

## **Genesis 1-35** **A Review**

On March 8, 2020, 407 days ago if you're counting, we last had the opportunity to look at this magnificent book of Genesis. Then, we saw Jacob and his family emigrating from Bethel to Ephrath where Rachel gave birth to her last child, Benjamin, and then died from complications of childbirth. Eventually, the group made their way to Hebron where Jacob's father, Isaac, was dying. But before we move on, after such an extended break, it seems wise to take one lesson to review the book of Genesis to this point.

### **From Creation to Abram - Genesis 1-11**

We began at the beginning, by looking at the seven days of creation. We saw that God created everything, both to demonstrate His glory and to manifest His character to humankind. "For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse" (Romans 1:20). God also created man and woman, and they were given all they needed to prosper and relate to their Creator. We must also remember that woman was created as a gift to man.

Then came the Fall. It was brought about by doubting God's Word and resulted in humankind being made slaves to their sin nature. Yet, God did not abandon His creation entirely. He promised a Savior, Who would destroy the work of Satan (Genesis 3:15). Driven from the Garden, Adam and Eve struggled to survive, but survive they did. They had children, but the results of sin were evident even in the interaction of these first two brothers as Cain murdered Abel because he was jealous. Yet, God continued to unfold His sovereign plan, as can be seen from the genealogy from Adam to Noah.

Then came the Flood. God was gracious and patient, but eventually determined to destroy humanity, except for the faithful Noah and his family. God gave specific instructions on how He wanted the ark built, so that Noah and his family would survive the devastation. Throughout the entire Flood narrative, Scripture reveals God's faithfulness, and also His need to punish sin, as well as Noah's obedience. In His perfect time, God caused the waters to subside, and Noah and his family were again able to walk the earth. Then God made a covenant with Noah, in which He promised unconditionally to never again destroy humanity by flood.

One might hope that after having survived a global catastrophe, Noah might be humbled and follow God. Sadly he did not. He quickly fell into the sins of drunkenness and incest. When Noah discovered that his son Ham had chosen to embarrass his father rather than try to cover his shame, he cursed his son, Canaan, and his descendants. Following this, concluding the Flood narrative, the Bible takes us through the Table of Nations, in which Scripture follows the generations of the three sons of Noah - Shem, Ham, and Japheth. This vital outline situated the people of the world in both geographic and historical context for the remainder of the Old Testament.

The final sections of Genesis before the patriarchal narratives is the Tower of Babel and then a final genealogy of descendants from Shem to Abram. The Tower of Babel narrative provides a striking contrast between the aspirations of man and the objectives of God. Man, lost in his self-achievement,

offended God when he took it upon himself to further his own plans instead of those of his Creator. Yet, God still accomplished His ends for His creation by compelling the people to scatter abroad over the face of the earth. The genealogy from Shem to Abram sets the stage for the remainder of Genesis, in which the great patriarchs of Israel receive the promises of God of land, seed, and blessing.

### **Abram - Genesis 12-25**

Abram was living in Haran when he heard the voice of the Lord. At the age of seventy-five, God called him to take his family and go to a land that He would show him. Abram obeyed, and God promised to make him into a great nation, to bless him, and through him to bless the nations of the world. So Abram took his wife, his nephew, and his servants, herds, and flocks and made his way along the trade routes and eventually came to the land of Canaan.

Abram settled in the southern part of the land, no doubt finding more space there. Unfortunately, there was a famine in Canaan at that time, so Abram took it upon himself to travel to Egypt, hoping to survive more easily in that fertile country. Concerned that the Egyptians might find his wife, Sarai, attractive and threaten to take her by force, he and Sarai agreed to portray her as his sister, a half-truth. Pharaoh did take Sarai into his household, but God protected her by sending plagues upon Pharaoh's house. Realizing that he had been tricked, Pharaoh sent Abram and his family away, but not before he had blessed him with many material blessings.

Returning to where he had originally settled in Canaan, Abram and his nephew, Lot, realized that their increased number of flocks and herds meant that there was not sufficient water and grazing for them to live together. So Abram graciously allowed Lot to choose where to settle, and Abram moved to the oaks of Mamre in Hebron.

Soon thereafter, an alliance of kings from the east came to enforce their rights as rulers over the local chieftains who had rebelled against them. Lot was collateral damage in this invasion, and he and his family were taken captive. When Abram heard of this, he raised his own force of some three hundred men, and attacked the invading kings in the northern part of Canaan. Victorious, Abram returned home with his nephew and family. He met the king of Salem, Melchizedek, and received his blessing, but Abram refused to take any of the spoils of war from the king of Sodom.

