

NOTES AND QUESTIONS ON THE BOOK OF GENESIS

CHAPTERS 37-50 JOSEPH, JEALOUSY, JUDGMENT AND JUSTIFICATION

As the end of his life approached Abraham, the man of faith, became deeply concerned about the future of his son, Isaac, and his growth in faith. He recognised the enormous importance of our choice of a life partner as a vital step of faith on which so much else would be built. The men of Noah's day had ignored this principle with disastrous consequences.(Gen.6) Chapter 24 shows the faith of many in the process of finding Isaac a wife. Isaac trusted God, and trusted his father to trust God and his servant, who also trusted God to show him clearly whom He had chosen. Rebecca trusted God and the servant. Her family trusted God and her. The two met and God sealed their relationship with love.

Chapter 25 describes the final years of Abraham. He took another wife and six more sons but there is no mention of God's place in his choice. He tried to send them well away from Isaac but they would be a source of trouble to Israel in later years. He died in 'ripe old age, an old man and satisfied with life' – a wonderful epitaph for 'the friend of God'.(Jas.2:23) Isaac, after 20 years of marriage, believing God's promise that he would be a father through whom the whole world would be blessed, prayed for a son – and received two! Rebecca also prayed and God gave her insight into the future of her boys and the conflict between them. Right from the start they were competing. As they grew it quickly became apparent how different they were. Esau was a man's man and became his father's favourite. Jacob preferred to stay home and was his mother's favourite. The seeds of jealousy between them were sown by their parents' mistakes. Esau was 'immoral and godless'.(Heb.12:16) Jacob had a sense of God's plan for him – occasionally.

In chapter 26, Isaac showed himself a son of Abraham and a son of Adam, by repeating in Gerar the mistake his father had made, first in Egypt and then in Gerar.(Gen.12 and 20) In the second half of the chapter Isaac demonstrated faith in business dealings. In the face of ill treatment he worked harder rather than fighting back and eventually won respect for himself and his God from unbelievers. Esau made two godless, unhappy marriages – and in-law problems.

Through chapter 27, the competition between the two brothers continued, fuelled by Isaac and Rebecca's favouritism. Jacob, desperate to win his father's approval, went along with his mother's scheme to bring food to Isaac having disguised himself as his brother. He showed himself a son of Adam by covering himself to hide who he really was. He gained approval from his father and hatred from his brother who would have followed Cain's example had Jacob not left home in a hurry.

In chapter 28, Isaac had the same concern for his son, as his father had had for him in chapter 24, to find him a believing wife so that together they could enjoy all God had promised them as a family. Esau was still trying to please his father by taking a third wife, this time his cousin. On the way to find a wife, Jacob met Christ who revealed Himself as the way to God - the ladder to heaven, the truth - God's plan for his life, and the life - in His promise 'I am with you'.(Jn.14:6) Jacob recognised the Lord's presence and feared Him but almost immediately missed the point in two ways. He supposed God lived in a building, and constructed a pile of stones. He made a bargain with God, one tenth, in return for continuing blessing. He assumed that God was like his brother,(Gen.25) and his father,(Gen.27) only giving when He was given something in return.

Chapter 29 tells the disastrous story of Jacob's marriages. Unlike his father, he fell in love first, based on her appearance and him showing off his strength. He then felt compelled to bargain with 7 years labour for the one whom he hoped was God's choice. His new father-in-law was as big a cheat as he was so that his beloved ended up costing him 14 years instead of 7. Leah became his first wife by disguise just as he had cheated his brother and father. All of them were sons and daughters of Adam. Now a competition began between the two sisters to see who could produce the most sons. Each son's name was a monument to jealousy. Each wife was trying to win the favour of Jacob, just as he had tried to win the approval of Isaac. Throughout chapter 30, there was more ungodly bargaining, first between Jacob's wives and then between him and his father-in-law. Jacob wanted to get away from Laban but was determined to take as much wealth with him as possible. There is no indication that God was in the means he used. A man of faith would have trusted God rather than his own dubious tricks.

More jealousy resulted in chapter 31. Now God stepped in with clear instructions to leave and finally Jacob did. He lacked the courage, which would have sprung from faith, to be straightforward about his departure, and tried to run away. Rachel followed suit by stealing her father's household idols and hiding her theft by pretence. An ugly confrontation between Laban and Jacob was prevented by God speaking to Laban and the two made another bargain, with another monument to mark it.

