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CERTIFICATE COURSE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

UNIT 8: PATRIARCHS AND PROMISES

BIBLICAL TEXT:

Read Genesis chapters 24-35 carefully before reading the following background information.

BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES:

The story of Abraham's descendants Isaac and Jacob is one of great contrast. While fourteen chapters of Genesis are devoted to the life of Abraham, only two are given to the life of his son Isaac, and a more substantial nine chapters concern Isaac's son Jacob. This situation seems to reflect a clear pattern in the lives of the three patriarchs. Abraham and Jacob were active individuals and much happened during their lives. Isaac, on the other hand, while clearly obedient to God, appears to have been of a more passive disposition and seldom pushed the biblical story in new directions. The promises God made to Abraham came to Isaac (Genesis 26:2-4) – rather than his elder brother Ishmael – without any planning or work on Isaac's part, and perhaps as a result, he did not need to struggle for them as his father or son did.

While the names of both Isaac's father and son were changed to reflect their actions or changing status, Isaac's name was never changed. He seems to have been the only patriarch who led a settled life, sometimes pursuing crop growing (Genesis 26:12) rather than animal herding, and he alone of the patriarchs never traveled outside the promised land. When Isaac dug wells, they were frequently taken over by other people, and he simply continued to dig more wells rather than strive to keep the ones that were rightfully his (Genesis 26:18-22). Isaac was clearly a man of peace, and he was God's choice to carry forward the promises to Abraham, yet his passive disposition is equally clear.

Perhaps for this reason God gave Isaac a wife who was more actively inclined and who was used in fulfilling God's plans for Abraham's descendants. In fact, much of the two chapters in which Isaac appears is devoted not to Isaac, but to his wife Rebekah. When Isaac was forty years old and still unmarried, Abraham sought a wife for him in order to make the promises to their descendants possible. Genesis 24 tells us that Abraham sent his most trusted servant Eliezer back to the area of Aram from which Abraham had come to find a wife for Isaac from among their own people (an example not followed by Isaac, whose son Jacob eventually went off to find a wife for himself!). This same chapter tells how Abraham's servant was guided by God to meet Rebekah – a young unmarried relative of Abraham – at the city well and the text emphasizes both her humility and kindness in the way she responded to Eliezer's request for water and help (Genesis 24:18-25).

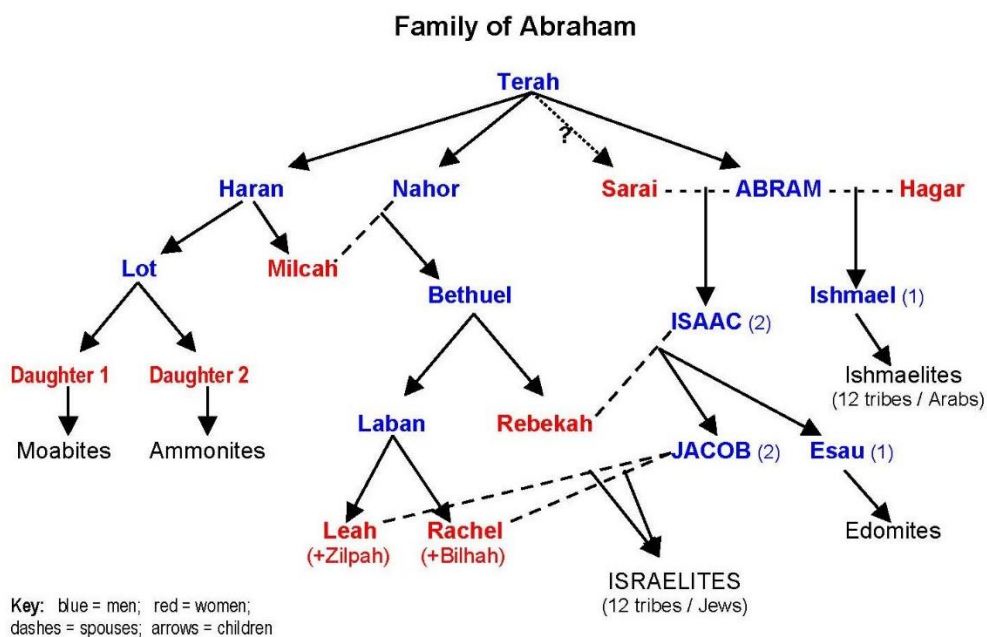
We know from later comments in Genesis that Rebekah was also beautiful (Genesis 26:7-9), and she was clearly the antithesis of passivity. She is introduced to us as a woman of non-stop activity – the subject of eleven verbs of action in four short verses of text (Genesis 24:16, 18-20) – and while the water jar she carried probably held no more than two or three gallons at most, the camels of Eliezer for which she drew water could easily drink twenty or more gallons each!