Then Abram received a second vision from God. Again God promised protection and blessings, and insisted that Abram would have offspring of his own and that his line would inherit these promises of God. In a hallowed ceremony, God revealed to Abram that his descendants would be enslaved for four hundred years before they were restored to the land of Canaan. Yet, God promised that the lands of Canaan, though inhabited by other peoples, would one day belong to the descendants of Abram.

But Abram and Sarai were getting older, and Abram thought he might take it upon himself to help fulfill God's promises. So when Sarai suggested that Abram take her maid, Hagar, and produce an heir through her, he agreed. The plan worked, but Sarai regretted her decision, began to mistreat Hagar, and Hagar fled. But God met Hagar in the desert, instructed her to return and submit to Sarai, and promised to make her son, to be named Ishmael, a great nation as well, though included in this promise was the warning that the descendants of Ishmael would live in constant struggle with the chosen line.

Several more years passed in the life of Abram. Then, again, God appeared to him and renewed His promises of land, seed, and blessing. To affirm His promises to Abram, God entered into a covenant with him and his descendants. That covenant was confirmed by the rite of circumcision for all males in Abram's household. A further symbol of this new covenant was that Abram and Sarai were given new names which better described the roles they would play in God's kingdom.

After this God again appeared to Abraham, but this time not in a vision. While Abraham was sitting outside his tent at the oaks of Mamre, the Lord and two angels approached. Abraham played the host perfectly, and fed and cared for his guests. The Lord then announced that when He returned the next year, Sarah would have a child. Unbelieving, she laughed, but God found her out and assured her that nothing was too difficult for the Lord.

As He was leaving, God decided to tell Abraham of his plans for the sinful cities of Sodom and Gomorrah that lay in the valley below. Their wickedness had become so great that God had determined to destroy them. Fearing for Lot and his family who had moved to Sodom, Abraham boldly intervened with God and asked that He spare the cities if enough faithful people could be found. Abraham negotiated with God to the point of requiring only ten faithful people to be living there for the city to be spared. No doubt Abraham hoped that Lot's family and a few friends would account for that number.

Yet when the angels arrived and were greeted by Lot, the situation proved to be as bad as had been feared. Taken into Lot's home for protection, the angels were assaulted that evening by crowds of people who wanted to have sexual relations with them. In hopes of protecting his guests, Lot offered his daughters to the crowd, thus showing how twisted Lot's thinking had become, since he was more willing to honor the guest-host relationship than the father-daughter relationship. The crowd was not appeased, and the angels were compelled to strike the raging crowd with blindness. The angels then warned Lot to leave the town at daybreak to avoid the destruction that was to come.

Lot made his escape to Zoar, a small town nearby, but his wife, longing for her life in Sodom, looked back and was destroyed. Moving out of the valley into the local mountains, Lot's daughters then took it upon themselves to continue the family line by having children by their father. In turns they got their father drunk, and then had intercourse with him. Thus the depravity of Sodom had made its way into Lot and his family, and the children born of this action became founders of nations hostile to the children of Israel (Moabites and Ammonites).

Abraham had continued to wander throughout the land of Canaan, and when he settled in the Negev, far to the South, he again feared that Sarah might be a temptation to the local ruler and that he, as a result, might be in danger. Returning to the strategy of telling the local king that she was his sister, Abraham put Sarah in danger, but God again intervened to protect the chosen line. He warned the king, Abimelech, in a dream that Abraham was a prophet of His and that Sarah was his wife, and God threatened to destroy Abimelech and his entire family if she was not returned unharmed. Abimelech complied and restored Sarah along with a generous gift of money to testify that she was innocent. This narrative shows that it is not always the pagans that are evil and God's chosen people who are saints.

God's faithfulness was proven a short time later when Sarah gave birth to Isaac. Twenty-five years had passed since Abraham first received the call of God to go to Canaan, and now those promises were fulfilled. But the rejoicing at the birth of Isaac had repercussions within the family, since Ishmael was resentful that he had been replaced as the heir apparent. Abraham was compelled by Sarah to drive Hagar and her son away, but God reassured him that He would provide for them both, and so He did, bringing them safely into the wilderness.

Abraham had grown powerful and prosperous. In fact, he had acquired so many flocks and herds that they were impacting the local water supply. In a land where such a resource was precious, tensions increased between Abraham and the local rulers. To keep the peace the local rulers chose to make a covenant with Abraham, agreeing to do no harm to one another and to not infringe on one another's wells. Thus the powerful Abraham settled, for a time, near the Philistines at Beersheba.

