

Genesis Bible Study 25

Forgiveness for the Family

taken from

Salvation for the Social Order: For Those Who Haven't Read the Bible and for Those Who Think Religion is Merely a Private Matter

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Reading: Genesis 49:33-50:9; Genesis 50:14-26

Notes

The last chapter of Genesis ends with forgiveness. After a four-generation saga of deception, disappointment, and discouragement, the writer ends the story with forgiveness and healing. This story stands quite alone among its genre of literature. It is neither heroic nor tragic. In a heroic story, normally the villain is killed, the hero gets the throne and the beautiful woman, or there is some such ending. In a tragedy, the hero is destroyed, and all the hero's hopes vanish. In Genesis, the hero never enters the stage. He is never seen on stage, yet he plays a powerful role. The reason is that God is the hero.

This story accomplishes two important things: (1) it sets the stage for the next book, Exodus, which is the story of nation-building. The nation of Israel emerges from Egypt, and God is again, the off-stage participant in the action. This nation becomes the prototype of God's interaction with humanity from now on, sort of like a pilot project, or experiment. In this experiment, God's character is revealed as one who can be trusted, even though life is full of treachery, suffering, and disappointment. (2) Genesis introduces the theme of forgiveness. This theme is not fully developed until one has read the New Testament, but by ending this way, Genesis reveals the main theme of the entire Bible. God can be trusted to forgive and repair His broken image on earth.

You may want to move directly from here to the New Testament and begin one of the gospels. Or you may want to simply continue the story to observe how Abraham's family grows into a nation and finds its place in the world under the care of a trustworthy God. The history of Israel is unique in the world. No other people has been without a permanent place of residence for hundreds and even thousands of years, and still managed to retain its sense of unique identity and purpose as Israel has. The purpose of Israel's existence is to showcase the trustworthiness of God, with regard both to mercy and to justice. Keep this in mind as you continue to explore the Bible's story.

Discussion

1. What new questions does this story raise for you?
2. Have you discovered any significant answers about the meaning of life from your study of Genesis?
3. What significant benefit will you take with you from reading the story of Genesis?

4. If possible, go back and read the parts of Genesis that were skipped in this study, particularly Genesis 5-11.
 - What new ideas about the meaning of history do you find in these 7 chapters?
 - Take special note of Genesis 6-9. Genesis 6:11-13, near the beginning, and Genesis 9:6, near the end, provide the key to interpreting the story of Noah.
 - Why do you think the Noah story follows quickly after Genesis 4 which begins with Cain and ends with Lamech?

A Personal Story from the Author

No other book in the Bible tells a family story with the depth or intensity of the four-generation study given in Genesis 12-50. The trustworthiness of God revealed in this story is echoed by my own story, which I would like to share briefly:

My mother was an arthritic invalid who could not bend her neck, her waist, her knees, or her ankles. Her body was locked into a standing or lying position, but she could not get out of bed or lie down unassisted. Limited use of her arms and hands permitted her to feed herself, hobble with a pair of crutches, and use her hands for cooking, sewing, reading, etc. provided that she did not need to bend or reach any distance. My father spent 40 of their 46 years of marriage caring for her. The principle task of our family was survival.

My mother named me Philip, in honor of a Jewish evangelist with the same Greek name, who was the first cross-cultural missionary in the New Testament. It was, no doubt, her spiritual vision that destined me for a life of cross-cultural ministry.

I was born by caesarian section, as was my younger brother. Before my brother's birth, the doctor recommended that my mother have a tubal ligation to prevent further pregnancy, due to her physical condition. This created a crisis of conscience for her, as she had never heard of such a thing, and doubted that God would approve. Even though my father, her pastor, and other significant authorities in her life all encouraged her to have the surgery, still her heart was not at peace. She told me herself that one night, unable to sleep, she asked Dad to bring her crutches and get her out of bed. She took the crutches and began pacing the floor while everyone else slept. Crying out to God to reveal His will, she finally came to a decision. In effect, this is the prayer she made to God: "God, I'm going ahead with the surgery. If you want me to have another baby after this one, then you have my permission to do whatever you want to do about it. But it is going to be your problem."

The surgery was done, and less than 2 years afterwards, my mother was pregnant again, much to Dad's and the doctor's dismay. Dad had experienced a complete mental breakdown since that last baby had been born, was now unemployed, and without any regular income. But Mother was ecstatic, for God had performed a miracle.

As children, we learned hard work along with a strong instinct of interdependence. We were a closely-knit and very independent family as well. When we were all teens, my younger brother died of a coronary occlusion from an undetected blood clot, due to an attack of colitis. Then in adulthood, with our own families, my sister and I grew farther

apart. Certain unresolved issues of childhood separated us, as well as misunderstandings as adults. Mother died at the age of 72, but Dad live for another 18 years. Then when Dad began suffering from Alzheimer's in his late 80's, God began to bring the two siblings together.

I had always considered Dad to be my hero, the gallant protector and provider for Mom and her children. My sister did not experience him that way at all. It was not until I was in my 50's that I realized why. At my birth the entire world around me rejoiced. The fact that the crippled lady and her husband could have a baby set the entire community rejoicing. My sister's birth was not so happy an occasion. Not only was Dad too exhausted physically and emotionally to provide that welcome a child needs, but my sister's early arrival required 6 weeks in an incubator before she was even able to feel her mother's love. Add to that the fact that much of the community no longer believed the Friesen family ought to have children, resulting in criticism and gossip. However, it was clear to both Mother and Dad that whatever the community believed, the daughter in their family was clearly God's plan, for God had overruled the power of medical science to bring her into being.

Dad passed away on April 9, 2002 at the age of 93. Without the struggle of care for him, I doubt that my sister, Jewel, and I would have the relationship we have today, and the foundation of that relationship has been forgiveness. It is imperative when you finish reading Genesis that you understand the importance of forgiveness at the end of the book, because it is a kind of forgiveness that only God could bring about. The trauma of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob's family needed this kind of forgiveness for creating the kind of family that could endure 400 years of slavery, and emerge as one people of God.

This forgiveness is revealed in the New Testament by Jesus to be the forgiveness that can and will heal the trauma of our world. Still, there are unhealed parts of the Genesis story festering in our world today. Most prominent is the story in Genesis 21 when Abraham's son, Ishmael is sent away. That quarrel between two mothers, who both demanded the right of their own son to be chief of the clan, still rocks the world today in the Middle East, and nothing short of Divine forgiveness will resolve it. Those who believe in Jesus also believe that no suffering and no injustice is beyond the healing power of God's forgiveness, which Jesus demonstrated when he prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do."

Genesis contains powerful lessons for healing the political and social chaos of the 21st century, but the forgiveness necessary for that healing begins at home, as the stories of Genesis reveal.