

# **THE GOSPEL OF GENESIS: REDEEMING THE SINS OF THE FATHERS AND MOTHERS**

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## **SUMMARY**

Hidden within the book of Genesis is an ancient family history that is crucial to our understanding of family relations today. It is the history of God's covenant people--the lineage of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. As a record of four consecutive generations within one family, their account provides us with a unique perspective. Not only can we identify the root forms of family dysfunction, but we can trace those forms from one generation to the next!

As a family history, their story may discourage us. For although they were God's chosen people, they deceived, abused, and exploited each other. And they did so repeatedly. They were a family in which the sins of the fathers and mothers were indeed visited upon the children--unto the third and fourth generations! And with each new generation the scope and intensity of their family pathology only escalated.

Though they lived some four thousand years ago, their history applies directly to our lives today. Because we are struggling with the same seeds of pathology as did they--pain, fear, distrust, self-centeredness, distorted self-worth, and the devaluation of others. Like them, we often manipulate, exploit, or deceive family members in order to advance our own interests. Our self-serving actions only alienate us further from each other. Yet, like the covenant family, we pass on these dysfunctional patterns to each new generation.

In these confusing and desperate times, we need to hear what God would teach us about family relations--as He had intended them. And we need the encouragement that through Him, there is a pathway out from our destructive histories.

The covenant family story delivers that message with hope, honesty, and clarity. God was merciful to His chosen ones despite their cruel abuses of each other. And because of His faithful presence in their lives, both parents and children were able to recognize their sins and alter their ways--even after four generations of entrenched pathology.

The Lord brought healing and reconciliation to His chosen family. He redeemed the sins of those fathers and mothers. And He would do the same for us today. With modern family relations disintegrating at such an alarming rate, we dare not overlook the profound insights which the Genesis account offers. The purpose of this study is to bring their story to the forefront of our search for the principles that foster healthy family living.

Of all the degenerative patterns that emerge from this text, perhaps the most significant of all was the disintegration of the marital relations. For it was the dysfunction between husbands and wives that laid the primary groundwork for all other pathological reactions and patterns. From the first generation to the fourth, the nature of those spousal relationships underwent tremendous change for the worse. From domination to competition to fragmentation to isolation. The fabric of marital relations unraveled until there was virtually nothing left.

FIRST GENERATION: fear, domination and exploitation. In an overreaction to his fears, Abraham abused his role of headship, by repeatedly dominating and exploiting his wife. His devaluation and abandonment of Sarah established a devastating precedent for distrust, deception, and self-protective manipulation within the covenant family.

Their relationship helps us to identify and understand a commonly distorted marital pattern, in which a husband mistakenly believes that he has the cultural or “God-given” right to make his wife do as he pleases. He may claim this right, because he is the “head-of-household.” But this is not the God-given purpose of headship. Marriages that operate upon such a power-hierarchy undermine any chance for true intimacy, and teach the children to think in similar terms of domination and exploitation.

SECOND GENERATION: self-indulgence, competition and division. Isaac was a spoiled and self-indulgent man who tried to dominate and exploit his wife Rebekah. However, Rebekah was a more formidable and territorial opponent than Isaac had reckoned. For at least several decades they competed bitterly against each other, ultimately splitting their family down the middle with rejection, favoritism and powerful parent-child alliances.

Their relationship illustrates another distorted pattern in today's marriages, in which men and women are locked in battles for control and supremacy over and against each other. This sort of competition generates fierce anger and disillusionment among them as spouses, and readily leads to further division and competition among the children.

THIRD GENERATION: fragmentation, disconnectedness, and neglect. Because of Laban's and Leah's trickery, Jacob lost his chance for an intimate marriage along with his beloved Rachel. Instead, he became the reluctant husband of four women and the father of thirteen children. As a relationally and emotionally fragmented man, Jacob faded in and out of active, healthy headship. Not surprisingly, his family became as fragmented as he.

The family was really four families in one. Leah and her sons were one family. Bilhah and her sons were another. Zilpah and her sons were yet another. And then there was the special, “cherished family” of Jacob, Rachel and Joseph. Many a decision was made by his quarreling wives or enraged sons--with Jacob playing only a passive disinterested role. Eventually Jacob narrowed his emotional focus to the sons of Rachael--Joseph and Benjamin.

Their complex and splintered marital relations bring to light some of the confusion and insecurity facing second-and third-marriages today. And their fragmented ties with the children provide an ancient context for examining the disconnectedness and pain which blended and step-families often experience. In particular, Jacob's struggles as a husband and father illustrate how difficult it can be to stay actively involved and emotionally present in the midst of such fragmentation and pain.

FOURTH GENERATION: isolation, rage and relational anarchy. As the fourth generation grew into adulthood, they were mostly an angry, isolated, and disillusioned bunch. Reuben slept with Bilhah after Rachel's death. Dinah wandered off to get a taste of Canaanite culture--and got raped. In cold blood, Simeon and Levi deceived and massacred the Shechemites. Leah's sons sold their own brother Joseph into slavery, and then tricked their father into

believing that he had been killed. Judah forsook his covenant roots to live among the Canaanites--later practicing pagan worship and soliciting temple prostitution.

This was truly a generation without scruples or direction. They were angry because the rejection they had experienced. They were isolated because their fear and lack of trust. They seemingly had little or no hope of establishing loving or faithful family relations. They acted impulsively and aggressively, with very little concern for the long-term consequences. They were a generation out-of-control.

The fourth generation provides a mirror in which we can see some our own present-day isolation and relational anarchy. Children who have grown up within such emotionally fragmented environments often emerge as enraged, wounded souls. If they have no experience or confidence in the lasting values of commitment and faithfulness, they may displace their anger on the people around them--exploiting those relationships for short-term gains. Forever dodging commitment and deflecting accountability. Pillaging and plundering those around them, for whatever they can get their hands on. Destroying lives and relationships with reckless abandon.

This degenerative marital-familial pattern is critical for us to ponder: from domination...to competition...to fragmentation...to relational anarchy. Like layers of sediment that are deposited one upon another, each generation laid a foundation of further distortion for its children. Each new variation grew out of the previous distortions. Such was the disintegration of relations within the covenant family. Such is the broken heritage for many a man and woman in today's disconnected and isolated world. As the core of all the covenant family's brokenness were the seeds of survivalistic pathology that are common to us all.

--pain--fear--distrust--disconnection from God--self-centeredness  
--rebelliousness-inflated/deflated self-worth--devaluation of others

They did not sufficiently value themselves or each other, because they had lost sight of their true value as God's children--created in His image. Because they had difficulty trusting God, they operated from a survivalistic mentality--manipulating each other to protect themselves. They did not trust each other, because they had each felt the sting of such manipulation. Without acknowledgment or confession of their sins, they were destined to pass these patterns on from generation to generation.

As discouraging as this assessment sounds, the covenant story is truly a gospel for our dysfunctional families!! It shouts the good news of God's faithfulness and mercy to those who love him. In the midst of their abuse and brokenness, the Lord consistently made His presence known to them and drew them back to Himself. For each individual who recognized God's faithful presence, there was hope--and another chance to start over again.