Then came Abraham's greatest test, which is saying something considering all that had come before. God once again called to Abraham, and Abraham once again immediately responded. Again God told Abraham to take a journey, and to bring along with him his son, Isaac. They were to go to a place God would show them and there, Abraham was to sacrifice Isaac as an offering to the Lord. Ever obedient, Abraham and Isaac made their way up the mountain and built an altar. The inquisitive lad asked where they would get the animal to be sacrificed, since they had not brought one. His father answered simply that God would provide. At the last moment, God stayed Abraham's hand, certain that he would have obeyed to the utmost. God then again renewed His promises of land, seed, and blessing to Abraham, and the father and son rejoined the servants who had travelled with them and made their way back to Beersheba.

Abraham and Sarah had grown old together, and they had seen God work miraculously in their lives. But now the end drew near for Sarah, who died at 127 years of age. To make arrangements, Abraham negotiated with the sons of Heth and settled on the cave of Machpelah as a burial site for the family. The cave was in the vicinity of Hebron where Abraham lived and proved to be the only land he ever actually possessed in the land of Canaan.

For the family line to continue, Isaac needed a wife. Abraham called his most trusted servant to him and made him promise to go to the lands from which they had migrated and find a wife for Isaac from among his relatives. Most importantly, Isaac was not to marry a Canaanite girl. The servant made the promise and then traveled back to Haran. As he was resting near a local well, he asked God for a specific sign that would indicate the girl God had chosen to be Isaac's bride. As he was praying, Rebekah came to the well and drew water and provided a drink for the servant and his animals.

Impressed, and believing God had answered his prayer, the servant gave Rebekah gifts and inquired about her family. Learning that she was a member of Abraham's family, he went to her home and told her brother, Laban, why he had come. Laban recognized the hand of God in this and granted permission for Rebekah to leave her home and marry Isaac. They left soon thereafter and returned to Canaan. Isaac and Rebekah married and lived in the southern part of Canaan.

Abraham married again, had more children, and then died at 175. He was buried in the family tomb at Machpelah by his sons Ishmael and Isaac, and after a brief accounting of the descendants of Ishmael, the patriarchal narrative turns to Isaac.

### **Isaac - Genesis 25-27**

Isaac's wife Rebekah soon found herself pregnant with twins. From their conception it seems they did not get along. Rebekah asked God why she was having such a difficult pregnancy, and He revealed to her the fact that her two sons would establish nations that would be antagonistic toward each other. And so it came to be. Even at birth, the younger son, Jacob, was grasping at the heel of his older brother, Esau.

The boys were as different as they could be. Esau was a "man of the field" who enjoyed hunting and rich, gamey meats. Jacob preferred to stay close to home, and enjoyed the domestic arts such as cooking. Jacob was also clever but could be manipulative, while Esau was rash and indiscreet. For example, one day, in a fit of hunger, Esau gave away his position in the family as eldest son just because he wanted some of Jacob's stew. Jacob, eager to supplant his brother, took full advantage of Esau's character flaws.

Sometime after this, Canaan experienced another season of famine, something that was not unusual in that time period and environment. Isaac and his family journeyed to Gerar, a Philistine area, but one that was known since Abraham had stayed there and had a treaty of friendship with the local rulers. God insisted that Isaac not travel into Egypt, but rather renewed His promises to give Isaac and his descendants the land in which they lived.

Isaac was like his father, and his experiences in Gerar repeated those of Abraham. First, fearing that Rebekah might catch the eye of the local ruler, Isaac told the men that she was his sister. This lie was discovered when the king saw Isaac and Rebekah embracing, but Isaac was permitted to remain in the land. He prospered and eventually became so wealthy and powerful that he seemed a threat to the local king who compelled him to leave. Isaac journeyed into the nearby valley, and kept moving until he found space enough for his flocks and herds. Eventually Abimelech, the king, made a treaty of non-aggression with Isaac similar to the one his father had made with Abraham a generation earlier.

Isaac had grown old, and he knew he was soon to die. Hoping to pass along his paternal blessing to his eldest, and favorite, son Esau, he asked him to go out and hunt some game that they might share a meal together. Rebekah, overhearing this, sought to manipulate the situation in favor of her favorite, Jacob. So she dressed Jacob in Esau's clothes, covered his neck and arms with goatskins, and prepared a meal for him to take into his father.

The ruse almost did not work. His eyesight failing, Isaac relied on his hearing and touch to discern that this was, indeed, Esau. Touching Jacob, Isaac felt the goatskins and presumed them to be the hair-covered arms of his eldest. But the voice was not Esau's. So Jacob talked little, lied to his father, and stole Esau's blessing.

