From Eden to Bethlehem: The Unlikely Family Tree
Genesis 28-49

The family tree of Jesus isn't a record of people who were good enough to deserve God's promises. It's the story of a God who remained faithful through imperfect people and welcomed outsiders into the family along the way.

Last week we looked at God's covenant with Abraham. God promised Abraham that He would: make him into a great nation, give his descendants a land, and bless all the families of the earth through him.

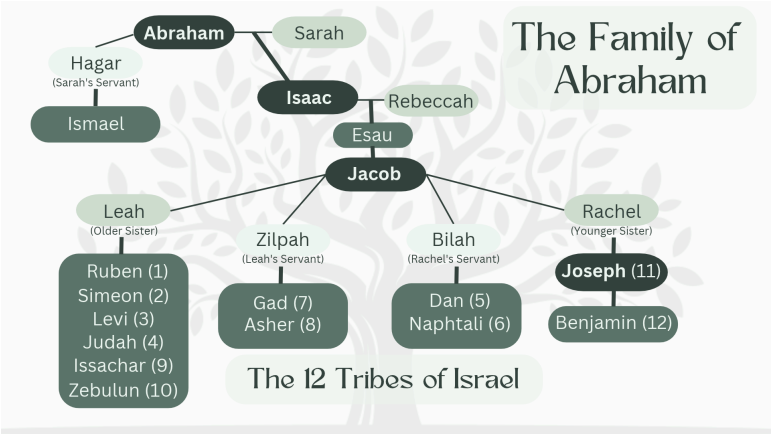
We also talked about contracts and that we need them because people don't always follow through on their promises. Contracts establish expectations, responsibilities, and also establish consequences when someone fails to fulfill their obligations. However, when God established His covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15 something incredible happened. In the covenant ceremony, Abraham was in a deep sleep while God (represented by the smoking firepot and flaming torch) passed between the divided animals. This emphasized God's commitment to fulfill His promise. The fulfillment of God's redemptive promise ultimately rested on His faithfulness; not on the perfection of Abraham's descendants which is a good thing!

Abraham's Family:

When we begin to look at Abraham's family tree, we discover that these people were far from perfect. In Genesis 18:14, God asked Abraham *"Is anything too hard for the LORD?"* God asked this question when Sarah struggled to believe she could have a child in her old age. Even though it seemed impossible, God made it happen!

This question is still relevant in the message today as we see God work through something else that seems impossible. We find a family full of jealousy, manipulation, betrayal, and broken relationships. Yet through that family, God would bring redemption to the world.

God knew humanity would need redemption before the foundation of the world. The arrival of Jesus wasn't an emergency response to an unexpected problem. He was God's plan of redemption from the very beginning.



Jacob's Deception:

Abraham and Sarah had Isaac. Isaac married Rebekah who then had Esau and Jacob. Jacob tricked Esau out of both his birthright and blessing. A birthright was a legal and material

privilege that belonged to the firstborn son. It included family leadership and a double portion of the fathers estate and inheritance. It was possible for the birthright to be sold or forfeited.

A blessing was a bit different. It was a spoken, prophetic pronouncement of divine favor, prosperity, and spiritual authority given by a father. It transferred spiritual lineage and continuation of the Abrahamic Covenant. It was not automatically given to the firstborn son.

It is important to understand that before the twins were born, God revealed that His purpose would continue through the younger brother, but instead of trusting God's promise, Jacob and his mother tried to secure it through manipulation. Jacob persuaded Esau to trade his birthright for food (Genesis 25:29-30). Rebekah helped Jacob deceive Isaac into giving him Esau's blessing (Genesis 27). Esau became furious and Jacob fled for his life.

Jacob tried to take control of something God had already promised and his deception came with consequences. His family was fractured; he was forced to leave home; and he later experienced deception himself at the hands of his uncle Laban.

God's faithfulness doesn't eliminate the consequences of our choices but our failures don't have to be the end of our story.

