

GENESIS 12—50: Family Matters

Introduction

As we read the Book of Genesis and come to the end of chapter eleven, we see God doing a new thing. The wider world of Genesis 1—11 narrows to one family and indeed one person as part of that family—Abraham. For reasons hidden in the loving purpose of God, God called Abraham to be the instrument through whom God would bless “all the families of the earth” (Genesis 12:3, New Revised Standard Version). Later generations of God’s people would see this event as being so important that they would focus on Abraham as “father” of the nation (see, for example, Luke 3:8; 13:16; 16:23–30; 19:9; John 8:39–40, 52–58; Acts 7:2; Romans 4:1–16).

Genesis 12—50 tells the story of the generations of Abraham’s family that became known as the patriarchs. Many Old Testament references speak of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—three generations—in one breath (see Exodus 2:24, for example). Jacob’s story in Genesis 12—50 continues a generation beyond, focusing on the life of Joseph, one of his twelve sons. This portion of Scripture can be read on several levels. It is indeed the story of how God began to work out his purpose in the life of this family. God made a covenant with Abraham (12:1–3), and much of Genesis 12—50 is how God maintained that covenant and passed it to each of the succeeding generations.

God did not wave a magic wand to accomplish his purposes with this family, however. God worked with these imperfect people in the midst of the earthiness and messiness of their lives. Included in Genesis 12—50 are accounts of tangled family relationships, bad decisions, and wrong actions.

So as we read this portion of Scripture, we meet life, real life, with God working with people as they are engaged in it. How God worked with this family is a reminder that God, though holy, chooses to enter into the earthiness of our own lives, relate in grace to us, and call us to walk with him.

Thus, as we study these passages of Scripture, so rich in the stuff of human life, we will also see ourselves and our families. Although the scriptures in Genesis 12—50 are indeed about Abraham’s family, we will find that they also are about our families. Our families, too, are characterized by tangled relationships, bad decisions, and wrong actions, as well as by indescribable joy and fulfillment. We do well to learn from the experiences of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph how to live in such families.

Who are these families of ours? They may be the families in which we were reared and/or the families we want to establish or have already established. The source of so much joy for us, they may also be the source of our greatest conflicts and sadness. We do well to learn from Scripture all we can about how to live in families.

(Adapted from BaptistWay Press, online sample of BaptistWay Adult Bible Studies and Resources, promotional section. www.baptistway.com . Permission to use in Home Church Online, February, 2002).