When Esau returned with his kill and had prepared a meal, he went in to his father who then understood he had been deceived. But the blessing could not be recanted, and there was not another to give Esau. So Esau burned with resentment and plotted to kill his brother once his father had died. Recognizing this

ramification of her plan, Rebekah insisted that Isaac send Jacob back to Haran to take a wife from among their relatives there. Since Esau had chosen for himself wives from among the Canaanites who had proved a source of great trouble to the family, Isaac was persuaded.

### **Jacob - Genesis 28-35**

So Isaac called Jacob to him and commanded him to go to Paddan-aram, the home of Rebekah's brother, Laban, and take a wife from his relatives there. Jacob obeyed, and as he journeyed there, he received a vision from God in which God renewed His promises of land, seed, and blessing. Jacob responded by erecting an altar there and calling the place Bethel. He further promised to make the Lord his God, if God protected him and brought him safely back to Canaan.

Moving on, Jacob finally arrived in the land of Haran. Resting by a well, he was talking with some of the men from the area when Rachel appeared. She was tending her father's sheep, and Jacob was attracted to her. Learning that she was the daughter of his mother's brother, Laban, Jacob presented himself to her and went home with her to Laban's house. Laban invited Jacob to stay with him and to pay him for the work he did while there. Jacob, instead of asking for wages, offered to work for Rachel hand in marriage. So he stayed there seven years serving in Laban's house, and at the end of that time he went to marry Rachel.

But it turned out Laban could be as treacherous as Jacob. After seven years, Laban sent in Leah, the elder daughter, as Jacob's bride instead of Rachel. Upon discovering this the following morning, Jacob was angry, but Laban insisted that it was the custom of their people to marry the elder daughter first. Laban did offer to give Jacob Rachel as well, but only after Jacob worked a further seven years in Laban's house.

Because of his great love for Rachel, Jacob worked another seven years. But during this time he neglected Leah. Seeing she was unloved, God chose to give her children, a significant event in that culture since it was a sign of God's special favor to a woman. So during the time while Jacob worked so diligently for Rachel, Leah blessed him with the birth of four sons, Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah.

But Leah's blessing proved a source of jealousy to Rachel. She had not yet had any children, and she and Jacob quarreled. Jacob reminded her that God was the source of life, and that if He chose to bless Leah and not her, there was nothing he could do about it. This tension was eased somewhat when Rachel gave her servant to Jacob that she might have children through her. And so Bilhah, Rachel's servant, bore Jacob two sons, Dan and Naphtali.

But Leah could play that game as well, and so she did. She gave Jacob her servant, Zilpah, and over time Zilpah bore to Jacob two sons, Gad and Asher. Jacob had become such a pawn in the struggle or precedence between his two wives that his physical attentions were even traded by Rachel to Leah for some flowers. Thus Leah had two more sons, Issachar and Zebulun. Clearly, Jacob the manipulator, had reached a low point.

Rachel eventually gave birth to another son, Joseph, and by this time, Jacob was ready to leave Laban's employment. But as Jacob and Laban discussed the arrangements of their parting, there was a question of what belonged to each man. Jacob had served Laban so well, and God had prospered him so richly, that

Laban's flocks and herds had increased beyond their natural ability. So Jacob suggested that he only be given those sheep, lambs, and goats, that were speckled or spotted. But Jacob had a plan to cheat Laban. He put rods of poplar and almond trees by the troughs where the animals drank, and when they came to drink and mated they rubbed against these sticks and became speckled and spotted. They then gave birth to lambs and goats that shared those markings. Jacob even went so far as to only do this when the healthiest of the flocks and herds came to drink, so he got the best of the livestock. Thus Jacob increased his holdings at the expense of Laban and became exceedingly prosperous.

But Jacob's actions did not go unnoticed. Laban's sons realized that their cousin was, in fact, stealing their inheritance. So the Lord warned Jacob to leave and return to Canaan. Jacob called his wives to him and complained that he had been the one cheated by their father. They saw that their future lay with Jacob, and so they agreed to quietly sneak off with all their flocks, herds, and other possessions before Laban could stop them. In an act of either vengeance or simple pettiness and spite, Rachel also stole the household gods that Laban worshipped.

