

Week One: at a time of transition God makes a big promise

Genesis 12:1-9. Sermon date: Sunday 11th September

We begin our journey through a series of Old Testament transitions with Abraham. Abraham is the first of three Patriarchs (or fathers of the faith) whose lives are recorded in the book of Genesis. Over this period – probably of around a Thousand years – God calls Abraham and his descendants to begin a journey through which they would become a people (the Israelites) set apart by God. These patriarchs were in no way perfect, and scripture records their misdeeds as well as their worthy qualities. Yet, God speaks to them despite their human failings. Our first three weeks will follow a series of transitions between these patriarchs and their families: from Abraham, through Isaac to Jacob. Later in this series we will follow the story of their descendants as the people of Israel moved into and out of the land promised by God to Abraham.

The book of Genesis itself was most likely compiled during the 6th and 5th Centuries B.C.E. This knowledge helps us to understand a little about why Genesis was written and, therefore, how we might approach it in our reading and discussions. During the 6th and 5th Centuries B.C.E., many cultures around the world started to ask big questions about what was ultimately significant in the world. Some historians know the period as the “axial age”. Well-known names such as Plato, Pythagoras, and Confucius were responding to these questions in their writings. Each of these and many others came up with different answers and discoveries. Often these thinkers were seeking a rational and humanistic way to understand the world. Major world religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism were also developing during this period. In the Persian Empire, Zoroastrianism was the guiding worldview. It was a time of significant development for human culture.

As for the Israelites, they were living in exile in Babylon and then within the Persian Empire. They too were being confronted with questions of identity, of what it means to be human, of how human society should be arranged, and of what to believe. They were striving to hold fast to their identity despite living under someone else’s rule. It is no wonder, then, that it was during this so-called “axial age” that the histories of the patriarchs which had been passed down – probably in a mix of oral and written form – were compiled; these are the stories which directed how God’s people understood their identity and their faith. The people of God found they already had the answers to some of the big existential questions the nations around them were asking and inspired by God they began to gather these together.

Genesis is, then, not best understood as a record of history, but instead as a record of how God revealed himself first to Abraham and then to Abraham’s descendants. It provides us with a theological answer (that is, a God-oriented and God-breathed one) to those big question about who we are and why we are here. This part of Genesis could be described as a hybrid between family history and prayer journal or theological reflection.

In Genesis 12-50, we look back to (at least) a few thousand years before the birth of Christ, to a time when so-called ‘complex societies’ (made up of thousands rather than tens or hundreds) had started to form. In those societies people began to have specialised roles – not everyone was simply some kind of farmer – and objects now recovered through archaeology were being made and used. There is evidence for literacy, numeracy, and science. It was a time when human cultures

were forming. Among them, a family of nomads somewhere in the Ancient Near East heard the Lord Almighty, YHWH, the Most High God call them for a special purpose...

Read Genesis 12:1-9

Start by reflecting on the passage as a whole together: what are your initial responses?

Look more closely at the words God says to Abraham. **What promises does God make? How does Abraham respond to God's words?**

What are the implications of God's promises to Abraham?

You might like think of implications at the time, later in history (later in the Old Testament, at the time of Jesus, and so on), and for us today. You could also consider that the promises are four-fold: land, descendants, covenant with God, blessing others. You might want to think about each of these in turn.

Spend some time reflecting on Abraham leaving his home. What might Abraham and those around him have been thinking and feeling at this time?

We read that Abraham has already moved from his birthplace (Ur in Babylon) to Haran (probably in northern Syria). He is told to leave his "clan" in Haran (probably a group of people bigger than extended family but smaller than a tribe) but does take with him a group of people he was related to or who were working for/with him. He then travels through what will later become known as the promised land from the northern to the southern border.

If God called you in this way, who would you journey with?

In verse 8 Abraham builds an altar. Why do you think this is? Why might it be significant?

This passage is considered to be a bridge between the "primordial history" of the first eleven chapters of Genesis (from Adam and Eve, through Noah, to the Tower of Babel) and the "patriarchal history" described above which starts with Abraham. **Why might it be important for the first readers of Genesis to see a link between those two? Does that speak to you at all today?**

Some application questions:

How might the promises made to Abraham still be relevant to us today? How does it feel to consider these promises as applicable to your own life?

Have you seen evidence of these promises in our world today?

How might we be part the calling given to Abraham to be a blessing? As individuals but also a church.

Week Two: at a time of transition God meets with Jacob

Genesis 32:3-13, 32:22-33:4. Sermon date: Sunday 18th September.

