benefits that result from circumcision. There is no female equivalent of circumcision, due to the differing anatomy of women and men.

CONCLUSION

Preachers, like myself, often use phrases like "The Children of God" to describe particular people groups. It is important to recognize that these types of phrases can have 2 very different meanings. There are those who belong to the physical, ethnic "people of God" - those chosen under the Old Covenant to serve as God's representatives on the earth. These are the Jews. There are also those of all backgrounds and races who belong to the spiritual, redeemed "people of God" through faith in Jesus Christ. These are the Christians. It is possible to be both Jewish and Christian, as was the case for many of the early believers.

Therefore, circumcision identifies someone as a Jew, but not necessarily a born-again believer. There are many circumcised people, Jewish and otherwise, who are not truly saved. In the same way, there are many baptized church goers who are not saved. These are merely outward symbols, not evidence of genuine faith. True, transformative, and saving change must take place within and can only be accomplished by God Almighty. Scripture describes this as "circumcision of the heart" (Romans 2:25-29).

A Heavenly Visit (Genesis 18)

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Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it. - Hebrews 13:2

When we were younger, my wife and I would regularly and purposefully invite friends and other acquaintances over for dinner. After we ate, we'd gather around the table to play cards, dominoes, or some other party game. We'd spend the entire evening talking, laughing, and sometimes even crying together. It was a great way to build and deepen relationships with the people in our lives. I'm certain that our world would be a lot better off if we spent more time doing things like this.

Anyway, in this morning's message we will read about "A Heavenly Visit" that took place many years ago. It involves our hero Abraham, who we've been discussing now for the past 2 months. He will play the host for a trio of divine guests...

I. WELCOMED GUESTS (v1-8)

As He had on several previous occasions, the LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre near the city of Hebron where his family had resided for the past 25 years (Genesis 13:18). On this particular day the LORD was accompanied by 2 others. When Abraham saw these 3 "men" approaching, he rushed out of his tent to greet them. He bowed himself before the Lord, and humbly invited them all to stay and rest for a moment rather than merely passing by. The men agreed.

So, Abraham brought a little water for the men to wash their dirty feet. He hurriedly informed Sarah that guests had arrived and asked her to prepare some bread for them. He instructed one of his servants to select and prepare a "tender and choice calf" for his visitors to eat. When everything was ready to serve, all of the food was placed before them including "curds and milk". Abraham stood beside them, under a tree, as they ate.

These 3 guests were not ordinary men. The fact that Abraham bowed before them indicates that he knew these men were divine. The text makes it clear that one of them was the LORD. He may have been God the Father physically manifest in human form or perhaps a preincarnate appearance of Jesus Christ. Similar episodes had already taken place in Abraham's life, such as his encounter with Melchizedek (Genesis 14:18-20) and when the LORD visibly passed through the divided animals to declare His solemn covenant (Genesis 15:17-21). The other 2 men were angels.

II. AN UNLIKELY PROMISE (v9-15)

Sarah remained inside the tent, near the entrance, while Abraham and his visitors talked outside. She could hear speaking them to one another. One of the men, probably the LORD, told Abraham that He'd return again in about a year by which time Sarah would have a son. When she heard this, Sarah laughed to herself in utter disbelief. How would she, a barren old woman, give birth to a newborn child?

The LORD is omniscient, and therefore knew that Sarah had laughed even though He didn't actually see her doing so. He asked Abraham why she had reacted in this way. Was anything too difficult for the LORD? He then repeated His intention to return in a year and again promised that Sarah would have a son. Perhaps a bit embarrassed, Sarah initially denied laughing, but the LORD knew that she had.

God had already promised to give Abraham a son by Sarah. Like she did, he too had laughed upon receiving the news (Genesis 17:16-17). Apparently, however, this was the first that Sarah had heard about this. Why hadn't Abraham told her? Could it be that Abraham was struggling to believe it himself and was therefore hesitant to tell his wife? It's hard to say for sure, but obviously both of them had their doubts.

III. LOOMING JUDGMENT (v16-21)

After they'd eaten, the 3 men turned to depart toward Sodom. Abraham walked with them for a stint as they were leaving. As they went the LORD turned to His 2 companions and asked them if He should reveal His intentions to Abraham. After all, Abraham was to be the patriarch of His chosen nation Israel through whom the entire world would be blessed. Surely Abraham, of all people, was privy to this information.

Determining to do so, the LORD began to share his plan with Abraham. He had heard a great outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah because their sin was exceedingly grave. It is uncertain who was making this outcry, but the Bible suggests that it may have been Abraham's nephew Lot (2 Peter 2:6-8). In light of these serious charges, the LORD and His counterparts were on their way to personally visit the cities in order to evaluate their moral condition. If the cities were found to be entirely corrupt, the implication is that God would destroy them.

IV. A PASSIONATE PLEA (v22-23)

Having revealed His intentions, the LORD stopped to speak further with Abraham while the other 2 men continued toward Sodom. Abraham asked if God planned to destroy the righteous residents of the city along with the unrighteous. Of course, Abraham was genuinely concerned about his nephew

Lot who lived in Sodom. Therefore, Abraham began to plead with the LORD to show mercy on the cities for the sake of the righteous people who might be living there.

Abraham began by asking God to spare the city if 50 righteous citizens could be found there. The LORD agreed to this request. Encouraged by the LORD's response, Abraham asked God to spare the city for the sake of 45 righteous citizens. Again God agreed. Feeling emboldened, Abraham lowered his request to 40, then 30, then 20 - and each time God consented. Abraham then offered a final appeal, and pleaded with the LORD to withhold judgment on the city even if only 10 righteous people could be found living there. The LORD agreed to do so, and then He departed. Abraham returned to his tent.

CONCLUSION

Some readers have interpreted this story as Abraham successfully negotiating with God. They propose that God actually changed His mind when confronted with Abraham's impassioned pleas. However, I disagree with this premise. Abraham wasn't bargaining with God, but rather was discovering the extent of His mercy. God was willing to spare the city for the sake of 10 from the outset, but Abraham didn't realize this so he started at 50 and worked his way down. In so doing, he came to realize that God was more merciful than he'd first imagined. It is important to understand that God's plans and actions are not altered by the demands of men. On the contrary, it is our understanding of God that changes and, hopefully, becomes more full.

In this passage, we see Abraham go out of his way to demonstrate hospitality to his heavenly guests. In the New Testament, hospitality is listed among the several spiritual gifts. We as Christians are instructed to show hospitality to others. We should strive to make guests feel welcomed in our homes. We should always be kind and friendly to new students at school or new employees at work. Our churches should be warm, inviting places where visitors feel wanted and loved. Hospitality is a godly characteristic.

Finally, it is noteworthy that the LORD was travelling to Sodom and Gomorrah to personally evaluate its moral decline before casting judgment against it. I believe that God already knew what He'd find when He got there, nevertheless the lesson still remains. Whenever we hear accusations and allegations of sinful behavior and misconduct, it is important not to jump to conclusions and immediately condemn without taking time to verify the truthfulness of the charges. This is a basic tenet of righteous judgment.

Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19)

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It was the same as happened in the days of Lot: they were eating, they were drinking, they were buying, they were selling, they were planting, they were building; but on the day that Lot went out from Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven and destroyed them all. It will be just the same on the day that the Son of Man is revealed. - Luke 17:28-30

Last week we read about 3 heavenly travelers who stopped briefly to rest and refresh themselves at Abraham's tent. The LORD had heard an outcry against Sodom and was heading there, along with 2 of His companions, in order to assess the moral depravity of the city. After a brief visit, the pair of angels resumed their journey to Sodom while the LORD Himself stayed behind to speak with Abraham. The text reveals that the LORD departed (presumably to Heaven) and never rejoined His counterparts.

This morning's message is a continuation of the same story. We will discover what the angelic duo discovered and the events that took place when they finally reached their destination. The title of today's sermon is "Sodom and Gomorrah". It features a well-known and somewhat harrowing passage of Scripture.

I. AN UNPLEASANT RECEPTION (v1-11)

The 2 angels who had recently visited Abraham arrived at Sodom around evening time. Lot, who was sitting at the city's gate, met them as they came into the city and invited them to stay at his house. The pair initially refused, indicating that they planned to spend the night in the open square. Lot probably suspected that these men would not be safe there, so he urged them to reconsider. They finally accepted Lot's invitation and went to his home for the night.

After they'd eaten dinner together, a mob of several men of the city showed up and surrounded Lot's house. They demanded that he send his 2 guests out so that they could have sex with them. Lot went outside to speak with these vile men, closing the door securely behind him. Lot was in a desperate situation, and offered to send out his 2 virgin daughters instead. The men then threatened Lot, pressed him up against the door, and tried to break it down. Fortunately the 2 angels quickly opened the door and pulled Lot safely inside. They then struck the men at the door with blindness, so that they were unable to find their way in.

As this incident shows, the citizens of Sodom were exceedingly wicked. They sought to commit homosexual gang rape against these 2 visitors. They even threatened violence toward Lot when he

refused to give them what they wanted. These were vile and despicable men, who were completely overcome with sin. They had no sense of morality, no respect for others, and no belief in God. This is what becomes of people who reject the LORD and are left to their own devices. Sadly, this is a fairly accurate description of much of our world today...

II. A HASTY ESCAPE (v12-22)

The 2 men told Lot that the LORD had sent them to destroy the city. They asked Lot to gather all of his family members and to leave town immediately. Lot's daughters were both engaged to be married, so Lot went to find his prospective sons-in-law. When he warned them about the city's impending doom, they thought he was joking and refused to come along. So the next morning at dawn, the angels brought only Lot, his wife, and his 2 daughters out of Sodom.

The angels instructed Lot and his family to leave the valley quickly and escape to the mountains. They warned them to make haste and to not look back, for the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah was imminent. Lot feared that he would not be able to make it to the mountains, and asked if he might flee to the small, nearby town of Zoar instead. The angels granted his request, promised to spare the little town, and told him that they'd wait to send judgment on the cities until he'd safely arrived out of harm's way.

Lot had chosen to live in Sodom for 25 years, despite its extensive wickedness and evil reputation. It appears that he had become a rather prominent citizen, as evidenced by his presence at the city's gate earlier in this story. This suggests that he'd been somewhat accepted by the locals, and had acclimated to their sinful way of life. Obviously his judgment was questionable, seeing that he willingly offered to give his virgin daughters over to the hell-bent mob. Still, despite his many flaws and imperfections, God chose to spare Lot and provided the necessary time for him to escape. The LORD came to save sinners.

III. A DEVASTATING JUDGMENT (v23-29)

The sun had already risen by the time Lot and his family arrived at Zoar. As soon as they were there, the LORD sent fire and brimstone from heaven down upon Sodom, Gomorrah, and the surrounding valley. It consumed and killed all of the inhabitants living there, as well as the crops that were growing in the fields. In violation of the angel's clear warning, Lot's wife looked back at the city of Sodom (perhaps in despair). As a result, she was turned into a pillar of salt.

Meanwhile Abraham, from his vantage point several miles away near Hebron, looked to the east and saw smoke rising from the ruins and ashes of Sodom and Gomorrah. Just a few days earlier, the LORD had warned Abraham that these cities were in danger of judgment... and now it had come.

God had promised to spare the city if He could find just 10 righteous men living there, but alas, there weren't even that many. Perhaps Abraham wondered that morning if his nephew Lot had survived, but the LORD remembered Abraham and Lot was spared from the horrible devastation.

IV. A DRUNKEN BLUNDER (v30-38)

Lot was afraid to stay in Zoar, so he and his 2 daughters continued on to the mountains where they stayed together in a cave. Both girls had been previously betrothed to men in Sodom, but now their husbands-to-be were dead. Alone in the wilderness with their father, and grieving the sudden loss of their fiances, these daughters feared that they might never have children of their own. In their anguish, they devised a dastardly plan.

The sisters coaxed their father into drinking excessive amounts of wine, so that he became slobbering drunk and completely unaware of what he was doing. Then the eldest daughter went in and slept with him that night. They did this again the next day. This time the younger daughter went in and slept with him. So both girls became pregnant by their own father. The older daughter bore a son named Moab, and the younger daughter bore a son named Ben-ammi. Thus, the Moabites and Ammonites (mentioned often throughout Scripture) are the physical descendants of Lot through his incestual relationship with his daughters.

This rather disturbing story highlights the danger of too much alcohol and drunkenness. Lot may have been mourning the loss of his dear wife and home, but drowning himself in booze was not the answer. It never is, by the way. Scripture advises Christians to avoid drunkenness, as it impairs our judgment and self-control (Ephesians 5:18). Alcohol might temporarily ease a person's pain, but it also hinders their ability to make good decisions which invariably leads to even more trouble than before.

CONCLUSION

There are 2 major observations I'd like to make concerning this chapter before we close. The first and most obvious is this - God hates sin and He judges sinners. The sudden and complete destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is one of the most prolific demonstrations of this truth found in all of Scripture. Although God's wrath is undeniable, most people today - even many professing Christians - don't want to talk about it or acknowledge it. But make no mistake about it my friends... those who persistently reject the LORD and live in sinful rebellion against Him will face eternal condemnation in an unquenchable fire.

Secondly, the LORD saves people based upon their acceptance of Him, not based on their works. Let's face it... Lot was not a good model of righteousness and virtue. He made several foolish

decisions and his morals were questionable at best. Yet, most likely as the result of his uncle Abraham's influence, Lot trusted in God for salvation. Though his faith was extremely shallow and he never reached his godly potential, still the LORD lovingly spared Lot's life. Of all the characters mentioned in the Bible, I believe that Lot most fittingly describes someone who was "saved, yet so as through fire" (1 Corinthians 3:15).

Abraham's Treachery (Genesis 20)

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You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies. - John 8:44

Good morning. Today's sermon is the 9th installment of this year's extended series, "The Chosen Church", which covers the patriarchs of Israel. We are now officially a quarter of the way through this series, and in the next few weeks we will gradually transition from the life of Abraham to that of his son Issac. That said, this particular message focuses on an occurrence in Abraham's life that is quite reminiscent of a previous occasion. As we discuss it, you might even get the sense of deja vu...

I. ABIMELECH'S UNWITTING SIN (v1-7)

In the days immediately following the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham and Sarah departed from their home near Hebron (where they had lived in Canaan for some 25 years) and ventured southward toward the Negev desert. They turned aside to the west and came to the Philistine city of Gerar. The king there was a man named Abimelech.

As they had done years earlier during their journey to Egypt, Abraham and Sarah again lied about the true nature of their relationship. Rather than telling the Philistine monarch Abimelech that they were married, they instead said that they were merely brother and sister. So in keeping with the custom of the day, Abimelech took Sarah into his royal household.

Before he made any physical advances toward Sarah, the LORD appeared to Abimelech in a dream at night. He admonished Abimelech for sinning by taking a married woman for himself. The king was shocked to hear that Abraham and Sarah were married. He asserted that he had been deceived and would have left Sarah alone had he known that she was a married woman. God agreed that Abimelech did not sin intentionally, but still instructed him to return Sarah to her husband at once and to have Abraham pray for his restoration. Otherwise, the punishment against the king and his house would be severe.

This incident demonstrates that ignorance of sin is not an acceptable excuse for sin. Abimelech was charged with unrighteous behavior even though it was done without intent. Had he not taken steps to rectify his standing before the LORD, punishment would have followed. This is an underlying Biblical principle. Those who sin against God cannot escape judgement by claiming that they didn't know any better (Romans 1:20).

Another lesson here is that one sin does not justify another. Abraham and Sarah had lied, and their deception laid the groundwork for Abimelech's misconduct. He argued that if they hadn't sinned to begin with, he wouldn't have sinned either. In essence, he was saying that his misstep was ultimately their fault. While this may have been true to some degree, it didn't matter. Their sin did not absolve him from his own.

II. ABRAHAM'S UNFOUNDED JUSTIFICATION (v8-13)

Having learned the truth, Abimelech arose early the next morning and shared the news with his servants. Then he confronted Abraham. He asked Abraham why he and Sarah had lied about their relationship. The king was deeply upset because God's judgment had come upon him and his kingdom. He asked Abraham to explain the reason for his deceit.

Abraham tried to vindicate himself in 2 ways. First he claimed that the lie was merely an attempt to protect himself (and his wife). Abraham feared that if Abimelech knew the truth, he might be killed which would leave Sarah a grieving widow. Second, he explained that Sarah actually was, in fact, his half-sister. Though this was true, it wasn't the full truth. More importantly, she was his wife - a fact that had been purposely concealed.

This isn't the first time that Abraham and Sarah had hidden their marriage. It was wrong for them to do it then back in Egypt, and it was wrong for them to do it now in Philistia. Their willingness to duplicate this same deceitful strategy again shows how easy it is to repeat sinful behaviors. Some people have "pet sins" or favorite sins that they tend to commit over and over again, such as - in this case - lying about one's true identity. It seems that certain sins are more attractive to some people than others.

III. GOD'S UNMERITED FORGIVENESS (v14-18)

Abimelech returned Sarah to her husband Abraham. Furthermore, he gave Abraham several sheep, oxen, and human servants. He also granted Abraham permission to settle anywhere within the country. In order to vindicate Sarah, Abimelech paid Abraham 1,000 pieces of silver. Notice that the king sarcastically referred to Abraham as Sarah's brother, though he now knew that they were wedded to one another.

As instructed, Abimelech had Abraham pray for him and his household. As a punishment for his sin, the LORD had previously closed the womb of Abimelech's wife and maids. But upon hearing this prayer for forgiveness, God healed the king and his family so that they'd once again be able to bear children.

Though both men had sinned, Abraham was called as a minister of God and held religious authority over Abimelech. This position did not make him blameless or without fault. Every prophet named in Scripture made mistakes and committed sins. Every pastor, myself included, has faltered at times and sinned before God. Please don't expect your preacher to be perfect. He is a person just like you, and faces the same temptations and trials that you do. Do not hold him to a higher standard than you do for yourself.

CONCLUSION

One of the questions that comes to the forefront of my mind as we discuss this story is this... is lying always a sin, under any circumstance? This story is now the second time in which Abraham and Sarah hide the truth about their marriage, and in neither passage do they apologize for doing so. In both cases they are blessed with gifts of animals, servants, and money by the very person they lied to! Apparently, neither one of them feels guilty enough in either scenario to repent of their deception.

It is important to note that the Bible never condoned their behavior, and though it led to some positive material outcomes, these results were never expressly attributed to the blessing of God. In fact, there is no instance in God's Word that ever justifies lying. One might argue that in some situations it is the best option to prevent some greater tragedy or to avoid some other more consequential sin. Perhaps so in rare cases, but that still doesn't make it an ideal alternative. As they say, the lesser of 2 evils is still evil. As Christians, we should aspire to be honest and trustworthy people who are known for telling the truth.

Are you guilty of lying? I am. If I said that I wasn't... well, I'd be lying. Whether it be a big lie, a small lie, or somewhere in between, it's still a sin. Perhaps during the invitation this morning you and I need to come clean. This is an opportunity to confess our sins and have them forgiven. Only then can we, like Abimelech, receive healing and restoration.

Isaac Is Born (Genesis 21)

Originally Preached 7/12/2020

Whenever a woman is in labor she has pain, because her hour has come; but when she gives birth to the child, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy that a child has been born into the world. - John 16:21

Hello everyone! Today's sermon is the 10th message in our series titled "The Chosen Church: Getting to Know the Patriarchs". While our focus has been primarily on the life of Abraham up to this point, this morning we will introduce a new character named Isaac. He will eventually take his father's place as the head of the family, and leader of the Hebrew people. This message is titled "Isaac Is Born".

I. THE BIRTH OF ISAAC (v1-8)

Finally, after 25 years of waiting, the LORD kept His promise. Sarah became pregnant with Abraham's child. At the appointed time, about a year after the angels had visited them at their tent near Hebron, the aged couple had a son. He was born in the land of Philistia, where they had recently moved. Abraham named the boy Isaac and circumcised him on the 8th day, in keeping with all that God had commanded him to do.