Jacob Becomes Israel:

While Jacob was fleeing, God appeared to him at Bethel and reaffirmed the covenant promise. Read Genesis 28:11-15.

Then years later when he was fleeing from his uncle and was about to have to face his brother Esau - he had another formative experience. Read Genesis 32:24-28.

Jacob became Israel. The name Israel means "he struggles with God." Think about that for a minute. The nation of God's chosen people is literally called the nation of "he struggles with God."

The man who had spent much of his life trying to control circumstances was learning, the hard way, to depend on God. Jacob wasn't suddenly perfect in this moment, but his life reveals a God who continues working in and through imperfect people.

The Family of Jacob/Israel:

The family of Jacob is wildly disfunctional. We won't get into all of that today though. In short he had 12 sons who became the ancestors of the tribes of Israel. These 12 sons aren't unrelated characters. They are brothers in a dysfunctional, complex family that is full of drama. Yet from their descendants come some of the most significant people in the Old Testament.

Moses and Aaron come from Levi; Joshua comes from Joseph's line; King Saul and much later, the apostle Paul came from Benjamin; but the line of the promised everlasting King comes through Judah.

Judah:

Of all 12 of the brothers, why Judah? Why not Joseph or Reuben, the oldest? To understand why Judah's place in the family tree is so surprising we need to look at his story.

Jacob/Israel had a favorite son: Joseph. He was the first born son of Rachel, the wife Jacob loved most. Jacob gave Joseph a special robe and his brothers resented the favoritism. Joseph also had dreams that he shared with his brothers that suggested that one day they would bow before him. Their jealousy grew into hatred.

One day Joseph came to check on his brothers while they were working and they saw an opportunity to get rid of him. Some wanted to kill him, but Reuben - the oldest - intervened and

convinced them not to kill him. Instead they threw him into a pit until a caravan of traders approached.

Read Genesis 37:26-28. Judah suggested selling Joseph rather than killing him. It spared Joseph's life but it wasn't exactly an act of genuine compassion. Judah saw an opportunity to profit from his brother's suffering. So Joseph was sold into slavery and taken to Egypt. The brothers then deceived Jacob into believing Joseph had been killed.

Judah was willing to sacrifice his brother for his own benefit, and this is the man whose family line would eventually lead to Jesus. Shortly after, Judah left and lived in Adullam and married a Canaanite woman. This leads to a very uncomfortable chapter in the family tree: the story of Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38).

Tamar was Judah's daughter-in-law. After her husband died, she was left in a very vulnerable position. In that culture, family obligations were intended to protect widows and preserve the family inheritance. Judah failed to fulfill his responsibility to her, so Tamar eventually took extraordinary (and morally complicated) action to secure the future she had been denied.

The story exposes Judah's hypocrisy and his failure to act justly toward someone who depended on him. When confronted with the truth, however, Judah acknowledged his wrongdoing.

This is an important moment. Judah, who previously acted out of self-interest… again, is forced to acknowledge that he has treated someone unjustly. This does not mean that Judah was suddenly perfect, but it was a humbling moment for him.

The story is complicated yet Scripture doesn't hide it. In fact, Tamar is named in Jesus' genealogy (Genesis 1:3). Matthew could have listed Judah and Perez without mentioning Tamar. Instead, he includes her by name. She is the first woman named in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus. The family history of the Messiah doesn't erase this painful and uncomfortable chapter. It preserves it and this becomes the pattern.

This shows that God's grace reaches beyond the people we might expect.

Remember what God promised Abraham: all families of the earth would be blessed through him (Genesis 12:3). The promise was never intended to remain within one family for that family's benefit alone. God was building a family through which His blessing would reach the world.

Judah's Heart Change:

Years passed. During his time in Egypt, God blessed Joseph and he rose to a position of authority. A famine spread across the region and Jacob's sons/Joseph's brothers travel to Egypt in search of food. The brothers don't recognize Joseph but Joseph recognizes them.