Rebekah was also mature and respected by her family to the point that they asked her whether or not she wanted to leave home immediately and travel to Canaan to become Isaac’s wife (Genesis 24:57-58) – in a place and time where the majority of marriages were arranged by parents without their children having any say in the matter. When the time came for her to make her choice, Rebekah responded decisively and with confidence in the face of the unknown.

If it is true that “opposites attract,” it is perhaps not surprising that we are told almost immediately after meeting Rebekah, Isaac fell in love with her (Genesis 24:67). Interestingly, this is only the second time in the Bible that love is mentioned. First, we are told of the parental love of Abraham for his son Isaac (Genesis 22:2), and then we are told of Isaac’s love for Rebekah. Both were obviously great loves to be singled out for mention, and it is doubtless not coincidental that at a time when concubines were common, Isaac did not take any concubines, and he is the sole patriarch of whom we are told he had only one wife – Rebekah.

But love is not always without problems, as we see in the unfolding of the story. Like the other matriarchs of the Genesis story – Sarah and Rachel – Rebekah was unable to have children. But when Isaac prayed for her, she became pregnant and later gave birth to twin sons – Esau and Jacob – the Bible telling us that Esau was born first, though only just (Genesis 25:26). As the boys grew, love enters the picture a third time, but now in a problematic way: “Isaac ... loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob” (Genesis 25:28).

This brings us to the event on which we will focus in this unit – the transfer of the birthright from Esau to Jacob and the roles that their parents played in this important situation.



The Family of Abraham. Image: Catholic Resources

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT:

In Genesis 25:22 we read that when Rebekah became pregnant with Jacob and Esau, “The babies jostled each other within her, and she said, ‘Why is this happening to me?’ So she went to inquire of the LORD.” We do not know how exactly Rebekah made this inquiry, but we are told that God replied “Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger” (Genesis 25:23).

This is the only recorded instance of one of the matriarchs receiving a revelation from God, and it speaks highly of Rebekah in that she sought God and was answered by him. We should note that God’s answer was not directly about the children, but about the family lines that would descend from them. Nevertheless, God made it clear that the older son would be subject to the younger, and we must keep this in mind when we examine the way in which Rebekah later devised a scheme to ensure that her second-born son, Jacob, would receive the birthright blessing of her firstborn son, Esau. But this event followed an incident in which Jacob himself successfully negotiated to purchase Esau’s birthright from him – the infamous bowl of stew for which Esau agreed to give up his birthright share (Genesis 25:29-34).

In the time of the patriarchs, it was customary throughout the ancient Near East that a family inheritance would be divided into the same number of portions as there were sons – plus one – and the eldest son received his own plus the extra portion, thus giving him a double share. In saying that Jacob purchased the family birthright, Genesis does not mean Esau’s entire inheritance, but the additional share that was the right of the firstborn son – and, by extension, the father’s blessing that came with it.

What Jacob did in taking advantage of his brother to obtain his birthright might seem entirely wrong, although it is sometimes argued that he did not take the birthright by force or even through trickery, and that he openly negotiated and purchased it. Perhaps Jacob also knew that Esau thought lightly of his birthright, as Genesis seems to indicate. The New Testament certainly takes this approach, and the writer of the book of Hebrews maintains that Esau’s attitude was one of profanity – treating lightly what he should have deeply respected (Hebrews 12:16). But, whatever we might think of Jacob’s “buying” his brother’s birthright portion, this was not as important as the blessing Esau lost due to the deception in favor of Jacob that was arranged by Rebekah (Genesis 27). The blessings or curses pronounced by the patriarch of the family were in a sense the nearest thing to a formal “will” in the nomadic culture of the time, and they were considered equally binding.

Also, as far as Rebekah’s involvement in the blessing of Jacob rather than Esau (Genesis 27:5-13), she knew that Jacob was God’s choice for the birthright, as we have seen (Genesis 25:23), and she seems to have had total confidence in what she was doing – to the extent of saying that she would take any resultant curse on herself when Jacob wavered regarding tricking his father (Genesis 27:11-13).

Once encouraged, Jacob seems to have adapted to this situation with little difficulty, however, and the extent of his own deceptive behavior is extraordinary: “Jacob said to his father, ‘I am Esau your firstborn. I have done as you told me. Please sit up and eat some of my game, so that you may give me your blessing’” (Genesis 27:19). As is so often the case with these early stories of the patriarchs, the Bible does not comment on the moral rightness or otherwise of Rebekah and Jacob’s actions. We do know that it was God’s will that the birthright be overturned, and we are left to presume that God worked out his will in the situation through the strengths or the weaknesses of the individuals concerned.