The name Isaac means "he will laugh" or "to laugh". Prior to his amazing birth, both his father Abraham and his mother Sarah had laughed at the prospect of having their own child. Now they laughed with joy in celebration of his birth, and others laughed with them. So Sarah nursed the child for several months, and when he was weaned Abraham held a great feast.

One of the most special days of any parent's life is the day that their child is born. For me personally, I have vivid memories of the birth day of all 3 of my children. They were some of the best days of my life. I can imagine the incredible joy that Abraham and Sarah must have experienced when Isaac was born. He was a miracle child, a baby that they never thought possible. Yet, here he was... the long-awaited, promised son.

II. SARAH TURNS AGAINST HAGAR (v9-14)

Ishmael would have been around 14 years old when Isaac was born. He was Isaac's half-brother, the son of Abraham through Hagar the maidservant. Sometime after Isaac's birth, Sarah saw Ishmael mocking or "making fun of" him. She was furious. Sarah had always disliked Hagar and Ishmael and held deep animosity toward them. So she asked Abraham to drive them out of the house.

At first Abraham was deeply distressed by Sarah's request, but then God instructed him to listen to his wife (which is a wise bit of advice for all husbands). God assured Abraham that his descendants would be named through Isaac, though Ishmael would become a nation as well. So Abraham rose early in the morning and provided Hagar with a few meager supplies - bread and water. Then he sent her and her son away. They departed and wandered about in the wilderness of Beersheba.

The long-time feud between Sarah and Hagar finally reached its peak. The friction between them was no longer sustainable. Something had to give. There are times when the best thing to do is part ways with one another. Perhaps kicking someone out of the house isn't the best way to go about it, but it did accomplish the goal. Maybe this is why God went along with it, because He knew it was for the greater good. Nevertheless, you can't make people like each other or force them to get along...

III. THE LORD PROVIDES (v15-21)

Eventually Hagar ran out of water. Alone with her teenage son in the desert, she felt certain that this was the end. Hagar left Ishmael under a bush, presumably for some limited shade from the heat, and sat several yards away so that she wouldn't see him die. There she wept bitterly and wailed loudly in distress.

God heard Ishmael crying, and the angel of the LORD spoke to Hagar. He encouraged Hagar and promised her that Ishmael would survive and become the father of a great nation. Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a water well nearby. She filled her waterskin and gave the boy a drink. Though no other details are given, obviously they survived. Ishmael grew up and became an archer. He lived in the wilderness of Paran with an Egyptian wife that his mother took for him.

As He had done previously when she fled from Abraham's tent during her pregnancy, God again took care of Hagar. He provided for her when the situation was most dire. It is quite clear that the LORD loved Hagar and Ishmael, even though they weren't the chosen ones. The Hebrews were never the exclusive recipients of God's compassion and favor. On the contrary, they were to serve as the messengers of His goodness and grace to all the world.

IV. A COVENANT WITH ABIMELECH (v22-34)

The Philistine king Abimelech, whom Abraham and Sarah had deceived almost a year earlier, had taken notice of the couple. He saw how God's favor and presence was with Abraham. So Abimelech and his military commander Phicol decided to make a treaty with Abraham to ensure lasting honesty and peace between them. Abraham swore to honor the agreement, but stated that some of

Abimelech's servants had seized a water well from him. The king was apparently unaware that this had happened.

In order to establish the covenant they'd made Abraham gave Abimelech several sheep and oxen. He also gave the king 7 ewe lambs in order to redeem the well that had been taken from him. Abraham named the place Beersheeba, which means "well of the oath" or "well of 7". After finalizing the agreement, Abimelech and Phicol returned to Gerar. Abraham planted a tree and worshipped the LORD. Beersheba would eventually become the southernmost major city of Israel, but apparently at this time the area was controlled by the Philistines. Abraham and Sarah lived there for many years.

This will not be the last time we'll encounter Abimelech and Philcol. Many years later, after his father has died and he has grown into manhood, Isaac will return to the city of Gerer. Once again there will be a dispute over the water wells and a new covenant will be made between these 2 parties. We will discuss this story in detail about a month from now when we get to Genesis 26... just thought I'd give you a heads up.

CONCLUSION

Isaac's birth was the fulfillment of a promise that God had made many years earlier. It was a miraculous event, seeing that Abraham and Sarah were both very old at the time he was born and that she had been barren all of her life. Yet, after a long and often difficult wait, in the fullness of time, their promised son was born. He would be the one through whom God's covenant was perpetuated. Does this remind you of anything?

God promised to send His Son, the Messiah, to rescue and redeem Israel. They waited for centuries, suffering through many trials and persecutions. Then, in His perfect timing and in accordance to His divine plan, the LORD kept His word. Jesus was miraculously born of a virgin in the sleepy town of Bethlehem. He would grow up to become the Savior of the world and establish the new covenant in His blood.

Once again we see an example of how the Old Testament points to Jesus and helps us as Christians to have a deeper, fuller understanding of the New Testament and the Gospels...

The Offering of Isaac (Genesis 22)

Originally Preached 7/19/2020

The next day he saw Jesus coming to him and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" - John 1:29

This morning we will explore a passage of Scripture that is very familiar to most long-time Christians. For me as a parent, this is one of the most disturbing chapters in the entire Bible. Abraham finds himself caught between his faithful devotion to God and his deeply held love for his young son. What will he do? Let's find out together...

I. GOD TESTS ABRAHAM (v1-8)

Some years after his birth, while Isaac was still young, the LORD tested Abraham. He told Abraham to take his son to the land of Moriah and to offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains "of which I will tell you." This command bears some resemblance to God's original calling to Abram 30 years earlier to leave his home in Haran and go to "the land which I will show you." In both instances Abraham was being challenged to follow the LORD in faithful obedience without fully knowing what lay ahead.

So Abraham rose up early, split wood for the burnt offering, and set out for Moriah with his son and 2 servants. After 3 days of traveling, they drew near to their destination. Abraham asked his servants to stay with the donkey while he and Isaac went on a bit further (presumably up the mountain that God had shown him) to make their offering. None of them, except for Abraham, knew that Isaac was the sacrifice to be offered. Even still, Abraham expressed confidence that both he and his son would "return".

Isaac couldn't have been a small child, because his father put the wood on him. Many respected commentators believe that he was already a teenager or perhaps in his early 20's at this point. As they walked on together, young Isaac noticed that they had brought items to start a fire but no animal to sacrifice. He asked Abraham where the lamb was for the burnt offering. Though I am sure that he cringed at the question and the horrible thought of sacrificing his own son, Abraham again answered with the assurance that God would provide.

Imagine for a moment how difficult this must have been for Abraham. He had waited for 25 years, all the while learning to trust in the promises of God, until finally Isaac was born. Wrapped up in this special child was the future of Hebrew people and the continuation of the LORD's covenant. How

painful it must have been to think that God would require Isaac as a burnt offering, yet Abraham remained resolute and his faith didn't waver.

II. A SACRIFICE IS MADE (v9-14)

When they reached the mountain top, Abraham bound his son and laid him on the wood atop the altar he'd constructed. Then Abraham raised up his knife to kill Isaac prior to setting the body aflame. At the last moment, just seconds before the blade came fatally down, the angel of the LORD cried out from heaven telling Abraham to stop. Because he'd been obedient even to the point of almost killing his own beloved son, the LORD was absolutely certain that Abraham's faith was genuine and that he truly feared God.

Abraham looked up and saw a ram caught in the thicket by its horns. Greatly relieved, he untied his son and placed the ram on the altar instead. He then offered it as the burnt offering in place of Isaac. In recognition of and to memorialize what had happened there, Abraham named the mountain "The LORD Will Provide". About 1,000 years later on this exact site, Mount Moriah, King Solomon would build the Jewish Temple. This location, in the Old City of Jerusalem, is widely considered to be one of the most holy places in the entire world.

Fortunately, God doesn't often literally call His followers to sacrifice their relatives. In fact, the LORD is strongly opposed to child sacrifice. Though Abraham didn't know it at the time, all of this was an elaborate test and God never actually intended for Isaac to be killed. That said, God does call His disciples to love Him even more than their own biological families and to leave them behind, if necessary, for the cause of Christ.

III. THE COVENANT RESTATED (v15-19)

Because he acted in faith, Abraham passed God's test. The angel of the LORD again spoke to him from heaven and swore to bless Abraham, to multiply his seed, and to give them power over their enemies. He further promised that all of the nations of the earth would be blessed by Abraham's posterity. With the sacrifice now complete, Abraham and Isaac went back to their servants, and together the 4 of them returned to their home in Beersheba.

When we consider this story from Isaac's perspective, it takes on a new significance. Abraham was over 110 years old when these events took place. Surely Isaac could have escaped or at least made an attempt to do so once he realized what his father planned to do. But there is no indication that he tried to run, or gave any objection at all, when his father tied him up and prepared to sacrifice him. It is obvious that Isaac trusted and respected his aged father. Furthermore, through this episode Isaac saw and experienced Abraham's amazing faith and would share in it for the rest of his life.

IV. ABRAHAM'S NEPHEWS (v20-24)

While living in Beersheba, Abraham received news that his surviving brother Nahor had produced a family of his own. Most likely, Nahor was still living in Ur of the Chaldeans - Abraham's ancestral homeland. Nahor now had 12 sons - 8 by his wife and 4 by his concubine. Each of them was Abraham's nephew. While this might seem like a trivial detail, it isn't. One of Nahor's sons would grow up to have a daughter named Rebekah, who would eventually become an important part of Isaac's life.

CONCLUSION

Just as the birth of Isaac pointed in many ways to the birth of Christ, so also the story of Isaac's offering foreshadows the cross of Calvary. Let me explain...

Abraham represents God the Father. Isaac represents all of the LORD's children, including you and I. Because of our sin, we are guilty before God and deserving of death. The Father is obligated by His just nature to hold us accountable for our evil deeds and to punish us for our rebellion. As Scripture says, the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23). Therefore, we as sinners have been placed on the altar of God's justice and are destined to face His wrath at any moment. The knife is in His hand and, though it grieves Him desperately, He is prepared to strike. The wood is dry and ready to be lit, engulfing us in eternal and unquenchable flames. God's judgment is imminent.

But wait! There in the thicket of His mercy the LORD has provided a Substitute. The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world has come to take our place. Jesus is the ram who has voluntarily laid down His life on the altar of God that we might live. His shed blood has paid the full price of sin and appeased the terrible wrath of God. By turning to Him in repentance and faith, we as sinners are loosed from the sin that binds us and freed from the sentence of death. His sacrifice is applied to our account, His righteousness reckoned to us.

It's not too late. If you've not yet done so, cry out to Jesus today for the forgiveness of your sins. In Him you will find freedom, hope, and eternal life! He will save everyone who places their faith and trust in Him.

Sarah Dies (Genesis 23)

Originally Preached 7/26/2020

For in this way in former times the holy women also, who hoped in God, used to adorn themselves, being submissive to their own husbands; just as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord, and you have become her children if you do what is right without being frightened by any fear. - 1 Peter 3:5-6

A wise sage once said that there are four phases in a person's life. In phase 1, they are children and their parents take care of them. In phase 2, they become parents and take care of their own children. In phase 3, with their kids now grown and gone, they as adult children take care of their aging parents. Finally in phase 4, having grown old themselves, their adult children take care of them.

With our youngest child only a few years away from his high school graduation, it occurs to me that it won't be too much longer before my wife and I enter phase 3 - caring for our parents. Right now all 4 of them are still living, and relatively healthy to the best of my knowledge. My mom and dad are both in their 70's while Janice's dad is in his 80's and her mom in her 70's. It's just a fact of life... if we live long enough, eventually we'll get old. And while I pray that their passing is still many years away, I know that it will come someday.

In today's message, will we learn about the death of Isaac's elderly mother Sarah. If Isaac was in fact a teenager at the time of his offering (as assumed), then some 20-25 years have passed between chapters 22 and 23 with no record of what transpired. It is notable that the Bible dedicates an entire chapter to Sarah's death and burial. This speaks to her significance as Abraham's wife and the matriarch of the Hebrew people. Sarah is one of the most prominent women in all of Scripture.

I. SARAH'S DEATH (v1-7)

Sarah was 127 years old when she died. She resided in the city of Hebron at the time of her death. Her husband Abraham came to mourn and weep for her. His desire was to bury her in Canaan, the land that God had promised to him and his descendants. So Abraham asked the local citizens - the sons of Heth - if he might acquire from them a suitable place for her burial. Moved by their great respect for him, the sons of Heth offered to give Abraham "the choicest of [their] graves". He was humbled by this kind gesture.

Though Abraham was 10 years older than Sarah, she preceded him in death. The original text reads that he "came to" or "went to" Hebron in order to mourn for her - in other words, he wasn't there when she died. This has been interpreted in different ways. Some Jewish rabbis believe that Abraham and Sarah separated after the offering of Isaac. They speculate that she was so upset by Abraham's

actions that she moved back to Hebron on her own, leaving him behind in Beersheeba. Other scholars have explained the separation by suggesting that the couple had moved back to Hebron together at some point, and Abraham was simply away from home for some reason when Sarah passed away. I tend to agree with this latter point of view.

The sons of Heth were 1 of the 12 main tribes that populated the land of Canaan. They were the descendants of Heth, the second son of Canaan, the son of Ham, the son of Noah (Genesis 10:1, 6, 15). They were also known as the Hittites. One of the most well known Biblical figures from this family was Uriah, the ill-fated husband of Bathsheba, who lived centuries later during the reign of King David. The sons of Heth held Abraham in high esteem, which suggests to me that he was living among them with Sarah and had been for some time prior to her death.

II. FUNERAL ARRANGEMENTS (v8-16)

While Abraham appreciated their offer of a free burial plot, he wanted to purchase a piece of land that would indisputably belong to his family for generations to come. So he approached Ephron, the owner of a nearby field, and asked to buy the cave of Machpelah that was located on the property. Like his fellow countrymen, Ephron initially offered to give the field and cave to Abraham for free. However, Abraham insisted on paying for it. Ephron valued the property at 400 shekels of silver and, in the presence of everyone, Abraham paid the full price for it.

This transaction was conducted publicly before the sons of Heth. Abraham wanted to make sure that there'd be no future debate regarding the rightful ownership of the property. He paid the asking price without negotiation or hesitation. He wanted to make certain that this plot of land, where Sarah was to be buried, belonged perpetually to his family.

According to the Biblical record, this small field was the first piece of property in the Promised Land to officially belong to the Hebrews. Some 5 centuries later, the descendants of Abraham, Issac, and Jacob would take possession of the entire region during the conquest led by Joshua. Nevertheless, God was slowly honoring His covenant promises - first, by giving Abraham a son named Isaac and second, by giving him land in Canaan.

III. SARAH'S BURIAL (v17-20)

Ephron's field, including all of its trees and the cave of Machpelah, was deeded over to Abraham. This cave and its surrounding acreage was located in or near Hebron, also called Mamre. Having officially purchased the cave, Abraham proceeded to bury his beloved wife Sarah inside. Her body would lie in Canaan, the land of promise that God had sworn to him.

The cave of Machpelah is commonly known today as “The Cave of the Patriarchs”. After the temple mount, which we discussed in last week’s sermon (on Mount Moriah), it is considered to be the second-most holy site in Israel. Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and Jacob and Leah were all buried there. We will see this unfold as we continue through our study in Genesis. Today, thousands of pilgrims come to visit this sacred place every year.

CONCLUSION

In closing, I’ve always told my wife not to spend a huge amount of money on my funeral when I die. I’ve joked that she could just bury me in a garbage bag or toss my body overboard at sea. After all, I won’t be there. When I draw my last breath, I’m going straight to Heaven to dwell with my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. It doesn’t matter to me what happens with this old broken body of mine, because I know that somebody I’ll have a much better, glorified one.

But would I bury her in a garbage bag? Absolutely not. All joking aside, the funeral process is a difficult, but deep expression of love for the deceased. Furthermore, it helps survivors to accept and grieve their loss. We set up gravestones as monuments that pay tribute to and remember those who’ve gone on before us. Funerals and burials are important, healing, and good.

Abraham loved Sarah and therefore wanted her buried in the Promised Land, wanted her body to be laid in a nice tomb, and wanted his family to have permanent access to her grave. These things were important to him and worth paying for. His actions demonstrate the value of conducting a proper funeral and burial for those we love.

While Sarah was laid in a family tomb (or cave) that was owned by her husband, Jesus was buried in a borrowed tomb that belonged to Joseph of Arimathea. In this case, there was no need for His mother Mary to buy it, seeing that Jesus wouldn’t be staying there for long. The Lord only used Joseph’s tomb for a few days, and then returned it in mint condition on Sunday morning when He walked out of the grave alive!

Isaac and Rebekah (Genesis 24)

Originally Preached 8/2/2020

He who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favor from the Lord. - Proverbs 18:22

My wife and I will be celebrating our 27th wedding anniversary in a few weeks. I still remember many of the details from that special day and will cherish them in my heart forever. There are few things in life that compare with the beauty and wonder of one's wedding day. As the years go by, I have found that our love continually grows stronger and stronger for both the LORD and for each other. I could have never imagined back then the great depths of love we'd discover together. And I trust that in Christ, we will continue diving deeper and deeper into the bottomless expanse of God's limitless grace and love for many more years to come.

In this morning's message, we will read and discuss the story of an important, historic marriage. I have titled it "Isaac and Rebekah". This is the 13th sermon of our current series, "The Chosen Church: Getting to Know the Patriarchs". It is based on Genesis 24.

I. SEEKING A BRIDE (v1-14)

Abraham, who by now was an old man, called his eldest servant (perhaps Eliezer mentioned in Genesis 15:2) and told him to find a wife for his son Isaac. He was not to select a wife from among the Canaanites, but rather was to return to Abraham's homeland in Chaldea and choose from the eligible women there. The servant was then to bring her back with him, assuming she was willing to come. However, under no circumstances was Isaac to be taken to Chaldea. Having received these instructions, the servant swore to abide by them.

So the servant gathered supplies for his journey, took 10 camels, and left for Mesopotamia. He approached the city where Abraham's brother Nahor lived (Genesis 22:20-24). The servant stopped at the water well just outside of the city at evening time and waited for the women to come and draw water. The servant prayed that the LORD would grant him success in finding Isaac's wife. He planned to choose the young maiden who offered both he and his camels a drink of water.

Abraham's servant was given a task by his master. He was given clear instructions and knew what needed to be done. He even devised a plan to complete the task successfully. Still, though he was fully competent to do this on his own, he prayed that God would bless his efforts and make him successful (Proverbs 16:3). This is a good practice for Christians to follow. We should seek the Lord's blessing in everything we do, knowing that He can prosper us and cause us to triumph.

II. REBEKAH IS CHOSEN (v15-61)

As the servant was praying, a beautiful young virgin named Rebekah came from the city to the well with a jar on her shoulder. After she filled her jar with water, he ran to meet her and asked for a drink. Rebekah gave him a drink and then filled the trough for his camels to drink also. The servant was amazed and gave her a few articles of golden jewelry. He asked her who she was and if he might lodge in her father's house for the night. She answered that her name was Rebekah, the granddaughter of Abraham's brother Nahor, and invited him to come stay with her family, with their permission of course. Once again, the servant was awed by the LORD's immediate provision.

Rebekah hurried home to tell them about this man she had met at the well. Her brother Laban listened carefully to Rebekah's description of all that had happened and saw the golden ring and bracelets she wore. He rushed out to meet the servant and joyfully led him and his camels back to their house. When they entered Laban took good care of both his guests and their animals. As they ate, the servant explained who he was and why he had come. He said that he belonged to Abraham, that he'd come from Canaan to find a bride for Isaac, and that God had shown Rebekah to be one.