Joseph's 10 older brothers who betrayed him and sold him were now coming to him in a state of desperation. Without Joseph's help their whole family would starve.

Long story short, their younger brother, Benjamin was accused of theft and faced enslavement. The brothers had a choice: they could leave Benjamin behind and save themselves or they could return home without him just as they once returned home without Joseph.

This time though, Judah chose differently. He stepped forward and pleaded with Joseph to take him in place of Benjamin. The brother who once convinced the other brothers to sell Joseph into slavery is now willing to become a slave in place of his brother.

We don't know everything that happened to Judah between selling Joseph and saving Benjamin. We do know that he didn't always make the right decisions. But we also know that he is no longer just thinking about himself. He is willing to sacrifice himself for someone else.

God's grace doesn't simply preserve His promise through imperfect people. It can transform those people in the process.

Judah's Blessing:

This is a foreshadowing of the true Savior that will come from the line of Judah. Read Genesis 49:8-12. Jacob declares that Judah's brothers will praise him and that they will bow down to him. He compares Judah to a lion (represents strength and royal authority). He says that the scepter will not depart from him (represents the right to rule). The promise points beyond Judah toward a future ruler associated with Judah's descendants. The line of kings, starting with David, will come though Judah. This doesn't mean Judah earned the promise through his transformation. It means God's grace has been at work through this family all along.

In Revelation, John hears about the Lion of Judah who has conquered, but when he looks he sees a Lamb standing that looks like it has been slain. The Lion of Judah is also the Lamb who was slain.

Think back to Judah standing before Joseph. Judah was willing to give up his freedom to save Benjamin. Jesus willingly gave His life to redeem humanity. The story of Judah's transformation points us toward the greater redemption accomplished through Christ.

Look at the people God chose: Abraham struggled to trust, Jacob deceived his father, Judah betrayed his brother and failed Tamar, and Tamar's story was painful and complicated. The genealogy of Jesus doesn't hide the failures, the scandals, or the outsiders. It includes them not because God approved of everything these people did; not because their choices had no consequences; but because God's faithfulness was greater than their failures.

Remember the contract illustration from last week. When people break agreements there are consequences. Throughout the Old Testament we see the consequences of human unfaithfulness. We also see a God who remains committed to His promise.

In Jesus, we discover just how far God was willing to go to redeem humanity. The One who made the promise is also the One who came to bear the cost of our redemption. God knew humanity would need redemption before the foundation of the world so He wasn't surprised by the failures of Abraham's family…and He isn't surprised by ours.

Application:

Three things I want you to remember: **Your past does not have to determine your future.** Judah's story reminds us that people can change. The man who once betrayed his brother became the man willing to stand in his brother's place.

God's grace reaches beyond the boundaries we create. The inclusion of Tamar reminds us that God's redemptive purpose was never limited to the people society considered respectable or worthy. The promise to Abraham was always intended to bless all the families of the earth.

God's faithfulness is not dependent on our perfection. We are called to respond to God with faith and obedience but our hope does not rest on our ability to be perfect. It rests on Jesus.

God didn't choose this family because they would never fail Him…He chose them knowing that they would. Likewise, God didn't choose you expecting you to never make a mistake. He had a plan for your redemption before you even existed.

Reflection Questions:

- Jacob tried to take control of something God had already promised him. Have you ever struggled to trust God's timing and tried to make things happen on your own? What were the consequences?
- Judah once put his own interests ahead of his brother's, but later he was willing to sacrifice his freedom to save Benjamin. What do you think brought about such a significant change in Judah? Where might God be calling you to put someone else's needs ahead of your own?
- Tamar's story reminds us that God's grace reaches beyond the boundaries people create. Are there people we sometimes consider unworthy of God's grace? How should this truth affect the way we treat others?
- **Your past does not have to determine your future.** Is there something from your past that you have allowed to define you? How does the story of Judah offer hope for change?