This week we skip a generation as we think about a significant transition in the life of Jacob. Jacob was the second son of Isaac, and Isaac was the son of Abraham and Sarah. Read through Genesis 12-32 if you want to know about everything that has happened in between. During Isaac's lifetime, the patriarchs and their families have moved in and out of the promised land – a pattern which would continue – and they have continued to hear God speak and guide them despite their many failings and bad decisions.

Jacob is a complex character and scripture does not spare him appropriate criticism. He is known as a cheater and a liar, a man who deceived others, and even his name can mean “to supplant” or “to deceive” or “to grasp”. We read about him stealing his brother Esau's birth-right (Genesis 27) with the help of his mother Rebekah. Deception seemed to run in the family as later Jacob's uncle, Rebekah's brother Laban deceived Jacob and then submits Jacob to long years of labour in exchange for marrying both of his daughters. Jacob gets his own back by deceiving Laban and finds himself on the run. Life had been messy and complex for Jacob – not what we might expect from a patriarch! Within all of this, God continues to be at work. Jacob first encounters God at a place called Bethel in Genesis 28 and the promises made first to Abraham continue to echo through these chapters. Still, Jacob's character prevails, and he tries to re-write God's promise rather than embracing it. Jacob would much rather make a bargain than receive God's promises as acts of grace.

Meanwhile, Isaac has remained in the promised land living amongst the Canaanites. In Genesis 32 we find Jacob heading back to his father. Inevitably, he will encounter his brother Esau. Jacob has no idea how Esau will receive him and assumes that there will be anger and conflict. Having become very wealthy while away from home, Jacob sends riches and presents to Esau in an attempt to make peace. Perhaps he is finally attempting to do the right thing and will give Esau back the blessing and birth-right which should have been Esau's in the first place. Jacob's speech in Genesis 32:11 suggests he had this in mind. Jacob's fear is not unwarranted, a messenger tells Jacob that Esau is coming to meet him accompanied by four hundred men. Jacob reacts with panic and fear, trying to fix the situation by protecting at least half of his own household and wealth.

Then – finally! - Jacob asks God for help. He sends more gifts for Esau. And he does something very strange. Having sent everything and everyone else ahead of him, he waits. At the banks of the river Jabbok, Jacob has an encounter with a strange figure which changes him. Jacob realises it is God with whom he wrestles and, clinging on, shouts “I will not let go unless you bless me”. Jacob is still obsessed with receiving blessing, but now it seems he cries out with desperation rather than with pride. He returns limping and with a new name. So, this crossing is not only a physical and symbolic transition for Jacob, but it is a deeply spiritual transition too. Our reading ends with a striking reconciliation, echoed by Jesus in the parable known as the “Lost Son” (or “Running Father”) as Esau greets and accepts Jacob. Reading on, that acceptance proves too much for Jacob to bear and he soon travels again.

There is much more to say about Jacob's meeting with God (sometimes described as a ‘theophany’). The text itself draws attention to it, in the original language the prose moves to

something more poetic which slows down the reader. It puns on the names of Jacob and the river Jabbok, again drawing attention to the change of identity about to take place. In 32:25-26 the Hebrew says something like “the man Jacobed/Jabboked him” drawing on the meaning of Jacob’s name. In confessing his name (32:27) Jacob confesses the kind of man he has been, one who deceived and grasps for what is not his own. This battle is not just physical, but a spiritual wrestle. Iain Provan (a biblical scholar) writes: “another battle is being fought – a spiritual battle, concerning identity and vocation – and Jacob will not yield”. Finally, as day breaks Jacob is blessed just as he has requested. However, this blessing comes with the significance of a change of name. He is now Israel – meaning “one who wrestles with God” or perhaps “God fights” – and this name will be carried by his descendants for generations to come. Somehow strengthened by this encounter, a limping Jacob goes to re-join his household and to meet his brother.

Read Genesis 32:3-12 and 22-31 (or 32:3-31 if you have time!)

Start by reflecting on the passage as a whole together: what are your initial responses? Does anything surprise or challenge you in this passage?

Recap what happens in the passage. The paragraphs above may be helpful. If useful, explore a few questions relating to what happens:

In verses 3-8 what do we learn about Jacob and the situation he finds himself in?

What do we learn about Jacob and Esau’s relationship?

How does Jacob try to fix the situation?

How does God intervene?

What do you make of Jacob’s prayer in 32:9-12? You could explore whether this seems to fit what we have said above about Jacob’s character, or not.

What do you imagine would have been going through Jacob’s mind at the various points in this passage?