The servant asked Rebekah's father if he would give her to Isaac as a bride. Having heard the servant's story, both Bethuel and Laban realized that this was God's plan. They had no choice in the matter but to do His will. So they heartily agreed. The servant responded by giving Rebekah and her family even more precious items of gold, silver, and garments. He wanted to return to Canaan as soon as possible, and intended to leave the next morning. However, Rebekah's family wished her to stay for another 10 days before departing. To settle the dispute, they asked Rebekah and she agreed to leave immediately. So after receiving a blessing, Rebekah and her maids mounted the camels and left with the servant for Canaan.

Rebekah's father and brother recognized that her departure and upcoming marriage was God's will. As such, their personal opinions on the matter held no weight. Perhaps they were saddened to see her leave, as evidenced by their request that she might stay home for a few more days, but ultimately they had no right to detain her. God's calling, purposes, and ways take precedence over human relationships, which at times makes for a difficult separation.

III. ISAAC GETS MARRIED (v62-67)

Isaac apparently did not live with his father Abraham, but instead resided somewhere in the Negev desert. He was a thoughtful and introspective man. He had gone to Beer-lahai-roi, the place where God had appeared to Hagar while she was pregnant with Ishmael more than 50 years earlier (Genesis 16:14), most likely to pray and reflect. He must have received word somehow that Abraham had sought out a bride for him, so he went to go see his father.

While staying with his dad (probably in Hebron), Isaac went out in the field one evening to meditate. In the distance, he saw Abraham's servant and camels coming. From her vantage point, Rebekah likewise saw Isaac from afar and asked who he was. The servant identified him as Abraham's son - her groom to be. Rebekah climbed down from the camel and covered her face with a veil. When they reached one another, the servant reported to Isaac all that had taken place. In the days that followed, Isaac took Rebekah as his bride. He loved her deeply. Their marriage was a great source of comfort for him, seeing that his mother Sarah had recently died.

Though there are certainly exceptions, as a rule most men need women in their lives. God created it this way. Isaac was blessed to have both Sarah and Rebekah. Boys need good, righteous mothers who will love and nurture them. Men need virtuous, godly wives who will care for and respect them. Perhaps this is why men often end up marrying women who share similar character traits with their own mothers. And in rare cases, they might even have the same name! (Both my mom and wife are named Janice...)

CONCLUSION

As I have done for the past few weeks, I'd like to end the message today by connecting this Old Testament event in the life of Isaac to the story of Jesus. In the past month we've talked about a miraculous birth, a substitutionary sacrifice, a holy burial, and now a glorious marriage. All of these have parallels in some form to the life and work of Christ.

Concerning the marriage specifically (which we discussed this morning), just as Rebekah was chosen to be Isaac's bride, so also the Church which consists of all New Testament Christians has been chosen to be the Bride of Christ. Like Isaac loved Rebekah, Jesus loves the Church and even gave up His life to redeem her. Someday, I believe during the Tribulation period, there will be a great celebration in Heaven called the Marriage Supper of the Lamb to commemorate this union.

Jacob and Esau (Genesis 25)

Originally Preached 8/9/2020

See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled; that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal. - Hebrews 12:15-16

Most of the details recorded in the book of Genesis are presented in chronological order. This has allowed us to progress through this series sequentially, chapter by chapter, verse by verse, without having to jump back and forth from one passage to the next. However, the various scenes discussed in chapter 25 are not written in the correct order. In today's message, I will rearrange them so that they can be better understood in the proper alignment.

We have already met Abraham and Isaac. This morning we will be introduced to the last of the "patriarchs". We will read about the birth of Jacob, and see him grow into early adulthood. For historical perspective, the events described in this chapter occurred around 2,000 BC.

I. ABRAHAM REMARRIES (v1-6)

After Sarah's death and Isaac's marriage to Rebekah, Abraham took another wife during the latter years of his life. Her name was Keturah. There is some debate among scholars as to whether she was his wife or his concubine, seeing that she is described as both in differing passages. Nevertheless, she bore him 6 sons. The most notable of these was Midian, whose descendants became known as the Midianites and eventually played a major role in Jewish history. While Abraham's entire inheritance was left to Isaac, he did give Keturah's sons gifts while he was still alive. Over time, their offspring settled to the east of Canaan/Israel.

It is rather common for widows and/or widowers to remarry after the death of their first spouse. While this typically applies to older people, all ages can be impacted. The Bible permits this practice, and even encourages it in some cases (1 Corinthians 7:8-9; 1 Timothy 5:14). The Biblical view on the binding nature of wedding vows is summarized in the traditional phrase "til death do us part." Therefore it is totally acceptable for the surviving spouse to remarry after the death of their husband or wife.

II. REBEKAH HAS TWINS (v19-26)

Isaac was 40 years old when he married Rebekah, and she was barren. So he prayed for her and she conceived. That said, her pregnancy was quite difficult and the babies struggled in her womb.

Rebekah cried out to the LORD in her pain. He explained that she was carrying the fathers of 2 contentious nations, and that the oldest son would serve the younger.

When the time came, Rebekah gave birth to twin boys. Isaac was 60 years old when they were born. The first son to be delivered was covered with red hair, and they named him Esau. The younger son came forth holding on to his brother's heel, and they named him Jacob. Their grandfather Abraham was still alive at the time of their birth. Jacob and Esau are the most famous pair of twins in the Bible.

A generation earlier, Abraham and his wife Sarah waited many years before their first child was born. Sarah was barren, just as Rebekah was. Thus, the births of Esau and Jacob were equally miraculous to that of their father Isaac. This amazing pattern would continue a generation later through Rachel, as we'll discover later in this series. The LORD is almighty, and is able to make a barren woman into the joyful mother of children (Psalm 113:9).

III. ABRAHAM DIES (7-11)

Jacob and Esau were only 15 years old when their grandfather Abraham died at the age of 175. He had lived a full, satisfying, and faithful life. His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, which he had purchased almost 40 years earlier from Ephron the Hittite. Abraham was buried there with his wife Sarah. Following his father's death, God blessed Isaac and he lived in the Negev by Beer-lahai-roi.

It seems somewhat surprising that Ishmael would show up to bury his father Abraham. He and his mother Hagar were last mentioned almost 75 earlier, when Ishmael was just a teenager. Abraham had kicked them out of the house, at Sarah's urging, and they had eventually settled in the Wilderness of Paran (Genesis 21:9-14). Perhaps Isaac wanted him there and sent word to him concerning their dad's death. These brothers didn't seem to have any lingering animosity toward one another.

IV. ISHMAEL'S DESCENDANTS (v12-18)

The Bible does not give many details about Ishmael's life, but it does say that he had 12 sons. They became the fathers of 12 tribes which over time developed into a great nation, just as God had promised to both Abraham and Hagar. The Ishmaelites were closely associated and intermingled with the Midianites. They lived east of Egypt, in modern day Saudi Arabia. Ishmael, who was in his late 80's when Abraham died, lived another 50 years before passing away at the age of 137. Therefore he was still alive, though distant and not involved, for the first half of Jacob and Esau's life.

V. ESAU DESPISES HIS BIRTHRIGHT (v27-34)

Jacob and Esau grew up to become very different from one another as adults. Esau was an outdoorsman and hunter, while Jacob preferred to stay inside and work at home. Because of these traits, their father Issac had a natural affinity for Esau and their mother Rebekah had particular affection for Jacob.

One day Esau came in from the field, where presumably he had been hunting, and was completely famished. Jacob had prepared a delicious red stew while he was gone. When Esau (who is also called Edom) saw and smelled it, he asked Jacob for some. Seizing the moment, Jacob told Esau that he'd give him the stew in exchange for Esau's birthright. Esau could have easily refused or went and found something else to eat, but instead he foolishly and hastily swore over his birthright for a measly bowl of stew.

The birthright was traditionally given to the eldest son, though it could be transferred to a younger one. This practice was later defined and limited by the Law of Moses (Deuteronomy 21:15-17). The possessor of the birthright received a double portion of their father's inheritance - a greater share than his brothers. Not to excuse Jacob's opportunistic behavior, but the fact that Esau would trade this tremendous honor away for a single meal was unbelievable. Apparently he did not value or appreciate the great privilege he had, and mindlessly let it slip away.

I see this same thing happening throughout America today. People are quick to give up their fundamental rights and God-given blessings (which have great worth) in exchange for temporary pleasures and provisions (of little value). Rather than accepting responsibility for themselves and their families, they'd rather be taken care of. This is foolishness! As long as people are willing to give away their rights and freedoms, power hungry leaders will gladly delight in taking them away. But I digress...

CONCLUSION

In today's message we've touched on a few varied topics such as the remarriage of widows and widowers, the power of God to give childless couples families of their own, and the human tendency to undervalue one's rights and privileges while overvaluing trivial, temporal things. I will close this morning by citing John 1:12 which tells us that those who trust in Jesus Christ have been given the "right to become children of God." This includes, among other things, the right to live in freedom from sin and bondage, the right to live without fear or worry, and the right to live victoriously in all circumstances. What will we do with this right? How will we regard it? Will we despise and underappreciate it like Esau did with his birthright, or will we esteem and cherish it like Jacob did?

Isaac's Wells (Genesis 26)

Originally Preached 8/16/2020

And you brethren, like Isaac, are children of promise. - Galatians 4:28

Of the 4 major characters we will discuss in this series, Isaac is the least well known. The Bible simply does not dwell on him as much as it does on Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph. There are less chapters in Genesis about Isaac and the various details of his life. That said, today's message is one of the few that focuses squarely and almost exclusively on Isaac and his family. I am calling it, "Isaac's Wells".

I. ISAAC PROSPERS IN GERAR (v1-17)

Isaac had spent most of his adult life living at Beer-lahai-roi - the well where God had appeared to Hagar many years earlier. However, after Esau and Jacob were grown, a severe famine struck the land. Isaac considered going to Egypt, but the LORD appeared to him and advised him to stay in the region of Canaan. So Isaac and Rebekah moved to a leading city in the land of Philistia named Gerar. This was, in fact, the same place that Isaac's parents Abraham and Sarah had relocated following the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

When they came to Gerar, Isaac repeated the misleading behavior of his father. Hoping to protect himself, he told the Philistines that Rebekah was his sister. After this deception had persisted for some time, the king saw Isaac and Rebekah being intimate with one another. He summoned Isaac, told him that he knew they were actually married, and asked Isaac why he was lying about it. Isaac explained that he was afraid for his life. The king was upset and charged his people to leave Rebekah alone.

While living in Gerar, Isaac had tremendous success farming. The LORD blessed him, and he became extremely wealthy. His flocks, herds, and household grew greatly. The Philistines became envious of Isaac's prosperity. Apparently Isaac was using water from the same wells that his father Abraham had dug a generation earlier. Perhaps as an attempt to sabotage his success, the Philistines stopped them up by filling them with dirt. The king asked Isaac to move away, but he didn't go very far. Isaac resettled in the Valley of Gerar nearby.

In this passage we read that the king of Gerar was called Abimelech. Could it be he was the same man who reigned during the life of Abraham (Genesis 20)? While it's remotely possible, it isn't likely as these 2 events took place at least 80 years apart. During the life of King David centuries later, the Philistine king of Gath is also referred to as Abimelech (Psalm 34). Many scholars believe that

“Abimelech” was a title given to many or even all Philistine kings, similar to “Pharaoh” in Egypt, not a proper name.

II. QUARREL OVER THE WELLS (v18-25)

Isaac and his servants redug the wells that had been stopped up by the Philistines. He called them by the same names that his father Abraham had originally given them. When the local herdsman saw that these wells were once flowing again, they began to complain and grumble. They contended that this water belonged to them - not to Isaac and his servants. Apparently to keep the peace, Isaac let them have the disputed wells which he called Esek and Sitnah (meaning “strife”). He moved on to another location, dug another well that was his alone, and named it Rehoboth (meaning “open spaces”). Finally God had made room for him in the land.

Sometime later Isaac went up to Beersheba, perhaps to seek God at the same place where his father had worshiped decades earlier (Genesis 21:33). The LORD appeared to him that night and restated the covenant promises that He’d first made to Abraham. In so doing, God again revealed that Isaac was the chosen son through whom the Hebrew people would be descended. In response, Isaac built an altar there and called upon the name of the LORD. In the days that followed, he moved from the Valley of Gerar to Beersheba and dug another well.

The Bible specifically mentions 4 occasions upon which Abraham built an altar. These were located near or at Shechem, Bethel, Hebron, and on Mount Moriah. In contrast, the Bible only records one instance of Isaac building an altar - at Beersheba. Altars were used to make sacrifices to the LORD for religious purposes, and were often built to commemorate a special or life-changing encounter with God that took place there.

III. A COVENANT WITH ABIMELECH (v26-33)

Abimelech the king, along with an advisor and his military commander, came up from Gerar to meet with Isaac at Beersheba. Isaac was somewhat surprised by their visit, seeing that they had asked him to leave their country. The Philistines had seen how Isaac prospered and recognized that God was with him. So they proposed a treaty with Isaac, fearing that he might one day turn against them. Isaac accepted their offer of peace and an agreement was made. They held a feast to celebrate the accord, and then the king and his men returned to their home. A similar treaty had been made between the Philistines and Abraham.

That same day Isaac’s servants informed him that they had discovered water in the new well they’d been digging. This well may have been a restoration of the old one Abraham once dug there. Isaac

named it Shiba, which means “oath”, to memorialize his agreement with Abimelech. The well of Shiba was the original well at Beersheba.

IV. ESAU'S MARRIAGES (v34-35)

It was during this time that Isaac's eldest son Esau took wives from among the local Hittites. Esau was 40 years old when he married Judith, and then also married Basemath. These marriages brought grief to his parents Isaac and Rebekah because Esau had chosen to marry Canaanite women rather than those from his own country. Like Ishmael before him, Esau's marriages to pagan wives were clear indicators that he was not the son of promise.

CONCLUSION

Isaac enjoyed tremendous success and prosperity. Those around him could have easily rejoiced in his good fortune and tried to emulate it for themselves. But rather than praising him for his hard work and honoring his great accomplishments, they instead chastised him and sought to destroy his name and estate. They were jealous of Isaac and felt threatened by his achievements, though he never expressed any ill-will toward them. Sadly, human nature often leads people to resent those who are successful rather than aspiring to be like them. We'd rather tear others down than build ourselves up.

Water is a basic human need. Places where water is available and plentiful often develop into settlements which eventually become cities. This was especially true in ancient times, when water couldn't be readily transported or moved long distances. The flowing water wells dug by Abraham, Isaac, and others throughout the arid Negev region of southern Canaan were critical to people living there. They depended on this water to survive.

In the gospels, we read about an occasion when Jesus came to Jerusalem for the annual Feast of Booths. On the last day of the feast, as He was teaching the crowds, Jesus referred to Himself as a well of living water (John 7:37-39). He invited those who were thirsty to come to Him for a drink. Jesus was using a metaphor to beckon the lost and needy to trust in Him for salvation and to receive the promise of the Holy Spirit to come.

As we wrap up, let me extend this same invitation. Did you know that the greatest human need is the forgiveness of sins? Our eternal destiny hinges on this issue. Only Jesus, the Son of God, has the power to dismiss your sins, pardon your guilt, and give you the hope of eternal life. He is a well of living water. He is a spring of life in a dry, sinful desert. Though death surrounds us, there is a fountain who is the King. Will you drink from Him today?

The Stolen Blessing (Genesis 27 & 28)

Originally Preached 8/23/2020

For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all, the testimony given at the proper time. - 1 Timothy 2:5-6

This morning I'll be preaching the 16th message of "The Chosen Church" series. When the service is finished today, we'll be exactly halfway through our extensive study of the Jewish patriarchs. I trust that you have been strengthened and edified by these sermons so far, and I look forward to preaching the later half of this series in the weeks to come.

Last week Isaac and his family were pushed out of the valley of Gerar by the Philistines. They moved to Beersheba, situated along the southern boundary of Canaan. Isaac's servants dug another water well and they continued with their farming. The events that take place in today's message happened while they were living in Beersheba. We are going to cover 2 chapters this morning, so buckle up...

I. DECEPTION (Gen. 27:1-29)

Isaac believed that his death was imminent, so he decided to go ahead and bless his eldest son Esau. The Bible reveals that Isaac didn't actually die until after Jacob had returned from the land of Paddan-aram (Genesis 35:28-29) several decades later. Perhaps Isaac had become very sick, his eyesight had diminished greatly as a result, and he (and his family for that matter) truly thought that he was going to die. Thus he went forward with the blessing, only to later recover from his grave illness and live for many more years.

Isaac asked Esau to go hunting, to kill some savory game, and to prepare it for them to eat. Following the meal, Isaac intended to give the blessing to his firstborn son Esau. Rebekah overheard their conversation and knew she must intervene. God had told her earlier that Jacob was to rule over Esau, not the other way around, and therefore Jacob needed to receive his father's blessing (Genesis 25:23). So Rebekah devised a plan, and after Esau had left the house she sprung into action.

She quickly prepared a delicious meal, then disguised Jacob as his brother, and sent him in to his father pretending to be Esau. Rebekah dressed Jacob in Esau's clothes and covered parts of his body with animal skins, hoping to fool her blinded husband Isaac. Though Jacob usually gets the blame for this trickery and was responsible for going along with it, this whole episode was his mother Rebekah's idea. In fact, Jacob was apprehensive and nervous about it because he didn't want to get caught.

Having received some final instructions from Rebekah about what to say, Jacob tentatively approached his father Isaac posing as Esau. As they spoke, Isaac suspected that he was hearing Jacob's voice. However, when he touched his skin and smelled his clothes, it seemed to be Esau. Finally Isaac asked directly, "Are you my son, Esau?" and Jacob outright lied by saying, "I am." They then ate the food that had been prepared, and afterwards Isaac blessed Jacob, believing him to be Esau.

II. DISAPPOINTMENT (Gen. 27:30-45)

Having received the blessing, Jacob departed just as Esau was returning from his hunt. Esau prepared the game he'd killed and brought it in to his father Isaac. When Esau arrived and began to speak, Isaac realized that he'd been deceived. He explained to Esau that he'd already mistakenly given the blessing to Jacob, and that it couldn't be revoked. Esau was devastated and begged his father to bless him also. So Isaac blessed Esau with a lesser blessing, but it didn't soothe away Esau's heartbreak and disappointment.

Esau was furious. He vowed in his heart to kill Jacob for this treachery. That said, he didn't want to do it while Isaac was still living. Believing that his father was near death, Esau decided to wait. In the meantime, Rebekah found out about Esau's murderous plan. She urged Jacob to flee to her brother Laban's house and stay there temporarily, until Esau's anger subsided. Rebekah shrewdly approached her husband Isaac and asked him to send Jacob away to find a bride from among their relatives, an endeavour which would serve 2 purposes - securing Jacob a proper marriage while also keeping him safe.

Although Rebekah and Jacob both acted deceptively, they were not the only ones at fault. Esau had traded away his birthright for a bowl of stew (Genesis 25:27-34) and was, therefore, not entitled to receive the blessing of the firstborn. The birthright and the blessing went together. Esau knew this to be true, yet conveniently chose not to share it with his father. It was Esau, in fact, who was trying to steal the blessing that he'd foolishly ceded to Jacob. Esau had forfeited his claim to Isaac's blessing. Yes, Jacob and his mother could have been more transparent and forthcoming with Isaac. Nevertheless, their actions brought about God's will - Jacob was the son of promise.

III. DEPARTURE (Gen. 28:1-9)

So Isaac sent Jacob away to Paddan-aram, the home of his maternal grandfather. He was instructed to marry one of his uncle Laban's daughters. Before he left, Isaac again blessed Jacob. He conferred upon him the promises of the Abrahamic covenant, thereby formally designating him as the chosen son. Though Jacob had deceived him earlier, apparently Isaac now realized that this all had taken

place in accordance with God's plan. This time around he knowingly blessed Jacob, the younger son, without any reservation.