But we might also ask why, if God had made clear to Rebekah his will for Jacob to inherit the birthright, God did not also make his will on this matter clear to Isaac. Could it be the passivity of this patriarch that is so clearly seen in the Scriptures had something to do with this situation and his possible unwillingness to go against the established practices of the society in which he lived? We are not given enough information to be sure, but we do know that when Isaac found he had blessed his younger rather than his firstborn son he was emotionally distraught (Genesis 27:33). Perhaps the realization that the birthright was being overturned between his sons – just as it was in his own case, when Isaac inherited the birthright that would have gone to his older half-brother Ishmael – was a conflicting and emotionally difficult one for the aged patriarch who knew what family turmoil would result.

Nevertheless, there was a positive outcome to this troubled family saga, as later in their lives Isaac and Ishmael were reconciled (Genesis 25:9), as were Jacob and Esau (Genesis 33:1-10). We are told that Isaac, like his father Abraham, died contented (the only two individuals in the first five books of the Bible of whom this is said). And Jacob lived to an old age – not only fathering the sons from whom the tribes of Israel would descend, but also adopting two grandsons (the sons of Joseph). This was another overturning of sorts – in which Jacob gave his fullest blessing to his younger grandson, Ephraim, rather than to the firstborn, Manasseh (Genesis 48:17-20).

KEY THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS:

When we put the biblical accounts of the lives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob together, we find several underlying threads. First, we see in the lives of the patriarchs the beginnings of God's plan to repair the damage done in humanity's turning from him that began with the story of Eden and continued throughout Genesis 1-11. With Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, we see not only a promise of land and descendants being given, but also of wider blessings that presuppose a renewed relationship with God. In the patriarchal succession we see God's faithfulness and perseverance in continuing the promises after Abraham's death, despite the failings and shortcomings of the family God chose.

This is a second lesson we can learn from the patriarchs – that God was willing to give his promises to, and work through, a seriously flawed family line. Although we celebrate the patriarchs as heroes of faith, we see in their lives repeated instances of compromise (Genesis 16:1-4; etc.), conflict (Genesis 27:41; etc.), and deceit (Genesis 27:19; etc.), to name only some of the evident problems.

Yet if we look carefully, we can see real change occurring in the lives of Abraham, Isaac, and even the deceptive Jacob. Having received God's promises in a dream, Jacob pledged his loyalty to God (Genesis 28:10-22) and afterward lived a very changed life. By the end of their lives all the patriarchs had exhibited repeated instances of obedience and faith, and this is a timeless lesson for all who follow in their footsteps. Although human frailty and failure is on clear display in the lives of all the patriarchs, God's power and desire to work with them – and us – is made equally clear in their stories.

A third lesson that we can learn from the patriarchal narratives is one that is developed as an important concept in the New Testament. While in the time of the patriarchs, law and custom dictated that the birthright promises were to be given to a family's eldest son, God turned this principle upside down in overturning the birthright in *each generation* of the patriarchs who followed Abraham. The promises he had given to Abraham were repeatedly passed to a younger rather than the eldest son – through Isaac and not Ishmael, through Jacob and not Esau, and through the younger son of Jacob's son Joseph.

God's purposefulness in this overturning is seen on several occasions in that his will to pass the blessing to the younger sons was made clear before they were even born. It is not because Isaac and Jacob were judged better than their elder siblings by virtue of their behavior or works, but simply because God had decreed it would be so. In the same way, God overturned the spiritual aspects of the birthright once again in giving the promises to his spiritual children – Israelite or Gentile (Hebrews 11:39). The apostle Paul confirms this in saying: "If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:29), and he uses the story of the patriarchs to clarify this in the book of Romans:

... not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children. On the contrary, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." In other words, it is not the children by physical descent who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring." (Romans 9:6-8)

In saying this, Paul stresses that God's working in our lives – just as in the lives of the patriarchs – is based on his purposes and grace and not on any virtue of our own. Paul makes the parallel explicit:

Rebekah's children were conceived at the same time by our father Isaac. Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad—in order that God's purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls—she was told, "The older will serve the younger." Just as it is written: "Jacob I loved ..." (Romans 9:10-13)

Perhaps this is the greatest lesson we can learn from the promises given to the patriarchs – and, by extension, to us today – that our relationship with God has nothing to do with either our physical descent or our spiritual works, but is based entirely on God's love and the promises he holds out to us.

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REVIEW AND REFLECTION: (complete in your notebook)

Basics:

What key similarities do you see in the lives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob?

In what ways was the patriarch Isaac very different from his father Abraham and his son Jacob?

Summarize the ancient Near Eastern concept of the birthright blessing.

Looking Below the Surface:

Think about and summarize God's purposes in overturning the recipients of the birthright blessings of Abraham's descendants.

Everyday Applications: In what specific ways can we be careful not to show unwise favoritism among the people with whom we interact in our lives?

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