Laban had been away shearing his own flocks when Jacob and his family left, so he did not hear the news until three days later. Nevertheless, he determined to go after them. A week later he caught up with the much slower traveling caravan of Jacob, his wives, their children, and their animals. But God remembered Jacob, and He came in a dream to Laban and warned him to do no harm to Jacob. Thus restricted, Laban confronted Jacob and they each argued that they had been honorable in their dealings and that the other had been duplicitous.

But Laban wanted his gods returned. Jacob, not knowing Rachel had taken them, gave Laban permission to search his camp and punish with death whoever had stolen anything from Laban. So Laban did search the camp, but Rachel tricked him by complaining that she was enduring her menstrual cycle and could not rise from where she was lying to allow him to search her belongings. Thus Rachel escaped punishment.

Not finding his gods, Laban and Jacob again traded accusations, and both Jacob and Laban acknowledged that it was God Who had protected Jacob these twenty years. At an impasse, the men agreed to a covenant, and set up a heap of stones to mark both the boundary past which neither man would go to do harm to the other, and to testify that Jacob would treat Laban's daughters and grandchildren well. Jacob then offered a sacrifice to the Lord and the two parties shared a meal. In the morning Laban returned to Paddan-aram, and Jacob set out to return to Canaan.

As he made his way, Jacob remembered that he and Esau had not parted on the best of terms. So he sent word ahead that he was returning, and had his servants give a brief accounting of his prospering these past two decades. When Jacob heard that Esau was coming with four hundred men to meet him, he feared the worst and divided his caravan into two groups, hoping one might escape if they were attacked. He also appealed to God, acknowledging His blessings and pleading for protection. In hopes of further pacifying his brother, Jacob sent ahead many gifts of flocks and herds to Esau. He also sent ahead his wives and children, and rested the night alone on the Jabbok river, near the Jordan. During the night, Jacob wrestled with God. This peculiar encounter is difficult to fully understand, but what is clear is that God changed Jacob's name to Israel, meaning "he who contends with God," an apt description of this complicated character.

Finally, Jacob and Esau met. Their encounter was not what Jacob had expected. Esau ran to greet him, hugged him, and kissed him. All, it seemed, had been forgiven and healed by the passage of time. After introducing the members of his family, each of whom prostrated themselves before Esau, Jacob offered his brother all the gifts which he had sent before. Esau refused, claiming he had plenty, but after Jacob insisted, Esau accepted Jacob's peace offering.

Esau then offered to go along with Jacob, but Jacob demurred stating that his women and children would not be able to keep pace with Esau's small army. Esau then offered to have some of his men remain with Jacob, but again Jacob said he could do well enough on his own. So Esau left, returning to his lands in the south of Canaan. But Jacob did not follow. Instead he made his way to Shechem, where he purchased some lands from the local Canaanites and built an altar to the Lord.

But trouble soon ensued with the locals. As Leah's daughter, Dinah, was visiting some local women, she was attacked and raped by Shechem, the son of the local ruler. Shechem's father, Hamor, tried to remedy the situation by having Dinah marry his son, and in fact offered to have his people intermarry with the sons Jacob, live together, and trade with one another.

Jacob's sons, however, wanted revenge for the attack on Dinah. So they told Hamor that the intermarriage could only take place if all the men in the community were circumcised. That seemed a small price to pay, thought Hamor, to form an alliance with Jacob and his large family, so he persuaded the men of the city to undergo the procedure. But Jacob's sons had been deceptive. As the men were recovering from being circumcised, Simeon and Levi, Dinah's brothers, entered the city and killed all the men, took captive the women and children, and looted their possessions. Jacob was frustrated that his sons had been so rash, but was unable to do more than leave the area before allies of Hamor discovered the treachery and attacked him and his family.

So God told Jacob to go to Bethel, and as they did so, God protected them from local peoples who might have done them harm. Then God again appeared to Jacob, and reminded him that his name would be Israel, and God renewed the promises of land, seed, and blessing. Jacob and his large family migrated from Bethel to Ephrath where Rachel gave birth to her last child, Joseph, and then died from complications of childbirth. Eventually, the family made their way to Hebron where Jacob's father, Isaac, was dying. Isaac soon died, and was "gathered to his people" as the writer eloquently put it, at the age of 180. He was buried by his sons Isaac and Esau.

### **Takeaways**

There are many things to take away from these narratives, but I will focus on two that stand out to me. First, God has a plan and is sovereign to carry it out. The attacks of Satan and the foolishness of men are not enough to keep God from fulfilling His will. Second, God is a God Who keeps His promises. He promised Abraham land, seed, and blessings, for both himself and his descendants, and He renewed these promises with each succeeding generation. As we will see in the Joseph narrative, God again acts to keep His promises and fulfill is will.