Esau saw that his father Isaac had sent Jacob away to a distant place to take a wife from among their own relatives. Esau realized that his marriages to pagan Canaanite women were displeasing to his parents (Genesis 26:34-35). So Esau, perhaps trying to mimic his brother, went to his uncle Ishmael's house and married his daughter Mahalath. Though he sought to emulate his brother Jacob, it was too late. His status in the family was already lost.

IV. DREAM (Gen. 28:10-22)

So Jacob left Beersheba and started northward toward Haran, the city of his mother Rebekah's family. He stopped at a certain place along the way to spend the night and placed a stone under his head for a pillow. As he slept, Jacob had a dream about a ladder stretching from the earth all the way into Heaven. He saw angels climbing up and down this ladder. Then the LORD spoke to him and extended the 3 major promises of the Abrahamic covenant - to give Jacob and his descendants the land of Canaan, to multiply them innumerable, and to bless the entire world through them. God also pledged to protect and guide Jacob personally.

When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he was completely blown away. According to the Biblical record, this was his first encounter with God. He set the stone up (that he'd used for a pillow) as a monument and poured oil on it. He named the place Bethel, which means "house of God". Jacob vowed to faithfully follow and serve the LORD if He'd protect Him on his journey and bring him home safely. Jacob shouldn't have placed conditions on his obedience like this, but he was still young and immature in his faith. Though his words were misguided, who among us has never sought to "make a deal" with God? Perhaps we should give him a break...

CONCLUSION

As we wrap-up today's sermon, let me focus our attention on Jacob's dream about the ladder. Some translations call it a stairway. The image of "Jacob's Ladder" or a "Stairway to Heaven" has been adopted and used in modern times. Most Bible scholars interpret the ladder metaphorically or symbolically. It represents the bridge or connection between God and man which makes a saving relationship possible. Ultimately this ladder is a picture of Jesus Christ, through whom God demonstrates His love for the world and through whom sinners have access to the Father. Hallelujah!

Jacob, Rachel, and Leah (Genesis 29)

Originally Preached 8/30/2020

All the people who were in the court, and the elders, said, "We are witnesses. May the Lord make the woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah, both of whom built the house of Israel; and may you achieve wealth in Ephrathah and become famous in Bethlehem." - Ruth 4:11

Good morning. Today we are in Genesis 29 which includes the story of Jacob, Rachel, and Leah. The events described in this chapter cover a period of about 14 years, during which Jacob marries and starts his own family. It is a tale that includes attraction, love, and devoted service... not to mention an ironic twist. Open your Bibles and let's begin.

I. MEETING RACHEL (v1-12)

After encountering God at Bethel, Jacob continued northward through Canaan and finally crossed into the region of Paddan-Aram. He noticed a well surrounded by 3 flocks of sheep that were lying beside it in the field. Jacob approached the well and found that it was covered by a large stone. These 3 flocks were waiting on others that were coming, but had not yet arrived. When all of the sheep were gathered, the stone would be rolled away from the well's opening, and they would all drink. Afterwards, the stone would be put back in place so as to protect and preserve the water source.

Jacob asked the shepherds that were already at the well where they were from. They answered, "Haran". He then followed up by asking if they knew a man named Laban... and they did! The shepherds told him that Rachel, one of Laban's daughters, would be arriving at the well shortly to water her father's flocks. Jacob wanted them to go ahead and begin, but they explained that their custom was to wait until everyone had arrived.

About that time, Rachel came with her father's sheep. Most likely trying to impress her, Jacob immediately and personally rolled the large stone away from the mouth of the well and watered her flocks. He greeted her with a kiss and explained who he was (her cousin) and why he'd come. Jacob cried out to the LORD, with weeping, because God had led him directly to his destination.

II. SERVING LABAN (v13-20)

Rachel ran home to tell her father about Jacob's arrival, and Laban excitedly hurried out to meet him. Laban warmly invited Jacob to stay with them in their home, and he readily agreed. Over time, they

got to know one another. After a month had passed, Laban asked Jacob to work for him as a shepherd.

Now Laban had 2 daughters - Leah and Rachel. Leah, the older sister, was less attractive than her younger sibling Rachel. Jacob had fallen head-over-heels in love with Rachel, and agreed to serve Laban 7 years in exchange for her hand in marriage. So Jacob remained in Haran, working diligently for his uncle, and - from his perspective - the years passed by quickly.

Can we speak honestly? Men are attracted to beautiful women. To be fair, women are attracted to handsome men. This is a fact, whether we like it or not - physical appearance matters. It isn't and shouldn't be the main thing, but it is undeniably something. Physical attraction by itself can't sustain a healthy marriage, but it can definitely destroy one. Spouses need to be aware of this. They shouldn't just "let themselves go", but rather should take reasonable steps to remain physically attractive to one another, as an act of love and a safeguard for their marriage.

III. TRICKING JACOB (v21-30)

When the day of the long-anticipated marriage finally arrived, Laban held a grand marriage feast. Little did Jacob realize that his uncle had a devious scheme in mind. Many commentators believe that Jacob got excessively drunk during the party, perhaps at Laban's prompting. When night fell, Laban brought his older daughter Leah to Jacob. Heavily inebriated, Jacob consummated the marriage by sleeping with her - all the while believing her to be Rachel. When he sobered up the next morning, he realized that he'd married the wrong sister!

In dismay, Jacob asked his uncle why he'd given Leah to him as his bride rather than Rachel. Laban explained that it was customary for the older sister to marry prior to the younger. Why hadn't Laban mentioned this detail earlier? Taking advantage of the situation, Laban agreed to let Jacob marry Rachel also on the condition that he serve him for another 7 years. So after honoring his marriage week with Leah, Jacob then married his beloved Rachel. However, they couldn't return immediately to Canaan because he'd committed to serve Laban 7 more years. As a wedding gift, Laban had given Leah a handmaiden named Zilpah and Rachel a handmaiden named Bilhah.

There is a principle in the Bible that goes like this... "you reap what you sow". Some people call it karma. Jacob had a history of taking advantage of others through deception, trickery, and outright lying. He had fooled his brother Esau and his father Isaac on past occasions pertaining to the birthright and blessing. But now the tables had turned. Jacob had been tricked into marrying the wrong woman, and was now obligated to serve his uncle twice as long as he'd originally planned to. As they say, "What goes around comes around."

IV. DISREGARDING LEAH (v31-35)

It was no secret - Jacob loved Rachel much more than Leah. Seeing this disparity, God made Leah fruitful while Rachel was barren. Thus, Rachel was like Rebekah and Sarah before her. Nevertheless, in the years that followed Leah bore 4 sons to her husband Jacob. With each of the first 3 births - Reuben, Simeon, and Levi - Leah hoped that Jacob's love for her would increase, but it didn't. By the time the 4th son was born - Judah - Leah had given up trying to win Jacob's affection and instead chose to delight in her children.

While Rachel was the love of Jacob's life, Leah was at least as important and arguably more important to both Jewish and Christian history than her younger sister. Leah's son Judah would eventually become the father of the Judahites. Centuries later Joshua would give the tribe of Judah a large portion of the Promised Land. The land of Judah would eventually become the southern kingdom of Israel, and later the Roman province of Judea. Its citizens became known as the Jews. Most significantly, Jesus Christ was born in the ancestral line of Judah. He was therefore a descendant of Leah, not of Rachel. What's more, as we will see later in this series, Leah was buried with Jacob in the cave of the Patriarchs.

CONCLUSION

As the chapter comes to an end, Jacob is still living in Haran working for his uncle Laban. He had initially been sent there from Beersheba to find a bride among his relatives, to stay temporarily if necessary, and then to return home. But instead he found himself stuck in his mother's homeland, bound by his own promise, while his aging parents Isaac and Rebekah remained waiting in Canaan.

In closing, I wish to make a parting observation. In the early part of the chapter, Jacob wanted to go ahead and water the flocks already at the well without waiting on the others. He was told that such an act would be a violation of their custom. Later in the chapter, Jacob wanted to marry Laban's younger daughter Rachel first, but was forbidden from doing so. Again, he was told that this wasn't customary. Twice Jacob sought to defy conventional methods.

In a similar way, Jesus had a knack for challenging the Jewish customs and traditions of His day. For this reason, some thought of Him as a revolutionary and felt needlessly threatened by His teachings. The religious elites had become so pious and rigid that they mistook their personal procedures and practices for God's law. Jesus came to break through this legalism, orthodoxy, and religiosity, by showing us God's unconditional, unfiltered mercy and grace.

Success In Haran (Genesis 30 & 31)

Originally Preached 9/6/2020

Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him. - James 1:12

As today's message begins, Jacob is still living in Haran and working for his uncle Laban. He is nearing the completion of his second set of 7-years service. He had committed himself to serve this period of time in exchange for Laban's 2 daughters. Jacob has now been married to both Leah and Rachel for a little more than 5 years. While Rachel is barren, Leah has already given birth to 4 sons - Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah.

I. JACOB'S CHILDREN (Genesis 30:1-24)

Rachel knew that she was unable to bear children and had become increasingly jealous of her sister Leah. Desperate to have a child she could call her own, Rachel urged Jacob to sleep with her handmaiden Bilhah. Ultimately Bilhah bore Jacob 2 sons - Dan and Naphtali. Seeing this, Leah - who had temporarily stopped bearing - gave her handmaiden Zilpah to Jacob as well. She also bore 2 sons to Jacob - Gad and Asher. Thus, the competing sisters' handmaidens actually birthed 4 of Jacob's sons.

Leah had her eldest son Reuben gather some mandrakes from the field. Mandrakes are flowering plants that were used as a fertility drug in ancient times. Apparently, this strategy was effective because Leah became fruitful again and had 2 more sons - Issachar and Zebulun - and a daughter - Dinah. Rachel also partook of the mandrakes and God opened her womb. Rachel was finally able to give birth, and she had a son named Joseph. She longed to bear another.

It seems highly unlikely that all of these children could have been born in just 7 years. Scripture states that Jacob actually lived in Laban's house for 20 years (Genesis 31:38,41). He stayed with his uncle for 6 additional years after completing his required 14 years of service. It's also likely that some of these pregnancies overlapped one another. Thus, there was plenty of time for all of these children to be born while Jacob resided in Haran.

At this point Jacob had 11 sons and a daughter. His sons were Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, and Joseph. His daughter was named Dinah.

II. THE FLOCKS INCREASE (Genesis 30:25-43)

During these same years, as his family was expanding and growing, Jacob was shepherding Laban's flocks. After his son Joseph was born, Jacob seriously considered returning with his family to Canaan. Not wanting them to go, Laban offered to pay Jacob a generous wage. Jacob agreed to remain in Haran and tend Laban's flocks on the condition that Laban would give him all of the multi-colored goats and black sheep. Because goats are usually solid in color and sheep are typically white, this seemed to be a good deal and Laban readily agreed.

In the years that followed, Jacob employed a primitive and somewhat mysterious method of selective breeding which caused the flocks to produce more and stronger multi-colored goats and black sheep. This resulted in fewer and weaker solid colored goats and white sheep. Thus, over time Jacob's animals became stronger and more numerous than Laban's. The approach that Jacob used, which involved peeled rods from poplar, almond, and plane trees, is still unclear to modern scientists. It was probably sheer superstition. The truth is that Jacob's prosperity came as the result of God's blessing - not a rudimentary form of artificial selection.

III. LEAVING FOR CANAAN (Genesis 31:1-21)

As time went by Jacob was becoming wealthier while Laban was becoming poorer. Tensions were increasing between the 2 of them and their servants. Some of them believed that Jacob had stolen Laban's livestock and riches. One day, the LORD appeared and told Jacob that it was time to return to Canaan. Jacob sent for Leah and Rachel and explained to them how he'd been mistreated by their father for many years. He told them of a dream he'd had about the flocks and of God's blessing to him through them. After listening to his speech, both sisters agreed to return with Jacob to his homeland.

So Jacob gathered his wives, children, servants, livestock, and all of his many possessions and departed. He did so secretly and abruptly, while his uncle and father-in-law Laban was away shearing his sheep. Unbeknownst to Jacob, Rachel took her father's household idols with them. They journeyed southward, crossing the Euphrates River, bound for Canaan.

IV. LABAN PURSUES (Genesis 31:22-42)

Three days later Laban received word that Jacob and his family had left, so he set out in pursuit. After a week of chasing, he overtook them in the hills of Gilead. That night the LORD spoke to Laban in a dream and warned him to treat Jacob well. When they met, Laban asked Jacob why he'd fled so suddenly without giving him a chance to say goodbye. He stated that if he'd known Jacob's intentions, he would have thrown a nice going away party. Jacob knew this wasn't true and explained that he'd left secretly because he feared that Laban would have tried to withhold his property and keep his wives had he been given advance notice.

Laban also asked why Jacob had stolen his household idols. Jacob had no idea that they'd been taken, and allowed Laban to search the camp for them. When Laban came into Rachel's tent, she was sitting on the idols which she'd hidden in a camel's saddle. She said that she was on her period, so Laban didn't ask her to move and chose not to look in the saddle. Ultimately Laban's search came up empty, and Jacob likely thought that he'd been falsely accused of stealing the idols. He was quite upset and contended angrily with Laban.

V. A COVENANT IS MADE (Genesis 31:43-55)

Although Laban still selfishly believed in his heart that Jacob's wives, children, and flocks rightly belonged to him, he couldn't shake God's warning. Laban realized that the LORD was with Jacob, and that the best decision was to leave him be. So the 2 men made a covenant with one another. Jacob promised to lovingly care for and be faithful to Laban's daughters. Furthermore, they agreed to live at peace and not fight with each other. They set up a heap and pillar, offered a sacrifice, and ate a meal to confirm the covenant. Early the next morning, Laban said his goodbyes and returned to Paddan-Aram empty-handed.

CONCLUSION

When Jacob left Canaan 2 decades earlier, he was single and mostly dependent on his parents. Now he was married, had several children, and owned large flocks of livestock. He was returning home a different man. During his 20 year absence, Jacob had worked hard to acquire his success and reach his goals. Though his boss, Laban, was dishonest and difficult to get along with at times, Jacob had remained dedicated to his service and didn't quit. As such, God richly blessed Jacob's efforts and allowed him to prosper.

This story is, in some ways, a metaphor for life. As Christians, we are pilgrims living in a foreign land. We began our journey with nothing. Throughout our lives worldly people will take advantage of us, exploit our efforts, and seek to take what we've earned. Still there is hope - God has not forgotten us. By living in faithful obedience to Him, we can find joy and success even in the midst of uncertainty and hardship. Like Jacob, we can make the most of our circumstances. And one day when the LORD calls us home, we can go victoriously having lived a full and fruitful life.

Wrestling and Reuniting (Genesis 32 & 33)

Originally Preached 9/13/2020

And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew dialect, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads." And I said, "Who are You, Lord?" And the Lord said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting." - Acts 26:14-15

It had been 20 years since Jacob left Canaan, in part to find a wife but also to escape his brother's wrath. At the time Esau wanted to kill Jacob for "stealing" his blessing. Rebekah urged her husband Isaac to send Jacob away to Haran primarily because she wanted to protect him from harm. Now, after all this time, Jacob was returning home. Would Esau be waiting for him? Would he still be angry?

They say that "time heals all wounds". I'm not sure if that's always true, as some pain never goes completely away. But time can make our hurts feel less tender. In this case, would Esau still be harboring a grudge? Had he forgiven Jacob for the sorrow he'd caused? Had Esau's pain diminished or was it still fresh? In today's sermon, we will discover what happened when Jacob and Esau were reunited after their long separation.

I. PREPARING TO MEET (Genesis 32:1-21)

Following his uncle Laban's departure, Jacob camped near the Jabbok River. The Jabbok is a tributary located east of Canaan that follows into the Jordan River. He named the site Mehamaim because the angels of God met with him there. Apparently Jacob had learned where his brother Esau was living, and decided to take the first step by making an offering of peace. He dispatched messengers to go find Esau in the mountainous region of Seir and to seek his favor. When these messengers returned, they informed Jacob that Esau and 400 of his men were coming to meet him. Jacob feared the worst, and felt terribly afraid and deeply distressed.

Expecting his brother to be bitterly angry and possibly even hostile, Jacob took preemptive action. First, he separated his people and possessions into 2 companies. This would ensure that if one was attacked, the other would escape and survive. Second, Jacob prayed and asked the LORD to protect him and his family from Esau. Third, Jacob sent 3 droves of animals ahead as a gift in hopes of appeasing Esau's anger. Esau would receive these generous presents 1 at a time in short succession before reaching Jacob's camp, and perhaps his fury would be quelled.

Jacob had no way of knowing how his reunion with Esau would go. Perhaps everything would be fine, water under the bridge so to speak - but maybe not. That said, the day of their encounter was fast

approaching. The Bible teaches us to hope for the best, but prepare for the worst. Though we trust in God for the victory, we should still ready ourselves for the battle (Proverbs 21:31). Jacob wisely took this approach as he prepared to meet his brother Esau.

II. WRESTLING WITH GOD (Genesis 32:22-32)

That night Jacob sent his wives, children, and possessions across the Jabbok River. Facing uncertainty and fear, he wanted some “alone time” on the opposite shore. A mysterious man appeared and wrestled with Jacob all night long. Some commentators believe that this man was an angel of God while others surmise that he was actually God in human form (perhaps a preincarnate appearance of Jesus). As daybreak approached, the divine man had not yet prevailed so he touched Jacob’s hip instantly causing it to become dislocated.

Though he was badly injured, Jacob still refused to let the man go without a blessing. Before he departed, the heavenly man gave Jacob a new name - Israel - because he had striven boldly with God and man. Israel means “one who contends with or struggles with God”. This would prove to be a fitting name for the nation that would arise from Jacob’s posterity as well. So Jacob named the place where he wrestled with the LORD Peniel, which means “face of God”, and it became known as Penuel. That morning as he crossed over the Jabbok to rejoin his family, Jacob walked with a limp that many believe persisted for the rest of his life.

This encounter with God forever changed Jacob’s life. His clash with the LORD that night is similar in some ways to Saul’s experience on the Damascus road. Just as Saul legally fought to oppress and imprison God’s people, so also Jacob physically fought against the LORD. Just as Saul’s name was changed to Paul, so also Jacob’s name became Israel. Just as Paul was left with an impairment that is believed to have resulted from his encounter (ie, poor eyesight), so also Jacob came away with a limp. These physical limitations were certainly burdens to both men, but also served as a constant reminder of God’s transformational power and grace.

III. REUNITING WITH ESAU (Genesis 33:1-20)

Not long thereafter, Jacob looked and saw Esau and his men coming in the distance. Still frightened, Jacob put the maids (Bilhah and Zilpah) and their children in the front, Leah and her children in the middle, and Rachel and Joseph in the back. Then he went on ahead of them all, bowing down 7 times as he approached Esau. To Jacob’s surprise, when they drew near to each other Esau ran to embrace him. It was a warm and joyful reunion. Relieved, Jacob introduced his family to Esau who was delighted to meet them. Esau told Jacob that all of the gifts he’d sent were appreciated but unnecessary, but Jacob insisted that he keep them.

Esau then invited Jacob to follow him to his home in Seir, but Jacob politely declined. He stated that he would come to visit Esau at a later time, but it is uncertain if he ever actually did (the Bible doesn't say). Esau offered to leave some men with Jacob perhaps as a guard or a guide, and again Jacob kindly declined. So Esau and his men returned southward to the land of Seir, while Jacob and his family journeyed westward toward Succoth. From there he crossed the Jordan River into Canaan and came to the city of Shechem. Jacob purchased some property from the locals, built an altar, and settled there.