Another critical point in Jacob's life is recorded in chapter 32. It began with a reminder of God's power which had always been available to him but which he was still failing to draw on. Jacob found himself having to cross Esau's territory and assumed that Esau would punish him for his deception of 20 years before. He planned to buy his way out of trouble as usual. The price he was prepared to pay was first his wealth, then his wives and children. Again he was copying the mistakes of his father and grandfather, (Gen.12,20,26) as a son of Adam. Alone that night he met Christ again, but did not know it. He fought the Lord as he had fought him all his life. As usual he demanded blessing. The Lord's blessing was simply in a new name, Israel, 'one who strives with God', a reminder of the secret of the Christian life – let God in us do the striving. Chapter 33 began with transformed behaviour, Jacob facing Esau rather than sending his family first. To Jacob's shock, Esau welcomed him as a brother rather than punishing him as a cheat. He invited Jacob to his home and left to prepare. Esau, the unbeliever, wanted to give out of natural affection. Sadly Jacob reverted to his usual behaviour and ran away, but at least he was back in the land of Canaan.

In chapter 34, Dinah, Jacob's only daughter went looking for female company among the unbelieving neighbours and was raped by a local man. Jacob's sons dealt with the problem in a way typical of the family. They made a bargain and broke it by mass murder, as sons of Adam and in imitation of Cain. Like their ancestors they justified their behaviour. In trouble once again, Jacob had to move on in a hurry. It was God's opportunity. In chapter 35 Jacob responded to meeting the Lord back at Bethel where his relationship with Him began. Remarkably God's plan for Jacob had not changed but it was still based on God's grace not Jacob's bargain. Jacob responded but he was still building piles of stones. Then there was joy and tragedy. Benjamin, the 12th son, was born but Rachel died at Bethlehem, the future birthplace of Jesus. Reuben committed incest with his step-mother and showed himself another son of Adam. Isaac died and his sons met one last time.

Chapter 36 is a surprise, a long list of the family of Esau, the unbeliever. Every soul, however unpromising, is precious to God. The life of Jacob covers half of the book of Genesis. Yet he was such an unimpressive character. His sons were even less attractive people with one exception, Joseph. The brothers' betrayal of Joseph, God's intervention and consequent blessing on Jacob and his totally undeserving family, is the theme of this final section of Genesis. Jacob and his sons were in the likeness of Adam, but there was a way back...

Once again review your titles in the last part of the book we have studied. The same choice of faith in all that God has promised, or faith in ourselves, which is doubt towards God, runs through the stories of Isaac and Jacob with the same, by now predictable, results. My suggestion for the last part of Genesis is that we divide it into chaps.37,38; 39-41; 42-45; and 46-50. Read it first. God will not teach you about what you have not read.

Section 1 - chapters 37,38

Q.1 Paul in I Cor.2:14-3:1 described three kinds of person, the natural man, the man of the flesh, and the spiritual man. Identify examples of each in the story of Esau and Jacob. If Jacob was so unimpressive as a Christian, why was so much of Genesis the story of his life? Why does Heb.11 have so little to say about Jacob?

Q.2 Why did Jacob have so much trouble with his kids? Put his family problems into a modern situation and explain how you would counsel such a family. What clues does the story of Jacob's family give us as to why kids of Christian families so often go off the rails?

Q.3 In what way does Acts 7 compare Joseph with Jesus Christ? How does chapter 37 begin to show the similarity?

Q.4 What does the story in chapter 38 teach us about the love and forgiveness of God?

Section 2 - chapters 39-41

Q.5 In what further ways did Joseph resemble Jesus in these three chapters?

Section 3 - chapters 42-45

Q.6 What does the relationship between Joseph and his brothers teach about forgiveness within the family? Why did Joseph not immediately reveal himself to his brothers when they met again? What effect has forgiveness or the lack of it had on families you know well?

Section 4 - chapters 46-50

Q.7 How was Joseph able in chapters 45-47 to help restore his father to trusting God? What obstacles do we face in being a spiritual encouragement to our parents?

Q.8 Why were Jacob's dying words in chapter 49 an outstanding example of faith?(Heb.11:21) What had he learned from his past mistakes?

Q.9 Why were Jacob and Joseph so concerned about where they were to be buried?

Q.10 In what ways does the life of Joseph demonstrate the Creator at work?

Q.11 Review the book of Genesis one more time. How have the principles of the first three chapters been illustrated in action in the story of Jacob and his family?