Why might God have left Jacob with a physical reminder of this wrestle (32:25)? What do you make of that?

What significance do you think this event had for the people of Israel? What significance does it have for us? You could explore what you make of the Israelites being named in this way.

Some application questions:

Can you identify with a sense of wrestling with God? What is that like for you?

Jacob wrestles with his sense of identity and vocation at a time of transition. Have you ever had this experience? What was the result?

Do you find this encounter comforting, encouraging, humbling, strengthening? Reflect together on what you might take away from this passage today.

For all his failings, Jacob recognises who God is and clings onto God for a blessing. **How can we cling onto God in this way in our lives?**

Sunday 25th September is expected to be our annual talk on giving (moved due to the death of the Queen) – TBC

Week Three: at a time of transition God leads Israel to an unexpected place

Genesis 45:25-46:7. Sermon date: Sunday 2nd October

We fast-forward now to the end of Jacob's life. Again, a new generation has been born and is grown up. Jacob's son Joseph has famously found himself in Egypt and is well-respected by Pharaoh. As Canaan is hit by drought and famine, Jacob's other sons head to Egypt to find food. There they find more than material provision; their long-lost brother Joseph, who they once sold into slavery, is there to greet them and welcome them to a new country. As with Jacob and Esau, the family relationships are complex and fractious. Deception continues to be a family trait, as Joseph manipulates a situation in which his brothers find out that he is the brother they once sold to slaves. Similarly, he manoeuvres things to ensure Pharaoh will accept Joseph's family – the extended family of Israel – and allow them to live freely. As we join the story, peace has been made and the brothers have gone back to tell Jacob that his beloved, favourite son is alive and inviting them all to join him in Egypt.

Migration of this kind was not unusual in the Ancient Near East, and migration to Egypt seems to have been particularly common. Egypt was well developed, and we have plenty of evidence for their literacy and numeracy early in human history. It was an attractive place to try and set-up home. For Jacob and all who surrounded him, however, this is an unexpected move. God promised to Abraham that land which Abraham had travelled through (as we read in Genesis 12) and the three patriarchs had clearly established home and community in that place, amongst the other Canaanites who lived there. Now they are forced by famine to leave the land they have been promised. It would seem they will become a nation not in the land promised but instead as foreigners in Egypt. God's words in Genesis 46 are, therefore, hugely important. There is a continuity with the promises of Abraham even though this might not seem to be the case at first glance.

For the original compilers of Genesis – themselves living in exile - this moment of their history was somewhat foundational. When Israel's family moved into Egypt they grew in number and by the time scripture re-joins the story in the Book of Exodus, the Israelites were a fully-fledged people group. That perhaps makes sense of the change in attitude: this Pharaoh of Jacob and Joseph's time allowed an extended family to live amongst them, by the time of Moses there would have been a new Pharaoh and he had a whole population on his hands. That Pharaoh finally gave in – after all of the plagues – and allowed God's people to leave Egypt under Moses' leadership. We know that event as the Exodus and it is celebrated at Passover. God's saving work through the Exodus was foundational to Israelite faith, as it remains so for both Jewish and Christian faith today. So, these words from God to Jacob in Genesis 46 are a reminder that God had always promised to bring them back out of Egypt. The Exodus was God's work, and it was promised long before life in Egypt became hard.

As for Jacob, here we do find him obedient to God. However, the text itself remains confused about Jacob's identity. He is sometimes Israel, sometimes Jacob. It would seem he has never quite taken on that new vocation given to him at the banks of the Jabbok. The text also begins to tell us about

Judah, and we will learn later in our series of the division of God's people between Israel and Judah in the generations which would follow. Nevertheless, God continues to speak to Jacob and to reassure Jacob's whole family – the people of Israel – that His promises still stand. This would have comforted and strengthened a divided, exiled people as they compiled Genesis for the first time, and it can comfort and strengthen us.

Read Genesis 45:25-46:7

Start by reflecting on the passage as a whole together: what are your initial responses?

Look closely at Genesis 46:1-4.

What does God say to Jacob? Reflect on these words together for a moment.

How do these promises compare to, contrast with, and complement the original promise made to Abraham? *If time you could compare to other promises made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.*

What significance might this promise have had to the original readers and hearers of Genesis?

What significance do they have today?

Some application questions:

Have you ever found God guiding you to an unexpected place?

Do you think the place we find ourselves in as a church or as a country unexpected? How might God be speaking into that?

As we come to the end of our three weeks looking at the patriarchs: What have you learnt? What do you want to know more about? What is one thing you will take away?