Finally Jacob was safely home again in the land of Canaan. His overbearing father-in-law Laban was no longer lording over him and his once estranged brother Esau didn't want to kill him any more. Things were definitely looking up! God had kept the promises that He'd made many years earlier at Bethel to protect and bless Jacob (Genesis 28:10-22). The LORD's covenant people would come from the line of Abraham, Issac, and Jacob.

CONCLUSION

As we wrap-up today's message, I want to apply Jacob's experience to our lives in 2 ways.

First, if we are honest, most of us have spent a portion of our lives fighting with God - some more than others. Perhaps we've stubbornly doubted or even denied His existence. Maybe we've rebelliously refused to follow His commandments or do His will. We've foolishly rejected His love, compassion, and forgiveness. Why? Because we lack the humility to admit that He is greater than us and that we need Him. Beloved, we will never outsmart, outdo, or outlast God. And our pride will be our downfall...

Second, many people are afraid to come to the LORD because they expect Him to be angry. They look at the sins they've committed in the past and doubt that God could ever love or forgive them. As such, they spend their lives on the run, in a foreign country, and/or without any hope of restoration. But the truth is that God loves sinners, He misses those who have strayed, and He desperately wants to be reunited with them. Lost person, the LORD isn't mad at you, so come and meet Him today!

Dinah Is Raped (Genesis 34)

Originally Preached 9/20/2020

Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. - Romans 12:17-18

On his way home from Paddan-Aram, Jacob had 3 separate encounters. First, he made a covenant with his uncle Laban (who had chased him down). Second, he wrestled with God all night long and survived. Third, he made amends with his older brother Esau. Following all of these occurrences, Jacob and his family finally arrived in Canaan.

The Bible doesn't explicitly state how many years passed between Jacob's departure from Haran and the disturbing events we'll discuss today in Genesis 24. It is clear, however, that by this point Jacob's children had grown into young adults. Therefore, it is reasonable to believe that Jacob's family lived in Succoth and then in Shechem for a combined period of at least 10-20 years (Genesis 33:17-20).

This morning's message is titled "Dinah Is Raped". It is the 20th sermon of "The Chosen Church" series and it covers a pair of rather unsettling topics - sexual assault and homicide. It is my prayer that God will speak to us clearly and powerfully today as we touch on these troubling issues.

I. RAPE (v1-7)

Jacob and his family lived in Shechem. One day Dinah, the daughter of Jacob and Leah, went to see some of her friends. A young man named Shechem (not to be confused with the city's name) saw her, abducted her, and raped her by force. He was strongly attracted to and infatuated by her beauty. To make matters more complicated, Shechem was the son of Hamor the Hivite - a prince in the land. In other words, this scandal involved a sexual assault perpetrated by a nobleman's child. In the aftermath, Shechem pleaded with his father to acquire Dinah for him to be his wife.

Hamor went out to find Jacob, hoping to speak with him about the incident. Meanwhile, Jacob had already received the horrifying news that Shechem had defiled his daughter. Though it grieved him deeply, Jacob was able to maintain his composure. However, when Jacob's sons - Dinah's brothers - found out what happened they were furious.

Rape is an evil and detestable sin that has been victimizing both men and women since Old Testament times. According to estimates made by the National Sexual Violence Resource Center, there were 734,630 people raped in the United States during 2018 (threatened, attempted, or completed). Nearly 1 in 5 women have been raped in their lifetimes (18%), most often by someone

they know personally. Approximately 40% of victims are raped before reaching age 18, and 80% before age 25. We as Christians should pray for and support those who have been sexually assaulted and stand against a culture that permits and even glorifies this type of violent behavior.

II. RESTITUTION (v8-18)

Hamor eventually found and conversed with Jacob and his sons. Hoping to make this problem go away, he and his son committed to give whatever was necessary as a bridal payment for Dinah. Furthermore, Hamor invited all of Jacob's sons to intermarry with the Hivites so as to become one people. He expressed a desire to share the land and property, and to engage in trade and commerce with each other.

Apparently Jacob didn't answer immediately, so his sons spoke up for him. They stated that it would be inappropriate and disgraceful to give their sister Dinah to someone who had not been circumcised as they were. They asked that all of the Hivite men be circumcised as a prerequisite condition before marrying any of the young women in Jacob's camp - including Dinah. Hamor and Shechem believed this to be a reasonable request and agreed to the terms.

We should remember that Jacob and his sons were circumcised in accordance with the Abrahamic Covenant first established between God and their grandfather. They were a distinct and peculiar people, who were not supposed to intermingle with the Canaanite people or acclimate to their pagan culture. They were to be purposely different and set apart for the LORD. Sadly, I fear that in modern times God's people (the church) have become so entangled with the world that it's often hard to tell the difference.

III. RETALIATION (v19-31)

Hamor and his son Shechem came to the gates of the city and addressed all of the men gathered there. They told them about the agreement they had made with Jacob's sons. They described Jacob's people as friendly and emphasized the merits of joining with them through intermarriage and mutual cooperation. Everyone was convinced that this would be a good thing. Therefore, all of the Hivite men including Hamor and Shechem were circumcised.

On the third day after their circumcision, while they were still suffering from and physically incapacitated by the procedure, 2 of Jacob's sons snuck into the city with swords and attacked the helpless men. One by one, Simeon and Levi killed every Hivite male who'd been circumcised. They murdered Hamor and Shechem, and took their sister Dinah back. Afterwards, Jacob's sons looted the city and seized their animals, wealth, wives, and children.

Now Jacob was unaware that his sons had done this. When he found out what happened, he didn't approve. Instead, he scolded his sons for their vengeful conduct. Jacob feared that the inhabitants of the land would retaliate against him because he had so ruthlessly slaughtered the citizens of the city. His sons vigorously defended their actions by arguing that Shechem couldn't be allowed to get away with treating their sister Dinah like a harlot.

CONCLUSION

Jacob's sons had every right to be angry with Shechem for sexually assaulting their sister. His behavior was vile, despicable, and completely unacceptable. He should have been held accountable and properly punished for his misconduct. But I ask you this... what did all of the other Hivites do wrong? What was their crime? Why did Jacob's sons think it was appropriate or necessary to take their vengeance out on the entire city instead of just the individual responsible? Is it okay for us to condemn and/or perpetrate violence against an entire group of people based upon the actions of one person? Beloved, these questions are relevant to our nation today.

Furthermore, was it appropriate for Jacob's sons to take matters into their own hands in the first place? Perhaps in ancient times, when there were no police officers or legal systems in place, such an approach was necessary. But as Christians today, what do we believe about vigilante justice? The Bible teaches us not to repay evil with evil or to seek revenge. Instead we are to trust that God will execute justice in His time and in His way (Deuteronomy 32:35). As we stand up and speak out against the sinful acts that permeate our culture, we must be careful not to digress into sinful behavior ourselves.

My friends, the story we've discussed this morning took place 3,000 years ago. Yet the issues it addresses and the questions it raises are still very relevant. The fact is - human nature hasn't changed. Sexual immorality, vengeance, injustice, and the murder of innocents are still prominent in our world today. We are, on our own, an evil and depraved people. And the only true answer to these problems and the dark scourge of sin is Jesus Christ...

Three Funerals (Genesis 35 & 36)

Originally Preached 9/27/2020

A good man leaves an inheritance to his children's children, and the wealth of the sinner is stored up for the righteous. - Proverbs 13:22

Good morning. Today's message covers 2 chapters, but I will put a greater emphasis on the first and just briefly touch on the second. Genesis 35 records a series of moves and other events that took place in Jacob's life during the year or so after he and his family left Shechem. This was a difficult time for Jacob, as he would experience much loss. I've titled the sermon "Three Funerals".

I. BETHEL (Genesis 35:1-15)

Following the tragic events that took place at Shechem, the LORD spoke to Jacob and commanded him to move to Bethel. Bethel was a special place to Jacob. It was where God had appeared to him many years earlier, when he fled from his brother Esau on the way to Paddan-Aram. Before leaving for Bethel, Jacob called his family to purify themselves. He gathered all of the foreign gods (ie, idols) and earrings of those in his household and left them behind under an oak in Shechem.

Though his murderous sons had greatly angered the Canaanites in the region, terror fell upon their cities and they didn't pursue Jacob. After arriving safely at Bethel, Jacob built an altar and worshiped the LORD. God spoke to him there once again. He reiterated that Jacob's new name was to be Israel. This change had originally been made following Jacob's all-night wrestling match with God. He also reminded Jacob of the glorious promises of the Abrahamic Covenant that would be realized through him and his descendants.

While they were living at Bethel, Rebekah's nurse Deborah died. Many Bible commentators suppose that Jacob's mother Rebekah had sent her nurse Deborah to live with Jacob and his family. It seems likely that she had resided with them for several years, and perhaps even assisted in raising and teaching their children. In any case, she must have been very dear to Jacob and his household for her death to be mentioned. He named the place of her burial Allon-bacuth which means "oak of weeping".

II. BETHLEHEM (Genesis 35:16-22)

After an unspecified period of time, Jacob departed from Bethel and traveled toward Ephrath (more commonly known as Bethlehem). Along the way, his pregnant wife Rachel suffered in severe labor and pain. As they drew near, she gave birth to a second son named Benjamin. However, it was a

difficult delivery and Rachel died during childbirth. Heartbroken, Jacob buried her there and set up a pillar to mark the place of her grave. After mourning her death, he continued on beyond the Tower of Eder (near Bethlehem) and settled there.

For many centuries Rachel's tomb lay on a deserted roadside. Her descendants would come to this lonely site to pray and remember. Today, because of population growth and expansion, Rachel's burial site is actually located within Bethlehem's city limits. It is considered a holy site for Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Rachel is revered for having a great sympathy and compassion for her children. The prophet Jeremiah described Rachel as "weeping for her children" in relation to the fall of Judah to the Babylonians (Jer. 31:15). In the New Testament, Matthew applied this prophecy to Herod's slaughter of the young children in and around Bethlehem following the birth of Christ (Matt. 2:18).

While living near Bethlehem, Jacob's oldest son Reuben slept with Bilhah, one of his concubines. She was Rachel's maid and the mother of Dan and Naphtali. While this detail is not elaborated on in this passage, it will become important later in the story...

III. HEBRON (Genesis 35:23-29)

Including Benjamin, who was substantially younger than his brothers, Jacob now had 12 sons. 11 were born in Paddan-Aram and 1 in Canaan. These men would become the fathers of the 12 tribes of Israel. Unfortunately, Benjamin never knew his mother Rachel.

Jacob left Bethlehem and came to his father Isaac's house in Hebron. It is uncertain if Rebekah was still alive at this point, as she is not mentioned and her death is not recorded anywhere in Scripture. Nevertheless, Isaac died at the age of 180. Interestingly, Isaac was the only patriarch who never left Canaan and remained married to 1 woman his entire life. His twin sons Esau and Jacob buried their father in the Cave of Machpelah (Gen. 49:30-31).

IV. ABOUT ESAU (Genesis 36)

Though he is not the main character, the patriarchal narrative pauses to devote an entire chapter to the life and posterity of Esau. Years earlier he had married 2 women from among the Canaanites and 1 of his uncle Ishmael's daughters. Together these women bore Esau 5 sons - Eliphaz, Reuel, Jeush, Jalam, and Korah. Esau also acquired and possessed a significant amount of property, goods, and animals. He and his family moved away from Canaan and lived in the land of Seir. Over time this neighboring country would become known as Edom, a synonym for Esau.

Esau's descendants were numerous and they became chiefs in the land. They, along with the sons of Seir the Horite, were leaders in the region for many generations. Eventually Edom developed into a prominent kingdom. Several kings reigned over Edom, centuries before the nation of Israel ever came into being. In fact, Moses sought the king's permission to travel peacefully through Edom during the exodus (Num. 20:14-21). Unfortunately, the nation of Edom historically had a very adversarial relationship with Israel.

CONCLUSION

Within a relatively brief span of time, perhaps just a year or 2, Jacob lost his father Issac, the beloved wife Rachel, and a dear family friend Deborah. Each of these 3 special people were important to Jacob and had made a profound impression on his life. There is little doubt that their deaths, especially coming so close together, caused him tremendous sorrow and grief.

When Rebekah was chosen to be Isaac's bride and brought to Canaan, her nurse Deborah accompanied her (Gen. 24:61). Deborah was Rebekah's friend and servant. She likely assisted Rebekah in the upbringing of Jacob (and Esau). Years later, she actually dwelt with Jacob and his family and helped him with their children. Deborah had been a vital part of the family for 3 generations, providing care for Jacob's mother, then him, and finally his kids.

Rachel was the love of Jacob's life. He willingly served her father Laban for 14 years in order to pay her steep bridal payment. He showered her favored status, as demonstrated by placing her in the most protected position when Esau approached (Gen. 33:1-2). Rachel's sons Joseph and Benjamin would become his father's favorites, probably because they reminded Jacob of her. To this day, Rachel is held in high regard by the Jewish people.

Issac was Jacob's father and role model. Though he had more in common with Esau, ultimately Issac recognized that Jacob was the chosen son through whom the people of God would rise. Therefore Issac blessed Jacob and took steps to ensure that he remained pure and set apart by marrying outside of the pagan Canaanite culture (Gen. 28:1-5). Issac's faith in God was passed down to his son Jacob, the greatest inheritance that any father can leave.

I close today with this question... when you're gone, how will you be remembered? Will the life you've lived and the legacy you've left point people to Christ or turn them away from Him?

A Young Man Named Joseph (Genesis 37)

Originally Preached 10/4/2020

For my soul has had enough troubles, and my life has drawn near to Sheol. I am reckoned among those who go down to the pit; I have become like a man without strength, forsaken among the dead, like the slain who lie in the grave, whom You remember no more, and they are cut off from Your hand. You have put me in the lowest pit, in dark places, in the depths. - Psalm 88:3-6

Thus far, our series has focused on 3 primary characters - Abraham, Issac, and Jacob. These men are the patriarchs of the Jewish people. This morning our spotlight will shift once again. Beginning with today's message and for the remainder of the series, we will be concentrating on Jacob's children - particularly on his son Joseph. Though Joseph is not one of the patriarchs, his story providentially sets the stage for the next chapter of Jewish history.

I. DESPISED BY HIS BROTHERS (v1-11)

Jacob and his family settled in Hebron, where both Abraham and Issac had sojourned before him. His son Joseph, who was just a baby when Jacob left Paddan-Aram, was now 17 years old. He and his brothers were responsible for pasturing their father's flocks. One day, Joseph brought back a bad report about some of the things they were doing. In other words, he told on them. Joseph was a snitch, and his brothers didn't like it.

Furthermore, Joseph was one of Rachel's sons and therefore held a special place in his father's heart. Jacob openly favored him over all of his other children, and even went so far as to make him a multi-colored tunic symbolizing his esteemed status. It would seem that Jacob, having himself experienced the toxicity of a father's favoritism, would have avoided repeating this same behavior - but he didn't. This was another reason why Joseph's brothers despised him.

To make matters worse, Joseph had a dream that he and his brothers were binding sheaves in the field. In the dream, their sheaves bowed down before his. Then he had a second dream in which the sun, moon, and 11 stars all bowed before him. In both of these dreams, Joseph's brothers were symbolically portrayed as submitting to and showing allegiance to him. Joseph felt superior to his brothers, and his lofty dreams and prideful arrogance further alienated them. In short, they hated him.

Let's face it... Joseph was a pompous brat and his brothers had plenty of valid reasons not to like him. But, let's not forget, his father Jacob had not been the best brother when he was young either. Remember how Jacob took advantage of Esau regarding the birthright and his father's blessing?

Remember how Esau hated him for it? Now, a generation later, we see young Joseph offending his brothers in similar fashion. As they say, “Like father, like son”.

II. THROWN IN A PIT (v12-24)

Now Jacob’s brothers had taken their father’s flocks to pasture near Shechem. Jacob sent Joseph to go check on them and see if they were okay. So Joseph came to Shechem, but his brothers were not there. A stranger approached him and asked, “Who are you looking for?” When Joseph answered the man told him that his brothers had moved on toward Dothan. Joseph continued to Dothan in search of them.

As he approached, his brothers saw him in the distance and plotted to kill him. They planned to throw his dead body in a pit and say that he’d been devoured by a wild animal. Reuben, the oldest son, convinced his brothers not to kill Joseph immediately but rather to throw him alive into a pit. As the firstborn, Reuben knew that he would likely be held most responsible should anything bad happen. In truth, Reuben secretly hoped to go “rescue” Joseph later and then take the credit for saving him.

When Joseph came near, the brothers seized him and stripped off the clothes he was wearing. Joseph had on his multi-colored tunic - the one he purposely wore around to flaunt himself as the favorite son. His enraged brothers cast poor, almost naked Joseph into a deep, waterless pit and left him there to die.

III. SOLD INTO SLAVERY (v25-36)

While they were eating, the brothers saw a caravan of Ishmaelites passing by on their way to Egypt. One of the brothers, Judah, proposed that they sell Joseph to these traveling merchants. He reasoned that killing Joseph was too extreme - after all, they were brothers. By selling him, they could avoid having “blood on their hands”, Joseph would still be gone, and they’d all make a little money in the process. The brothers agreed that this was a better idea than either killing him or leaving him to die.

There are 2 competing explanations for what happened next. The first is that Reuben, for some unknown reason, was not with his brothers when they sold Joseph to these Ishmaelites (synonymously called Midianites). Thus, when Reuben returned to the pit later he was surprised to find that Joseph was already gone. The second possibility is that Reuben returned to the pit on behalf of his brothers to retrieve Joseph so that they could sell him. However, when he arrived Joseph wasn’t there. Some Midianite traders had already found him and sold him to the Ishmaelites.

Either way, Joseph was long gone. So the brothers slaughtered a goat and dipped Joseph's colorful coat in its blood. They took the blood-stained tunic to their father Jacob and gave it to him for inspection. The brothers claimed that Joseph had been fatally attacked by a wild animal. Jacob saw the evidence, believed their report, and was devastated to hear that his favorite son was dead. He mourned deeply for many days and refused to be comforted. Meanwhile, the Ishmaelites took Joseph to Egypt and sold him into slavery. He became the servant of Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's bodyguard.

Jacob lived the next several years believing that his precious son Joseph was dead. Perhaps his guilty brothers convinced themselves into thinking the same thing. Maybe it helped them sleep better at night. For many years to follow, even as they watched their aging father languish in grief, they kept silent about what really happened. Perhaps they thought that telling him would only cause more harm. Maybe, but sometimes additional pain is necessary so that true healing can begin. In any case, keeping a secret in order to conceal one's sin is always wrong (Proverbs 28:13).

CONCLUSION

The passage we've studied today, like so many others in Scripture, clearly foreshadows the life and death of Jesus Christ. It is yet another striking example of how the entire Bible points to and centers around Jesus. It amazes me how so many people can read the Word of God and still miss this truth. Let me close by making a few notable comparisons...

Joseph was despised and condemned by his own brothers.
Jesus was hated and rejected by His Jewish brethren.

Joseph's brothers plotted evil against him and intended to kill him.
The Jewish priests and religious authorities conspired against and sought to execute Jesus.

Joseph was seized, stripped, and cast into a pit where he was left to die.
Jesus was arrested, stripped, beaten, and crucified on a Roman cross.

After suffering there for some time, Joseph was lifted alive out of the pit.
After 3 days, Jesus miraculously rose from the dead and walked out of the grave.

Joseph was taken to the far-away country of Egypt.
Jesus ascended into Heaven, the glorious Kingdom of God.

Joseph's brothers chose to hide their guilt from their father.
Many people today refuse to admit their sins and confess them to God.

Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38)

Originally Preached 10/11/2020

The record of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham: Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers. Judah was the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, - Matthew 1:1-3a

In last week's message we turned our attention to Joseph and began our discussion of his incredible life. He was despised by his brothers, thrown into a pit, sold into slavery, and taken away to Egypt... and this was just the beginning of many adventures to come. Next week we will return to and continue reading Joseph's compelling story.

However, this morning we will shift the spotlight (albeit briefly) to Judah, one of Joseph's older brothers. Based upon other Biblical evidence and a little common sense, the events described in this chapter most likely cover a span of around 25-30 years. Therefore, they were happening to Judah in Canaan at the same time that Joseph's remarkable story was unfolding in distant Egypt. Keep this in mind as our study goes on. They are parallel accounts designed to contrast these 2 important siblings.

I. 2 BAD BROTHERS (v1-11)

Unlike Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who married among their own Hebrew relatives and started families late in life, all of Jacob's sons married Gentile wives and started having children much earlier. Judah is no exception. While still a young man, Judah went to visit his friend Hirah in the nearby town of Adullam. While there he saw and fell in love with an unnamed Canaanite woman identified only as the "daughter of Shua". They were married and began having children immediately. Within a short span, the couple had 3 sons - Er, Onan, and Shelah.

Several years passed and these boys grew into young men themselves. Judah chose a young maiden named Tamar to be the wife of his oldest son Er. However, before they could come together to produce a child, Er died. In keeping with their custom, Er's younger brother Onan was responsible for maintaining his deceased brother's family line. Therefore Onan went in and slept with Tamar. However, Onan knew that if she had a baby, the child would legally be considered Er's heir - not his. So Onan took action to insure that Tamar did not become pregnant. Subsequently, he died also.

Judah's only remaining son, Shelah, was not yet old enough to marry. Judah asked his daughter-in-law Tamar to remain a widow and live in her father's house until Shelah came of age. Perhaps then they could produce children for Shelah's older brothers and for themselves.

Heartbroken and childless, Tamar agreed to do so. Meanwhile Judah was having second thoughts. He feared that somehow Tamar was bad luck, and worried that Shelah might also die prematurely should he ever be married to her.

The Bible plainly states that God took Er's life because he was "evil" and took Onan's life because his actions were "displeasing in the sight of the LORD". Tamar had nothing to do with their untimely deaths. This passage has been cited throughout history to argue against all forms of contraceptives and/or birth control. Proponents assert that Onan sinned by using preventative measures to ensure that Tamar did not get pregnant during sex. They assert that any such efforts are morally wicked. Personally, I believe this position mischaracterizes the true nature of Onan's sin, stretches the actual meaning of the text, and is inconsistent with the broader teaching of Scripture on the issue of sex. Perhaps we can dig more deeply into the matter of birth control in a future sermon.

II. 2 DESPERATE PEOPLE (v12-23)

Tamar quietly and dutifully waited through the next few years. During this time, Judah's wife died and he became a widower. Eventually Shelah reached the necessary age for marriage, but Judah was hesitant to pair him with Tamar. One day she learned that Judah and his friend Hirah were going to Timnah to supervise the shearing of his sheep. Having witnessed Judah's reluctance, Tamar disguised herself as a prostitute, covered her face with a veil, and waited along the roadside at the gate of Enaim for him to pass by.

When they met, Judah didn't recognize his daughter-in-law. Thinking her to be a harlot and longing for the intimacy he'd lost, Judah offered to give her a young goat from his flock in exchange for her services. However, he did not have a goat with him at the time. Therefore, Tamar took Judah's seal (signet ring), cord, and staff as a pledge until the animal could be delivered. Once the details of payment had been arranged, Judah went in and slept with Tamar. Afterwards he continued on his way, while she returned home having become pregnant by her own father-in-law.

When they arrived at Timnah, Judah took one of his goats, gave it to his friend Hirah, and sent him back to find and pay the prostitute. Hirah returned to Enaim, but couldn't find her. He asked the local citizens if they'd seen her - and they hadn't. Frustrated, Hirah returned again to Timnah and told Judah that she was gone. Judah decided to keep quiet about the incident because he reasoned that people would laugh at him if word got out.

This story provides an example of 2 people engaging in a sexual relationship for very different reasons. Judah hired what he thought was a prostitute for his own personal pleasure. For him this was a one-night stand - no strings, no consequences. On the other hand, Tamar (who was justifiably

upset with Judah from withholding his son Shelah from her) was purposefully trying to get pregnant. She wanted a baby, even if it required taking extreme measures.

III. 2 NEW BABIES (v24-30)

About 3 months later, Judah learned that his daughter-in-law Tamar was pregnant. He was absolutely furious and wanted her killed for not faithfully waiting on Shelah. But when she showed him the signet ring, cord, and staff, Judah immediately recognized what he'd done. He even took responsibility for it, reasoning that if he'd simply given Shelah to her in a timely manner the whole episode could have been avoided. He made no effort to punish Tamar for her deceit.

When the months of her pregnancy were over, Tamar gave birth to twin boys. During the delivery, one of the babies stuck their hand out. The midwife tied a scarlet thread around it to identify which child was born first. But then the baby withdrew its hand and the other son came out instead. So the firstborn child was named Perez, which means "to breach" or "to bust forth". The second born son (who had the thread tied on his hand) was named Zerah, which means "dawning" or "shining".

CONCLUSION

As we wrap our study this morning, it is worth mentioning that Tamar is 1 of only 4 women named in the genealogy of Jesus Christ. This quartet includes Tamar (the daughter-in-law of Judah), Ruth (the wife of Boaz), Bathsheeba (the wife of King David), and Mary (the wife of Joseph). Of these, only Mary was a Jew. Tamar and Bathsheeba were both Canaanites and Ruth was a Moabite. Yet God divinely permitted these Gentile women (and perhaps others left unnamed) to become ancestors of Christ. By His birth Jesus was a Jew, but (like virtually all of us) His true ethnicity was mixed to some extent. He represented the Gentiles as well. He came to make salvation available to everyone!

Falsely Accused (Genesis 39)

Originally Preached 10/18/2020

Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. - Matthew 5:11

After discussing Judah and his family last week, this morning we will return our attention to Joseph. As you may recall, Joseph was his father Jacob's favorite son. Jacob even made Joseph a coat of many colors which he proudly showed off to his brothers. Joseph sometimes snitched on his brothers and caused them to get in trouble. He openly shared his dreams of ruling over them someday. The brothers hated him for these things and conspired to kill him. Instead, they decided to sell him to a band of foreign merchants.

In today's message, we resume our discussion of Joseph's incredible life. I have titled this sermon "Falsely Accused". It is the 24th message of "The Chosen Church: Getting To Know the Patriarchs" series.

I. ELEVATED (v1-6b)

After being sold to the Ishmaelite traders, Joseph was taken from Canaan to Egypt. Upon arrival, they sold him as a slave to Potiphar, an Egyptian officer of Pharaoh. Potiphar was the captain of the bodyguard. Joseph became a servant in Potiphar's house and the LORD blessed him. Over time, Joseph's success became evident and his master recognized that everything he did prospered. Therefore, Potiphar made Joseph his personal assistant and put him in charge of overseeing and managing his household.

God began to bless Potiphar's house and property because he'd placed Joseph in charge of it. Everything that Joseph was given responsibility over flourished and thrived. Increasingly, Potiphar gave Joseph more and more control. Eventually the only thing that Potiphar had left to be concerned about was the food that he ate. Joseph took care of everything else for him.

Prior to his arrival in Egypt, the Bible presents Joseph as a somewhat snooty, spoiled, and unlikable teenager. However, while he lived with Potiphar, Joseph worked hard, earned the respect and admiration of his master, and enjoyed remarkable success (especially due to God's blessing). His attitude and demeanor seemed better, and he'd definitely matured as a person. Sometimes going through a traumatic experience, like being sold into slavery, changes your perspective and forces you to grow up quickly. What's more, sometimes people just need a fresh start in a new place somewhere far away from their past.

II. BLAMED (v6c-18)

Joseph was a handsome young man and Potiphar's wife was strongly attracted to him. She began making sexual advances towards him and sought to entice Joseph into sleeping with her. But Joseph did not want to betray his master nor sin against God, so he repeatedly refused her propositions. She continued trying to seduce him day after day, but he always resisted.

One day Joseph was working alone in the house and no other people were around. Potiphar's wife approached him, grabbed his garment, and demanded that he sleep with her. Joseph quickly fled from her presence, leaving his garment behind in her hand. Frustrated and angry, she gathered the men of the house and falsely accused Joseph of trying to sexually assault her. She showed them his garment and claimed that he'd tried to force himself on her, but ran away when she screamed. She later repeated this same lie to her husband, Potiphar, when he returned home.

There are many examples men who commit acts of sexual harassment and/or assault against women. Those who are guilty of this behavior should be held accountable. In no way do I or should we ever condone such conduct. On the other hand, there are also numerous instances in which innocent men are falsely accused of such things. Often in these cases, untrue and slanderous allegations impede or even destroy the young man's life. Serious charges like these should be thoroughly investigated to determine the truth, not merely accepted at face value.

III. IMPRISONED (v19-23)

Though he was completely innocent, Joseph was placed in prison for attempting to rape Potiphar's wife. The jail where he was confined housed only the king's prisoners - those incarcerated by the king's decree. While there, God's favor was upon Joseph once again and he caught the attention of the chief jailer. As time went by, the chief jailer began giving him management and oversight responsibilities so that eventually Joseph was in charge of all the prisoners. The chief jailer trusted him completely.

Though he was in prison, Joseph made the best of his circumstances and rose to a position of leadership. He had done the same thing while serving as a slave in Potiphar's house. In both instances, Joseph succeeded in spite of his challenging environment. There is no doubt that some people have an easier path than others, but Joseph's story clearly demonstrates that one's surroundings should not limit their achievements.

With God's help, anyone can rise above their circumstances and find success. Doing so requires a positive attitude, a willingness to work hard, and a healthy reliance of the LORD. Joseph could have

easily cursed God for his many misfortunes, wallowed in self-pity, and given up on himself - but he didn't. Instead he faced every new day with a passionate desire to become the best he could be where he was. Success shouldn't be measured in comparison to others and their situations, but rather in the achieving of one's own potential.

CONCLUSION

As we observed earlier in this series, there are several noticeable similarities to be seen between Joseph's life and that of Jesus Christ. We've already seen images that foreshadowed His betrayal, death, and resurrection. Let's elaborate on a couple more commonalities as we wrap things up this morning.

First, while serving as a slave Joseph was faced with constant temptation. Can you imagine the challenging nature of his work environment? Yet, though he was a sinner in numerous other ways, Joseph successfully resisted the ongoing attempts of seduction made by Potiphar's wife. In comparison, Jesus left His heavenly home, took on flesh, and came to live in the fallen world where sin abounds. He faced all sorts of temptations, just as we do each day, yet He never sinned (Hebrews 4:15).

Second, Joseph was condemned on the basis of false testimony. Potiphar's wife accused him of doing something that he didn't do, and he was subsequently put in prison for it. Jesus was also convicted based on contrived and even conflicting evidence (Matthew 26:59, Mark 14:56). Ultimately, Jesus was sentenced to death for inciting rebellion against Rome (treason or sedition) - a bogus charge that was totally false.

Interpreting Dreams (Genesis 40)

Originally Preached 10/25/2020

When they had struck them with many blows, they threw them [Paul and Silas] into prison, commanding the jailer to guard them securely; and he, having received such a command, threw them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks. - Acts 16:23-24

I don't dream very often anymore. If I do, I don't remember what I've dreamt about when I wake up in the morning. But many years ago, when I was a child, I used to have bad nightmares. They would wake me up in the middle of the night sweating and terrified. As an example, there was a streetlight outside my window that I used to dream about coming alive and chasing after me. Anyway, I prayed for many years that I'd stop having dreams altogether, and eventually God granted my request.

This morning we are going to read about and discuss dreams. Joseph has been called "The Prince of Dreams" because he both had dreams and interpreted them for others. In an upcoming message, we will see how God uses Joseph's ability to interpret dreams as the means of freeing him from prison. Today however, we will see him interpret the dreams of his fellow inmates.

I. WE EACH HAD A DREAM (v1-8)

Joseph had likely been incarcerated for a while before he was given authority by the chief jailer to oversee the prisoners - perhaps a few years. At some point, 2 of Pharaoh's servants (his cupbearer and head baker) offended and infuriated the king. He subsequently placed them in prison - in the same facility where Joseph was confined. The cupbearer and head baker were added to those under Joseph's charge, and he took care of them.

One night, both of Pharaoh's servants had a dream. Their dreams were different from one another, but both were perplexing. The next morning, Joseph noticed that both men seemed distressed. He asked them why they were so sad and upset. The cupbearer and head baker explained that they'd each had a troubling dream, and knew of no one who could interpret them. Joseph stated that interpretations belong to God and asked them to tell their dreams to him.

Several years earlier, when Joseph was just a boy, he himself had 2 God-given dreams about the future. In the first, his brothers' sheaths bowed down before his. In the second, the sun, moon, and 11 stars bowed down before him. Both of his childhood dreams predicted that someday Joseph would rule over his own family members (Genesis 37:5-11). Now Joseph was placed in the position of interpreting someone else's dreams.

There are numerous examples in the Bible of people having dreams and visions. God frequently used them to communicate truths to people many years ago. Now that the Bible is complete, we have easy access to the written Word of God which includes His teachings, prophecies, and so forth. Therefore, dreams and visions are no longer as necessary as they once were. God can still use them, especially in places where the gospel is scarce, but we should rely on the full and final revelation of Scripture. Not all dreams and visions are of God, which can cause them to be misleading and harmful.

II. WHAT DO THEY MEAN? (v9-19)

The cupbearer began by describing his dream to Joseph. In it, he had seen a vine with 3 branches. He watched as the branches budded, blossomed, and produced clusters of ripe grapes. He took some of these grapes, squeezed them into Pharaoh's cup which he was holding, and placed it in Pharaoh's hand. Upon hearing the dream, Joseph explained that the branches represented days. He predicted that in 3 days, the cupbearer would be released from prison and restored to his former office. Joseph asked the cupbearer to remember him and plead on his behalf once he was released.

The head baker went next. He shared his dream with Joseph. In it, there were 3 baskets of white bread stacked on the baker's head. In the top basket were all sorts of baked food for Pharaoh and the birds above were eating out of it. Upon hearing the dream, Joseph explained that the baskets represented days. He predicted that in 3 days, Pharaoh would hang the baker's body from a tree and the birds would scavenge his corpse.

In the Bible, God would often enable prophets to make predictions about the immediate future. When these prophecies came true, it would bolster their credibility in the minds of their listeners. This would make their longer term prophecies more believable and trustworthy. Now that we have the Bible, the reliability and truthfulness of preachers and teachers should be measured against their strict adherence to Scripture.

III. DREAMS DO COME TRUE (v20-23)

3 days later, everything happened just as Joseph had predicted. It was Pharaoh's birthday and there was a huge party for all his servants. During the celebration, Pharaoh brought the cupbearer and head baker out from prison and stood them before everyone. He then reinstated the cupbearer to his former position and had the head baker hanged.

Though the cupbearer once again enjoyed the audience of Pharaoh and served him regularly, he forgot to mention how Joseph had been unfairly accused and unjustly imprisoned. Joseph had hoped that the cupbearer would convince Pharaoh to release him from jail. Unfortunately, the cupbearer

didn't speak to Pharaoh about it at all. So Joseph remained in prison, serving hard time for a crime he didn't commit.

Do you ever feel forgotten or overlooked? Perhaps you've done something kind or generous for someone and they've failed to remember it or acknowledge it. Feeling this way can often lead to discouragement or despair. It can make you feel alone or unappreciated. But don't fret... though people might forget about the good things you've done (oftentimes unintentionally) God does not. He will never forget those who faithfully serve Him and minister in His name to others (Hebrews 6:10).

CONCLUSION

Joseph is the most famous dreamer and interpreter of dreams in the Bible. During the Patriarchal Age, God gifted Him with this special ability. That was then, and this is now. I personally believe that such dreams and visions are rightly compared with the "cessation gifts" of miracles, healings, and tongues. Let me explain...

Cessationism teaches that certain spiritual gifts, referred to as the sign gifts, which were common in Biblical times have all but ceased to exist today. God granted these gifts to prophets and apostles centuries ago as a means of establishing their identity and authority. They were tools that helped accomplish His purposes. Since the end of the apostolic age however, these particular gifts are no longer given to individual believers. God can and still performs miracles today, but not through supernaturally empowered healers, dreamers, and so on.

I will close today's message with a quote that my wife shared on Facebook a few weeks ago. When I read it, it left a strong impression. It is attributed to Dustin Benge, a prominent Baptist theologian, professor, and author. He said:

"The Bible is better than visions, more reliable than emotions, greater than miracles, more trustworthy than experience, stronger than tradition. Do you want to know God? Do you want to hear God? Read the Bible."

The Prince of Egypt (Genesis 41)

Originally Preached 11/1/2020

And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. - Romans 8:28

Have you ever heard of a “rags to riches” story? These types of stories tell about people who started with very little and eventually climbed their way to the top. Sometimes this was accomplished by hard work, other times through a stroke of good fortune, and in many cases it involved a combination of both. As Christians, we realize that no one achieves such success apart from the divine working of God. He deserves all of the glory!

In this morning’s message we will read about Joseph’s amazing promotion from the prison to the palace. I have titled it “The Prince of Egypt”. Turn to Genesis 41 and let’s begin.

I. THE CUPBEARER FINALLY REMEMBERS (v1-13)

The Pharaoh’s cupbearer had been released from prison and restored to his former office, but had forgotten to tell Pharaoh about Joseph. Two more long years went by as Joseph waited in prison. Then one night Pharaoh had a pair of disturbing dreams. In the first, he was standing by the Nile river where 7 healthy, strong cows were grazing on the grassy shoreline. Suddenly 7 thin, ugly cows came up beside them on the bank. These skinny, sickly cows ate the good looking cows. In the second dream, 7 plump ears of grain came up on a stalk. Afterwards 7 thin grains scorched by the wind sprouted up. These thin ears swallowed the full ears.

The next morning Pharaoh was troubled by these 2 dreams. He summoned all of the soothsayers and wise men in Egypt, but none of them could give him a satisfactory interpretation of what they meant. As all of this unfolded, the cupbearer finally remembered how Joseph had rightly interpreted his dream a few years back while he was in prison. So the cupbearer recounted his story to the Pharaoh and told him about Joseph’s incredible ability to understand dreams.

Have you ever had something trigger a memory from years ago which you had forgotten about? This happens to me all the time. I often hear songs that take me back to a certain time and place. Or something will happen in my life that is reminiscent of the past. Sometimes these memories have a direct bearing on my present circumstances. For example, I might remember how to do something, where I left something, or something helpful that someone said. God uses past experiences to help us face our daily challenges - if we can remember them.

II. JOSEPH'S INTERPRETATION AND ADVICE (v14-37)

Pharaoh called for Joseph, so they cleaned him up and brought him out of the dungeon. When he arrived, Pharaoh asked Joseph if he could interpret dreams. Joseph credited God for interpreting dreams through him. Then Pharaoh proceeded to share his 2 dreams with Joseph. He told him about the cows and the ears of grain. Pharaoh further stated that none of his seers or priests could interpret them.

After hearing the dreams, Joseph explained that both of the dreams meant the same thing. The fact that they were repeated showed that God had determined to bring them about quickly. The cows and the ears of grain represented years. Egypt (and the surrounding regions) would experience 7 years of great abundance followed by 7 years of terrible famine. During the years of famine, the good years would be forgotten as people struggled in hunger and poverty.

Joseph continued by offering the Pharaoh some advice. He suggested that Pharaoh appoint a discerning, skilled leader to make preparations during the first 7 years to address the anticipated needs of the second 7 years. He proposed storing and guarding surplus grain during the abundant years to be used as sustenance for the nation throughout the upcoming famine. Pharaoh was pleased with Joseph's interpretation and impressed by his plan to deal with it.

We don't know what will happen in the immediate future. Will our economy be prosperous and robust or will we suffer through another difficult recession? Will our personal income be plentiful and sufficient to meet our needs or will we slip into poverty and lack? The Bible teaches us that it is wise to plan ahead and save money whenever possible so that we have it available if needed (Proverbs 6:6-8). This shouldn't, however, infringe upon our obligation to give cheerfully to the church and to those in need.

III. PHARAOH PUTS JOSEPH IN CHARGE (v38-57)

Joseph never explicitly recommended himself for the position, but clearly he was quite capable. Pharaoh recognized Joseph's impeccable wisdom and character, and appointed him to oversee the preparations for the upcoming famine. In fact, Pharaoh put Joseph in charge of his house and made him second-in-command over all of Egypt. Joseph was dressed in the finest clothes and jewelry. The people bowed before him as he paraded throughout the land in a chariot. Pharaoh gave him an Egyptian name and a beautiful young maiden to be his wife.

Joseph was 30 years old when he became the prince of Egypt. During the next 7 years of abundance and prosperity he oversaw the collection of surplus grain. He stored it in various cities across the nation in quantities too great to measure. During these plentiful years, Joseph and his wife Asenath

had 2 sons. The firstborn was named Manasseh, which means “to forget”, and the second born was named Ephraim which means “fruitful”.

The names of Joseph’s sons reflect his way of thinking. Joseph didn’t literally forget about his past life and the many troubles he faced. Rather, he simply chose not to dwell on them or let them drag him down. Instead, he focused on how God had blessed him and brought him through. In the same way, we cannot move forward if we are always looking backward.

When the 7 years of famine began, the people cried out because they were starving. Pharaoh sent them to Joseph, who managed the distribution and sell of the grain that had been stored up in advance. The severe famine prevailed well beyond Egypt, throughout the entire Middle East, so that both Egyptians and foreigners came to Joseph to buy grain.

CONCLUSION

Joseph was just 17 years old when his brothers threw him into the pit in Canaan and left him for dead. He was 30 years old when he was made ruler in Egypt. During those 13 years in between, he had been a slave and a prisoner. He had been betrayed by his brothers, falsely accused by Potiphar's wife, and forgotten by Pharaoh’s cupbearer. His life was filled with one bad break after another. Yet through it all Joseph continued to glorify God and trust in His plan.

This series of difficult and trying events ultimately led Joseph to be in the right place at the right time. Pharaoh needed an interpreter and Joseph was available. God providentially worked all of these things together so that Joseph might rise to power in Egypt. And through Joseph’s influence, as we will see in the coming chapters, the LORD would accomplish his purpose of temporarily moving the Hebrew people out of Canaan.

Perhaps more vividly than any other story in Scripture, Joseph’s life is an example of how God works all things together for good to those who love Him. Notice that this promise does not apply to those who hate or reject God. But if you are His, a born again believer who is faithfully devoted to the LORD, you can trust that God is in control of your life even in perilous times. You may not become the vice president, but God will turn your life around and make something good and beautiful out of the bitterness and darkness.

The Brothers Visit (Genesis 42)

Originally Preached 11/8/2020

But He answered and said, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes out of the mouth of God.'" - Matthew 4:4

Usually my wife goes to the grocery store once a week to buy food for the family. Sometimes I go shopping with her. As most of us know, when you have kids at home it takes a lot to keep everyone fed. We try to plan ahead and make a grocery list each week of the things we'll need. For our family, food is one of the largest expenses in our monthly budget. We spend a lot of money on it. Everyone needs food to survive, and Jacob's family was no different.

Last week we talked about Joseph's remarkable and sudden rise to power in Egypt. He wisely oversaw the collection of surplus grain during the 7 years of abundance. Then, when the 7 years of famine began, the Egyptian people and foreigners from the surrounding regions began to cry out for bread. Unable to produce crops, they were desperate to purchase food from the reserves and storehouses located in Egypt.

Today's message is somewhat reminiscent of our weekly trips to the grocery store. Jacob and his family needed food, so he sent his sons to go buy some. Let's explore what happened...

I. COMING TO EGYPT (v1-7)

During the several years that Joseph spent as Potiphar's servant, then as a prisoner, and finally as the new prince, his elderly father Jacob and his brothers remained in Canaan. When the great famine struck, like many others they found themselves in need of food. Jacob knew that there was grain available in Egypt so he sent 10 of his sons on a journey to purchase a supply of it. Jacob did not send Benjamin, who was quite a bit younger than his brothers, with them on this trip for fear that something bad might happen to him.

The brothers, less Benjamin, made their way to Egypt and came before Joseph. It had been over 20 years since they'd last seen him. They did not recognize him as their long lost brother, though Joseph did recognize them. In fulfillment of the dream Joseph had when he was a boy, the brothers bowed down before him. Rather than revealing his true identity, Joseph kept it concealed. Instead he sternly asked them why they'd come, to which they responded that they wished to buy grain.

I used to wonder why Joseph didn't immediately tell his brothers who he was. His actions seemed purposefully deceptive and somewhat mean-spirited. In truth, however, he acted shrewdly in order to

test their integrity and trustworthiness. After all, the last time they were together his brothers hated him, conspired to kill him, and sold him to foreign merchants. Had they changed at all? Did they regret their decisions? Had they matured in their character? The Bible actually encourages believers to be righteously shrewd in their dealings (Matthew 10:16).

II. BEING IN EGYPT (v8-28)

Joseph accused his brothers of being foreign spies who'd come to survey the land for potential weaknesses. The brothers insisted that they'd come simply to buy food and had no ill intentions. They described themselves as honest men from the land of Canaan, 12 sons of 1 father - the 10 of them, a younger brother who'd stayed home with dad, and another brother who they believed to be dead. Joseph feigned doubt about their claim of innocence and posed a test. He would allow 1 of them to return home and bring back their younger brother as proof of their testimony, but before doing so he placed all of them in prison for 3 days.

During this time, Joseph lightened the severity of his original proposal. So on the third day, rather than keeping all of them confined except for 1, he allowed them all to go except for 1. The brothers conversed among themselves in their native language, not realizing that Joseph could hear and understand them. They expressed remorse for how they mistreated Joseph years ago and reasoned that justice had finally befallen them. Reuben reminded them that he'd been against harming Joseph (Genesis 37:21-22). When Joseph overheard their discussion, he turned away and wept. After regaining his composure, he took Simeon, bound him in their presence, and returned him to the jail.

The remaining brothers started home for Canaan with the grain that they'd purchased. Unbeknownst to them, Joseph had given their money back to them as well. Along the way, 1 of the brothers discovered that the portion of money he'd taken to buy the food was still in his bags. When he told the others they were all upset. If the Prince of Egypt already believed them to be spies, what would he think when he discovered that they'd not fully paid him for the grain?

III. RETURNING FROM EGYPT (v29-38)

When the remaining brothers finally arrived at home, they told their father Jacob about what had happened to them. They explained that the prince had accused them of being spies and was currently and indefinitely holding Simeon hostage until they proved otherwise. They were to bring their youngest brother back to Egypt as evidence of their truthfulness. Then, and only then, would he be released and they be allowed to trade in the land.

As the brothers unpacked from the long journey, all of them discovered that their share of the money that had been originally sent to purchase the grain was still in their bags. Had they inadvertently taken

the grain without paying for it? Both Jacob and the brothers were fearful of how this oversight would further aggravate the situation. Upon reflection, Jacob stated that he would not let Benjamin return with them. Reuben spoke up and swore to protect Benjamin, offering the lives of his own 2 sons as a pledge, but Jacob refused. With Joseph gone and now Simeon, Jacob couldn't bear the possibility of losing Benjamin too.

Though Reuben was simply trying to console his father's worries, his willingness to offer his own sons as collateral was fool-hearted, brazen, and reckless. Reuben had betrayed Jacob years earlier by sleeping with his concubine Bilhah (Genesis 35:22) and had lost all credibility in his father's eyes. Reuben's assurance that he'd protect Benjamin was empty and hollow, because his reputation spoke louder than his words. Going forward, Reuben's role as leader would diminish and Judah would rise to become the prominent brother.

CONCLUSION

In closing, we must remember that all of this was an elaborate, multi-pronged test. Joseph knew that his brothers weren't spies. Still, he wanted to know if they'd changed. He'd heard them expressing remorse about how they'd treated him years ago, but was their shame genuine? Did they truly regret what they'd done or were they just upset that it had finally caught up to them? Were they willing to abandon yet another brother or would they act differently this time? Would they deal honestly with Jacob and bring back the grain money? Perhaps most importantly, was his younger brother Benjamin, the only other son of Rachel, alive and well?

Joseph tested his brothers. Sometimes God tests us. He places us in certain situations to see how we will react. We will choose to do what is honest and right? Will we obey God and trust in His promises and power? In fact, our entire lives are a test. Are we passing or failing?

One final observation before we go... Throughout this series I have pointed out several similarities between the story of Joseph and that of Jesus Christ. Let me add yet another. The brothers were starving and came to Joseph for food because he was the only one who had grain. So also, Jesus is the Bread of Life, and the exclusive source of salvation and spiritual provision (John 6:35). In Him we find sustenance and eternal life.

The Brothers Visit Again (Genesis 43 & 44)

Originally Preached 11/15/2020

No one who has been born of God practices sin, because His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin continually, because he has been born of God. - 1 John 3:9

In last week's message, Jacob sent all of his sons except Benjamin to Egypt in order to buy food. When they arrived, Joseph recognized them and decided to put them to the test. He accused them of being spies and took Simeon as a prisoner. He gave the remaining brothers the grain they needed, sent them away, and told them to come again with Benjamin as proof of their innocence. The brothers returned home and told Jacob everything that had happened.

This morning we will pick up the story right where we left off. Would the brothers go back? Would Simeon remain in jail forever? Would Jacob allow Benjamin to leave home with them? So many questions... let's find out the answers!

I. BACK TO EGYPT (Gen. 43:1-15)

The famine continued until Jacob's family ran out of the food supply they'd brought back from Egypt. He asked his sons to return and purchase more grain, but Judah reminded him that they would be unable to do so without Benjamin present. Jacob questioned them for revealing that they even had a younger brother, but Judah calmly explained that they couldn't have predicted the prince would want to see him. Judah then promised to take personal responsibility for Benjamin's protection, as Jacob didn't trust Reuben's earlier pledge to do so. He urged his father to let them go and not to delay any longer.

Left with no other options, Jacob begrudgingly agreed. He decided to send a collection of some of the finest products from Canaan as a gift for the prince. Furthermore, he had the brothers take twice as much money as they had taken previously. Half of it was for the grain they'd already used but never properly paid for and the other half was for the food which they were going to buy. Finally, he prayed that God would watch over them, that all would go well, that Simeon would be released, and that all of the brothers would come home safely. And so the brothers, including Benjamin, returned to Egypt again.

One of the lessons we can learn from this passage is that sometimes we have to do things that we don't necessarily want to do in order to get what we want or need. Jacob didn't want to let Benjamin go. In fact, he waited for as long as he possibly could before releasing him. Even then he was hesitant. But when left with no other choice but starvation, he finally allowed Benjamin to return to

Egypt with his brothers. Perhaps there have been times in your life that you've had to make (and act upon) undesirable, but necessary, decisions.

II. JOSEPH SEES BENJAMIN (Gen. 43:16-34)

When Joseph saw that the brothers were back with Benjamin, he had them escorted to his house. He had his servants begin to prepare a lunch for them. This seemed strange to the brothers, they reasoned that Joseph was angry with them for having taken the first load of food without paying for it, and they feared the worst. They told Joseph's steward that they'd brought the payment for the grain from their first trip and swore that they hadn't withheld it on purpose. The steward wasn't concerned or upset about it. Instead, he brought Simeon out to them, gave them water to wash their feet, and fed their donkeys. So the brothers anxiously waited for Joseph's arrival and prepared the gift they'd brought for him.

When Joseph arrived, they brought the gift to him and bowed down in his presence. Joseph asked about their aging father. The brothers responded that he was well and bowed down a second time. Then Joseph asked if this new person with them was their youngest brother Benjamin. He then prayed that God's grace be upon Benjamin. Moved with emotion, Joseph hurried out of sight and wept. Once he regained his composure, Joseph returned and instructed his servants to serve the meal. Typically Egyptians and Hebrews ate separately. But Joseph chose to eat with his brothers, and they were seated around the table according to their age. Benjamin was given a larger portion than his brothers.

Everything that was happening seemed bizarre. Why would the Prince of Egypt serve a special lunch for these brothers in his own house? Why would he bless Benjamin in God's name? Why would he personally sit and eat with them seeing that they were Hebrews? How could he possibly know the correct order of their birth? Something was definitely going on... but the brothers didn't yet know exactly what it was. When things seem peculiar and people are acting in curious ways, it is usually a sign that something is taking place behind the scenes.

III. THE STOLEN CUP (Gen. 44)

Joseph ordered his servants to fill the brothers' sacks with grain and to give them their money back (again). Furthermore, Joseph told his steward to secretly place his silver cup in Benjamin's bag. At morning light the 11 brothers left for home. Not long after they'd gone, Joseph sent his steward after them. When the steward caught up, he accused the brothers of stealing Joseph's cup. They strongly denied the charge and claimed that they were innocent. The steward stated that if any of them had stolen the cup, that individual would become the prince's slave. They searched their bags and found

the silver cup in Benjamin's sack. The brothers were overcome with grief and were brought back to the city.

Joseph began to interrogate the brothers. Judah spoke up as their representative, but was unable to give a defense for their guilt. He suggested that all of them be held as slaves, but Joseph replied that only Benjamin would be kept. Judah approached Joseph and explained that Benjamin was his elderly father's favorite son - the only son left of his mother. He stated that Jacob would die of sorrow if Benjamin did not return home safely from Egypt. Judah had pledged to protect Benjamin and couldn't go back to Canaan without him. Out of deep love for his father and youngest brother, Judah volunteered to take Benjamin's place. This pictures Jesus' substitutionary sacrifice for sinners.

Almost 25 years earlier, it was Judah who had proposed selling Joseph to the Ishmaelites as a slave. Now, as poor Benjamin seemed destined to become a slave also, Judah desperately sought to intervene. Rather than purposely condemning his brother to a life of servitude, he instead acted compassionately to deliver his brother from such a fate. Clearly Judah had changed. It has been said that the best indicator of true repentance occurs when a person chooses to act righteously while facing the same situation or circumstances that formally led them to sin.

CONCLUSION

In closing, let's briefly review a few of the lessons we've brought out in today's message.

First, sometimes in life we have to do things that we don't want to do in order to get what we need. For example, there are days we don't want to go to work and would rather stay in bed, but we need that paycheck and don't want to get fired. So we get up and go...

Second, when people are acting strangely and things seem out of place, it is likely that something is going on. People do and say things for a reason. Motivations drive actions. We should be sensitive enough to recognize and question curious and peculiar conduct.

Third, true repentance can be defined as a change of mind that results in a change of behavior. Everyone sins, even Christians. That said, those who are truly sorry and repentant will not continue to repeat the same sins over and over again habitually.

Joseph Shows Kindness (Genesis 45)

Originally Preached 11/22/2020

Be kind to one another, compassionate, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you. - Ephesians 4:32

Joseph had been testing his brothers to see if their actions proved them to be honest, upright, and caring. They had brought the money back for the grain they'd taken home on their first trip to Egypt. Though they had tarried somewhat, they had come back to rescue Simeon. They obviously cherished and looked out for their younger brother Benjamin. Judah had even offered to take Benjamin's place as the prince's slave. It was now abundantly clear that these brothers, who were once just murderous boys, had matured and developed into honorable men of good character. The test was complete.

Today's message is called "Joseph Shows Kindness". It focuses on the events recorded in Genesis 45. After this sermon is complete, there will only be 3 more left in this series. We are nearing the end my friends. Yeah!

I. REVELATION (v1-8)

Joseph had been concealing his true identity from his brothers for the past several months. When Judah sacrificially offered himself to be the prince's slave rather than Benjamin, Joseph had seen enough. He was now fully convinced that his brothers were changed men. Therefore, he cleared the room of everyone other than himself and his brothers. Once they were alone, Joseph told them who he was. As he did so, he was overcome with emotion and wept loudly so that the Egyptians heard. The brothers were dumbfounded and unable to respond.

Joseph asked them to come closer. He stated that he wasn't angry at them for selling him in slavery years ago. He even counseled them to forgive themselves for having done so. Instead, he now recognized that it had all been a part of God's grand design. Joseph's rocky past had providentially led him to become the Prince of Egypt. As prince, Joseph was in a unique position to deliver his family (and countless others) from starvation and famine. It had been God's plan all along, so that the Hebrew people would be saved.

Isn't forgiveness wonderful? Joseph's brothers expected him to be furious with them for how they'd mistreated him years ago. Instead, Joseph extended kindness and compassion to them. He didn't hold a grudge and wasn't poisoned by bitterness. Instead he acknowledged that God was sovereign over all things, including the events of his own life. This realization freed him to forgive his brothers and to praise God in all circumstances (Job 1:21-22).

II. INVITATION (v9-15)

Joseph instructed his brothers to go quickly and tell their father Jacob that he was still alive and had become the prince. He asked them to bring their entire family and all of their possessions from Canaan to Egypt and to settle in the region of Goshen, where the Nile river flows into the sea. He said that there were 5 years of famine remaining, and that he wanted his family to live close by that he might provide for and protect them. Joseph hugged Benjamin, kissed all of his brothers, and they conversed with one another as the tears of joy flowed down their cheeks.

Joseph invited his family to leave their uncertainty and fears behind by moving to a place where they'd be cared for and sustained. Have you ever received an invitation? Invitations offer us access to things that we might not otherwise be privy to. Invitations express a desire on the part of the giver to have us there. Invitations are powerful. The gospel message is an invitation made to everyone to receive salvation and eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ.

III. PREPARATION (v16-23)

When the news spread throughout Pharaoh's house that Joseph and his brothers had been reunited, Pharaoh and his servants were greatly pleased. Pharaoh consented to Joseph's earlier promise to allow Jacob and his family to settle in Goshen. This was the most lush and fertile land in all of Egypt. Pharaoh didn't want the brothers to be concerned about where they'd live. What's more, he even arranged for and sent wagons back with them to Canaan to help with the move.

In addition to this, Joseph gave his brothers provisions for their journey. He gave each of them a change of garments. However, he specifically gave Benjamin 5 changes of garments and 300 pieces of silver. He also sent male and female donkeys loaded with many fine things from Egypt, bread, and grain. All of these things would provide ample sustenance for the family as they relocated to Egypt.

Have you ever moved to a distant location? It's a huge and costly undertaking. I've moved several times during my life, but always within Texas! Like the wagons in this story, we've had to rent moving trucks to carry all of our things. We loaded them up, drove them to our new house, and then carefully unloaded everything. It's exhausting. When I think about it, it makes me hope that I'll never have to move again...

IV. JUBILATION (24-28)

Joseph's brothers gathered all of their things, including the wagons and provisions they had been given for the trip, and returned home. When they arrived, they told their father Jacob that his beloved

son Joseph was still alive. In fact, he was the ruler over Egypt. Jacob was stunned by their statement and didn't immediately believe them. For almost 22 years he had presumed that Joseph was dead. But when Jacob saw the Egyptian wagons and provisions, his mind changed. Joseph was alive, and Jacob desperately wanted to go and see him.

I can only imagine the joy Jacob must have felt when he heard and was convinced that his long-lost son Joseph was still alive. I've heard several heart wrenching stories of people that have lost loved ones only to be reunited with them years later. Perhaps you've been touched by a similar experience. In a real sense, this is the hope we have in Christ. As the redeemed children of God, we have the assurance that no separation is permanent - not even death - and that someday we will meet again in Heaven.

CONCLUSION

Let me close by pointing out more similarities between Joseph and Jesus. After thinking him to be dead for years, Joseph's brothers were finally reunited with him. During their first meeting Benjamin was not with them. However, the second time he was. In a similar way, after Jesus had been dead for 3 days, He rose from the grave and appeared to His disciples. On His first appearance Thomas was not with them, but a week later he was.

After speaking with his brothers, Joseph prepared to meet his father once again. Likewise, after appearing to His disciples for 40 days, Jesus prepared to return to His Father on Ascension Day. They would soon be in each other's presence again.

Finally, Joseph forgave his brothers and invited his family to come live in Egypt. His kindness is a picture of Christ's love for us. Jesus has forgiven us of our transgressions and offered us salvation and eternal life with Him. Have you accepted His invitation?

Egypt and the Famine (Genesis 46 & 47)

Originally Preached 11/29/2020

“Behold, days are coming,” declares the Lord God, “When I will send a famine on the land. Not a famine for bread or a thirst for water, but rather for hearing the words of the Lord.” - Amos 8:11

Today’s message covers 2 chapters. It highlights Jacob’s move to Egypt and the remaining 5 years of famine. As I’ve done previously in this series when covering multiple chapters in a single sermon, I will try to summarize the events that take place and only read portions of the text as time allows.

I. THE HEBREWS MOVE TO EGYPT (Gen. 46:1-27)

Jacob and his family set out from their home, presumably in Hebron, and headed for Egypt. Along the way they stopped in Beersheba, the place where God had spoken to Jacob’s father Isaac many years before (Genesis 26:23-25). The LORD appeared in a vision and encouraged Jacob not to be afraid of moving his family out of the Promised Land. God assured him that someday his descendants return to Canaan and resettle there.

So the Hebrews continued onward toward Egypt in the wagons that Pharaoh had provided for their move. This was a large procession. It included all of Jacob’s livestock and possessions, along with his sons and daughters, grandsons and granddaughters, and many others. The Bible specifically names approximately 70 male family members (a few women are also listed) who made this journey with Jacob to Egypt.

It is worth mentioning that all 12 of Jacob’s sons already had children of their own by this point. The oldest of them, Reuben, was likely in his mid-fifties. These children were born of Canaanite women (or Egyptian in Joseph’s case), as there is no indication that Jacob’s sons sought out Hebrew wives. For context, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob all purposefully chose wives from among their own relatives, waited much later to start their families, and therefore had fewer children. Had this new practice of intermarriage and explosive proliferation continued for a few more generations, the unique identity of the Hebrew people would have likely been lost. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why God called them to isolation in Egypt...

II. THEY SETTLE IN GOSHEN (Gen. 46:28-47:12)

Jacob sent Judah to inform Joseph that they had arrived safely in the land of Goshen. Upon receiving the message Joseph hurriedly came to meet them and to see his father. An emotional reunion took place between Jacob and his long-lost son. Joseph told them that he would go and report to Pharaoh

that they had come and settled in Goshen. He instructed them to tell Pharaoh that they were shepherds. Bible historians surmise that the Egyptians didn't eat meat, or at least not mutton. Thus, these Hebrews would be segregated from and not intermingle with people of Egypt.

Joseph took 5 of his brothers to go meet Pharaoh. As expected, Pharaoh asked them what their occupation was and they answered "shepherds". They described their plight in Canaan that had come as the result of the famine. Pharaoh confirmed his previous decision permitting them to settle in Goshen. He even allowed them to manage some of his own livestock.

Joseph also took his father to meet Pharaoh. Pharaoh asked Jacob how old he was, and Jacob said that he was 130. Jacob went on to say that he'd lived a challenging, difficult life. At the end of their meeting, Jacob blessed Pharaoh. In the months that followed, the Hebrews settled in the region of Goshen, which would later become associated with the city of Rameses that was built there (Exodus 1:11). Joseph provided for their needs as the famine persisted.

III. THE FAMINE RAGES ON (Gen. 47:13-26)

During the final 5 years of the famine, the people of Egypt became increasingly desperate. They quickly spent all of their money to buy grain. When it was completely gone, they began selling their livestock and herds to purchase food. Once they ran out of animals, they began selling their homes and property. When this was exhausted, they sold themselves into slavery in exchange for bread. Within a few short years, Pharaoh and his government gained ownership of virtually everything in Egypt.

All of the land, with the exception of that which was owned by the priests, now belonged to Pharaoh. Having sold everything, many people left their rural homes behind and moved to the cities where the storehouses of grain were readily available. Those who chose to stay in the countryside and grow crops were now actually servants of Pharaoh living and working on his land. They were required to give one-fifth of their produce to Pharaoh.

The political and societal structure of Egypt completely changed as a result of the famine. Individual ownership and control of property all but ceased, as almost everything was acquired by Pharaoh. Governmental power and influence increased dramatically. The people willingly ceded their independence to Pharaoh in exchange for protection and provision. This dramatic shift set the stage for political corruption and the Egyptian captivity that was to come.

IV. JOSEPH MAKES A PROMISE (Gen. 47:27-31)

While much of Egypt suffered and became poor, Jacob and his family prospered in Goshen. They acquired land of their own, were fruitful in it, and became quite numerous. Jacob would reside in the nation of Egypt for 17 more years before his death. He asked his son Joseph not to bury his body in Egypt. Joseph swore that, when the time came, he would carry his father's body back to Canaan and bury him with his ancestors in the Cave of Machpelah.

God blessed the Hebrews and they enjoyed great success. Their productivity was a stark contrast to the struggles being felt by most Egyptians. Over time, this disparity of fortune would contribute to feelings of resentment and animosity toward the Hebrew people - yet another factor that led to the Egyptian captivity.

CONCLUSION

God orchestrated all of these events so that the Hebrew people, the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, would endure as a distinct ethnic group. He brought them to Egypt and settled them in their own remote region, in part because He didn't want them assimilating with the Canaanites. They were regarded as peculiar outsiders by the Egyptian citizens and largely left alone. Thus, they married from among themselves and maintained a unique status as God's chosen nation.

Furthermore, God was setting the table for the next phase of Jewish history - the Egyptian captivity. Increased governmental power would enable future Pharaohs to enslave the Hebrew people for almost 400 years. During these centuries, they would multiply into a large and populous nation. Eventually, under Moses and Joshua, they would return to Canaan just as God had promised to Jacob at Beersheba.

The Hebrews lived in Egypt, but remained separate from its many influences. They preserved their faith and practices, and did not allow their identity to become diluted by the Egyptian way of life. In similar fashion, we as Christians are called to live "in the world but not of the world". I fear that many believers have compromised their faith and acquiesced to allures of this fallen world. To a large degree, we have lost our identity as strangers and pilgrims on the earth.

Jacob's Final Blessings (Genesis 48:1-49:28)

Originally Preached 12/6/2020

To sum up, all of you be harmonious, sympathetic, loving, compassionate, and humble; not returning evil for evil or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you would inherit a blessing. - 1 Peter 3:8-9

What is a blessing? The dictionary defines a blessing as "God's favor and protection." When we pray or speak blessings upon others, we are asking God to pour out His gracious kindness upon them. We are invoking His loving care. This is a fairly common practice within the church, the family, and elsewhere. As Christians, we are called to bless one another just as Israel was chosen to be a blessing for all the world.

Today's sermon covers 2 chapters, both of which detail Jacob's final blessings. These are Jacob's last words, thoughtfully spoken to his sons and grandsons. In some cases they invoke God's favor, in others they convey Jacob's disappointment, and in all instances they predict what lies ahead for the Hebrew people.

I. JACOB MEETS HIS GRANDSONS (Gen. 48:1-7)

Jacob spent the final 17 years of his life in Egypt. Therefore, a significant amount of time had passed between his arrival in Goshen and the illness that led to his death. Nevertheless, one day Joseph received news that his elderly father was very sick. He and his 2 sons hurried to go visit Jacob. When Jacob saw them, he gathered his strength and sat up in the bed. He began to speak to his son and grandsons.

Jacob reminded Joseph of God's promise, which was given at Luz, to bless him and his descendants, to multiply them into a great nation, and to give them the land of Canaan as an eternal possession (Genesis 35:6-15). Jacob then adopted Joseph's 2 sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, as his own thereby entitling them to his inheritance. Lastly, he explained why he had buried Joseph's mother Rachel - the love of Jacob's life - on the road to Bethlehem.

Though Jacob was deathly sick and bedridden, he was delighted to see Joseph - and especially his grandsons Ephraim and Manasseh. Most grandparents seem to have a special place in their heart for their grandchildren. Grandparents are free to spoil their grandchildren rotten without fear of having to discipline them later. Some of my sweetest childhood memories took place at my grandparents' house. There is a undeniably special bond between grandparents and grandchildren.

II. JACOB BLESSES HIS GRANDSONS (Gen. 48:8-22)

Jacob's eyesight was bad, due to age and sickness, and he didn't immediately recognize his grandsons. When Joseph brought them closer, he realized who they were and hugged and kissed them. Then Jacob prepared to speak a blessing over them. Though he was the prince of Egypt, still Joseph humbly bowed in deference before his father and set his sons before him. Manasseh, the oldest, stood on Jacob's right and Ephraim, the youngest, was on Jacob's left.

The blessing of the right hand was traditionally reserved for the eldest son. Jacob crossed his arms as he reached out to place his hands on the heads of his grandsons. In so doing, he placed his right hand on Ephraim and his left on Manasseh. Then he began giving his blessing. When Joseph realized what was happening, he interrupted. Joseph believed that his father was making a mistake. However, Jacob responded that he was fully aware of what he was doing. He told Joseph that Ephraim, though younger, would become a greater people than Manasseh. Therefore, Jacob purposefully gave the greater blessing to Ephraim.

After blessing his grandsons, Jacob turned his attention to Joseph. Knowing that his death was near, he reassured Joseph that God would continue to be with even after he was gone. Jacob also prophesied that one day Joseph would return to Canaan, the land of his ancestors. This prophecy ended up having a dual fulfillment in that Joseph's body was eventually brought back and buried in Canaan and Joseph's descendants eventually returned to and settled in Canaan. Finally, Jacob explained that Joseph would receive a double portion of his inheritance in the Promised Land through Ephraim and Manasseh.

There is a recurring theme that runs through the stories of Genesis. God repeatedly chose a younger son to rule over or become greater than the older. Isaac was chosen over Ishmael, Jacob was chosen over Esau, Joseph (though not the youngest) was chosen over Reuben, and now Ephraim was chosen over Manasseh. I can't say with certainty why God did this, but it does show us that God's ways are different than man's ways. It also reflects to some degree on Jesus' teaching that "The first shall be last and the last shall be first" (Matthew 20:16).

III. JACOB BLESSES HIS SONS (Gen. 49:1-28)

After blessing his 2 grandsons Ephraim and Manasseh, Jacob summoned and assembled all 12 of his own sons. He began to bless them and foretell what would happen to their families in the generations to come. He began with Reuben and continued according to their birth order concluding with Benjamin.

Jacob rebuked Reuben for sleeping with his concubine Bilhah. He revoked his privileges as the firstborn due to his lack of self-control. Jacob reprimanded Simeon and Levi for violently and angrily murdering all of the men of Shechem after their sister Dinah was raped. Jacob blessed Judah, comparing him to a lion, and promised that he would perpetually rule over his brothers. This, in fact, came to pass as King David and later Jesus Christ would come from the line of Judah. Jacob stated that Zebulun's descendants would be a coastal and sea faring people. He described Issachar as a strong donkey bearing heavy burdens and enduring forced labor. He pictured Dan as a serpent in the pathway biting at the horse's heels.

Jacob interjected with a shout to God and then continued. He described Gad as someone who drove his enemies away, Asher as enjoying rich food and royal delicacies, and Naphtali as a loosed doe speaking beautiful words. Jacob pronounced his greatest blessing on Joseph, describing him as a fruitful branch who remained strong even when provoked. Finally, he stated that Benjamin was like a ravenous wolf who devoured his prey and divided his spoils. With this, Jacob's blessings, rebukes, and prophetic utterances ended.

CONCLUSION

In the generations to follow Jacob's sons would multiply and develop into the 12 tribes of Israel. These tribes would become characterized by the blessings and descriptions that Jacob spoke over them. Though distinct from one another, as kinsmen these tribes would collectively form the nation of Israel. Following the conquest of Canaan, which was still almost 400 years away, each would receive a portion of the Promised Land in keeping with God's covenant promise to Abraham, Issac, and Jacob.

The 12 tribes of Israel are: Reuben, Simeon, Judah, Zebulun, Issachar, Dan, Gad, Asher, Naphtali, Ephraim, Manasseh, and Benjamin. Ephraim and Manasseh were both adopted by Jacob so as to give Joseph's family a double portion of the inheritance. Levi was designated as the priestly line and therefore didn't receive an allotment of land, which explains their absence from the list. They were, of course, still a unique tribe.

In closing, Jacob blessed his sons. Following his example, we should bless others.

The End of an Era (Genesis 49:29-50:26)

Originally Preached 12/13/2020

You did not choose Me but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit, and that your fruit would remain, so that whatever you ask of the Father in My name He may give to you. - John 15:16

This morning's sermon is the final one of "The Chosen Church" series. I have titled it, appropriately enough, "The End of an Era". It covers the deaths of Jacob and Joseph, which marked the end of the Patriarchal Age.

At the conclusion of last week's message Jacob had just finished blessing his sons. His blessings prophetically described the tribes that would emerge from each of them. Remember, Jacob was extremely ill and at the point of death when he spoke these words.

I. JACOB DIES (Gen. 49:29-33)

With his last fleeting breaths, Jacob commanded his sons to bury him in Canaan. He wanted to be laid in the Cave of Machpelah which was located in the field that his grandfather Abraham had purchased from Ephron the Hittite many years earlier. His grandparents Abraham and Sarah, his parents Isaac and Rebekah, and his first wife Leah were all already buried there. Jacob wanted his body to rest with them in the family grave. He had already asked Joseph to do this once before, and was now repeating his last request to all of his sons. After voicing these words, Jacob laid back in his bed, drew his feet up, and died at the age of 147.

Jacob was the last of the patriarchs. All of his sons were mutual recipients of God's promise. They were known collectively as the Hebrews. Though each had their own distinct tribal identity, together they made up the nation of Israel. God's covenant, which began with Abraham, was established through the lines of Isaac and Jacob.

II. RETURNED TO CANAAN (Gen. 50:1-11)

Joseph wept when his father died. He ordered his physicians to embalm Jacob's body, a tedious process that took 40 days to complete. Meanwhile the Egyptians mourned Jacob's death for 70 days. Afterwards, Pharaoh gave Joseph permission to go bury his father in their ancestral homeland.

Joseph and his family, along with many Egyptians, left for Canaan. Along the way they stopped at the threshing floor of Atad, which some suggest was located on the border between Egypt and Canaan -

its exact location remains unknown. There they lamented the death of Jacob for another 7 days. When the Canaanites who lived in the area saw the extent of their sorrow, they named the site Abel-Mizraim which means “mourning of Egypt”.

Jacob’s body was embalmed according to the Egyptian custom. The Jews do not typically embalm their dead. In fact, it is against their law to do so. Instead, they bury the deceased within 24 hours after their death, before the natural decaying process begins. Because Jacob’s body was embalmed, it was preserved for a much longer period of time. This allowed it to be transported many miles from Egypt to Canaan intact and without decomposing.

III. BURIED IN CANAAN (Gen. 50:12-21)

Upon their arrival at the Cave of Machpelah, near the city of Hebron, Joseph and his brothers buried their father. When the burial was complete, they all returned to their homes in Egypt. In the days that followed Joseph’s brothers feared that he might seek vengeance against them now that Jacob was dead. They again sought his forgiveness and bowed in humble servitude before him. However, Joseph was not angry with them at all. He knew that everything they’d done during his youth, though it had been intended for evil, had worked together for good in accordance with God’s perfect plan.

IV. JOSEPH DIES (Gen. 50:22-26)

Joseph lived in Egypt for the remainder of his life, roughly 54 more years. The Bible doesn’t record any information about what happened during this time. Eventually, Joseph died at the age of 110. He lived long enough to meet his great grandchildren, the offspring of Ephraim and Manasseh. Near the end of his life, Joseph reassured his brothers that God would care for them and someday lead the Hebrews back to the land of Canaan which He’d promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He asked them to take his body back there, just as they’d done for their father Jacob. When Joseph died, the Egyptians embalmed his body and placed it in a coffin. It would remain there for almost 400 years, until the time of the exodus.

Joseph was not one of the patriarchs. Nevertheless, several chapters in the book of Genesis are dedicated to him. There are likely multiple reasons for this. First, Joseph’s story explains how the Jewish people wound up in Egypt, thereby providing the backdrop for the Egyptian captivity to follow. Second, as we’ve pointed out throughout this series, Joseph’s life presents many similarities to the ministry and experiences of Jesus Christ. I see Joseph’s story as a preview, in many respects, of the coming Messiah.

CONCLUSION

Prior to the age of the patriarchs, there were no designated people of God. Instead the LORD revealed Himself to individuals and families who were scattered across the earth, including faithful men such as Abel, Enoch, Noah, and Job. Believers were, for the most part, largely disconnected from one another. This approach starkly changed when God chose Abraham to become the father of His people. The descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were set apart to serve as God's representatives on the earth.

In keeping with this new arrangement, God established the Abrahamic Covenant. It consisted of 3 main parts. First, God would bless Abraham and his descendants and grow them into a populous and successful nation. Second, God would give these Hebrews the land of Canaan as an eternal possession from which they could live and serve Him forever. Third, God would work through His people to bless the entire world. It was the LORD's intention for Israel to become a spiritually fruitful and morally righteous nation that made His name famous in all the earth. Unfortunately, the Jewish people didn't always rise to this lofty expectation.

Following the age of the patriarchs, the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were enslaved by the Egyptians for almost 400 years. During their captivity several generations passed and they multiplied into a large ethnic group - estimated to be in the millions by the time of the exodus. Their growth as a people, despite severe hardship, was consistent with God's covenant promise. All of these things took place just as God had predicted (Genesis 15:12-16).

In closing, we have seen again and again in this series that the patriarchs were sinners just like you and me. They were not chosen because of their moral excellence or superiority. Rather, God chose them solely based upon His own sovereign will for reasons that we don't fully understand. By faith they trusted in His promises and obeyed His directions. In the same way, we as Christians today (the church) do not choose to follow God by our own prerogative. Rather, He chooses us through the finished work of Jesus Christ and we simply accept or reject His invitation (John 1:12).

The Age of the Patriarchs Timeline

(all dates are approximate)

2166 BC	Abram is born in Ur Abram marries Sarai Abram's Family Moves to Haran Terah Dies
2091 BC	God Calls Abram Abram Travels to Canaan Abram Lives Briefly in Egypt Abram Returns to Canaan Lot Moves to Sodom
2080 BC	Ishmael Is Born (of Hagar)
2067 BC	Abram is Renamed Abraham Circumcision is Established Sodom and Gomorrah Destroyed
2066 BC	Isaac is born (of Sarah) The Offering of Isaac
2029 BC	Sarah Dies
2026 BC	Isaac Marries Rebekah Abraham Remarries
2006 BC	Jacob & Esau are Born
1991 BC	Abraham Dies Esau Despises His Birthright
1966 BC	Esau Marries Canaanite Women
1943 BC	Ishmael Dies
1935 BC	Jacob Steals Esau's Blessing Jacob Marries/Starts Family
1915 BC	Joseph is Born Jacob Wrestles God/Named Israel Jacob Reunites with Esau Dinah is Raped Rachel Dies Giving Birth
1898 BC	Joseph Sold in Slavery Joseph Serves Potiphar Joseph Put In Jail
1886 BC	Isaac Dies
1885 BC	Joseph Becomes Governor Judah and Tamar Have Twins The Brothers Visit (Twice)
1876 BC	Jacob and Family Move to Egypt
1859 BC	Jacob Dies
1805 BC	Joseph Dies