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Bible Study -- Leader's Guide

Miles Before Sleep, Promises to Keep: A Study of the Patriarchal/Matriarchal Narratives

by Karl Koch

About the author

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Introduction

Your task as leader is not necessarily to be the authority or to lecture on the material. Rather, see yourself as a facilitator — providing background, encouraging questions, helping discussion. Use the leader's notes provided, as well as your own resources and insights to make the open-ended questions and discussions truly a learning experience. May I suggest that you read the stories aloud together so that you may hear as well as see them.

It is important to see the patriarchal/matriarchal narratives in context. Review the events of the primeval history (chapters 1-11) which set the salvation history of God's people within the broader context of human history.

Explain the development of this part of the Old Testament as a series of concentric circles. The innermost one is the exodus, around which everything else revolves, just as the New Testament revolves around the death and resurrection of Jesus. Next come the patriarchal/matriarchal narratives, and finally, in the outer circle, the primeval history.

Throughout the study, we want to emphasize grace and promise. As the primeval history ends, the world seems to be standing under a curse (read Genesis 11). In the midst of this, God acts to overcome sin, confusion and disharmony by creating the way of promise — calling out one family through whom the whole world will be blessed.

God addresses one person and through this seeming exclusiveness, plans to make salvation a reality for the whole creation. God now intends to give what humanity tried to secure itself.

Seek together to understand the promise to the patriarchs/matriarchs as a response to humanity's needs throughout our whole study. Our task will be to discover the joy and beauty of knowing the faithfulness of God's word.

Session 1:

Promise Me Everything

The numbers on the notes don't necessarily correspond to the study questions.

A. Genesis 12:1-9

1. Abraham's order to leave Haran represents a command to abandon radically all roots and sources of security. On the basis of God's promise alone, he is called to move out into uncertainty toward the unknown. True faith means abandoning all of our traditional roots and sources of security.
2. The promise contains three parts:
 - a. Abraham will receive a great posterity, lots of descendants;
 - b. His descendants will be the mediators of God's blessing to all the world;
 - c. Receipt of new land.
3. We begin to see here the significance of Israel as a nation for the whole world. God's intention is to bless all people through this promise to Abraham.
4. Abraham responds blindly without objection. To leave home and break ancestral bonds was to do the impossible, but he did it.
5. Our purpose here is to emphasize the radical nature of God's call and the radical response required.
6. The promise points beyond Abraham to God's objectives on behalf of all people. The road of faith always seems to lead the recipient of the promise into difficulty, temptation and frustration precisely in his/her position as recipient of the promise. We, too, are people of promise. Begin to think and talk about our faith as a journey lived out in this promise. The way into uncertainty (faith) is always in God's promise, a movement toward a great saving good. Like Abraham, we may have nothing to go on except God's radical call and gracious promise, but it is all we need.
7. Begin to make the connection with us. What about the baptismal covenant, the promise that we live in? Daily life is to be a constant reminder, living out of God's promise of forgiveness, identity and belonging made to us in Baptism. We live through, in and out of God's gracious promise. The promise is there to sustain us in the midst of uncertainty. We are constantly called to live out of the promise. Read "Baptism" in *Theology of Martin Luther* by Paul Althaus.
8. Just as Baptism is the sacrament of beginning, so Communion is the sacrament of nurture, constantly reminding us of the promise, renewing the grace for us and in us. It also reminds us that the promise points beyond us to encompass all people. We are receivers and sharers of the promise.

B. Genesis 17:1-8, 15-21

1. A covenant is a communal relationship by means of legal ordinance. Often the most powerful member extends the covenant to the weaker. In this case, God gives and Abraham receives: the emphasis is on God's initiative. The promise of Chapter 12 here is repeated and amplified (verses 4-8) by the promise of land and many descendants.

Names always carried great significance. Abram becomes Abraham, which means "father of a multitude". His name would be a constant reminder of God's promise.
2. "Walk before me" (verse 1) means that all of Abraham's life was to be lived in the presence and power of God. To be "blameless" is to be whole or perfect, not in the sense of moral perfection, but in terms of a relationship to God; it signifies total and complete surrender. In Jesus, our relationship with God is made new and whole.
3. The birth of a son became the key to the fulfillment of a promise. Everything came to depend on this birth.
4. God establishes the covenant; humanity "keeps" it. Circumcision became a response of faith and obedience to God who was revealed; a witness to promise. Faith for us is always response to God's promise...never that which encourages God to love us.
5. Abraham laughs (verse 17) as a response to the incredible promise. This shows how close belief and unbelief are to each other. The promise that Abraham received seemed so paradoxical, so impossible that Abraham could only laugh. (See "Faith" in *Wishful Thinking* by Frederick Buechner.)
6. God embraces humanity here in a particular way with Abraham and in Jesus of Nazareth. Grace is brought into a specific human situation. The covenant becomes a part of our daily life, not just some abstract theological concept. It is concrete and specific; we are asked to make it visible in concrete,

1. The name "Isaac" means "he laughed" and refers to Chapters 17:17 and 18:12. He will always be a reminder to them of God's incredible and outlandish promise.
2. Their ages alone make the promise seem unbelievable. God's intention and action is always beyond our comprehension, but always for our salvation, like Jesus of Nazareth. Remember that the entire promise rested in this birth.

B. Genesis 22:1-14

1. Abraham was asked to give up the son for whom he had waited so long. In essence, he was asked to give up his only link to the fulfilled covenant. In Chapter 12, he had been asked to renounce his past; now he is being asked to renounce his future. Isaac is the child of the promise. Everything that God has promised to do is invested in him. We're talking about losing the whole promise!
2. God seems to recognize the seriousness of the demand (verse 2).
3. Abraham responds to the radical test of obedience with a faith that recognizes the power and meaning of the promise. As author of the promise, God is completely free to give or take. Abraham is led into Godforsakenness — where God seems to want to remove the promise. Discuss how God's promise to us is threatened from within and without.
4. For Abraham to be able to give up the gift was to truly recognize it as a gift; to give up all claim, all right, all privilege to the promise is to truly see it as a promise centered in God's action.
5. Radical faith gives up on self, on its own ability to believe, accept, understand; radical faith is never conscious of itself. It relies utterly on God's grace which is always a true gift. What are the implications for this radical vision of faith for us?

Session 4:

Conflict Over the Promise

A. Genesis 25:7-11, 19-34

1. People lived with the recognition that life was not endless, but limited. To die "in a good old age" was to feel fulfilled by God, and death without fear concluded such a life.
2. With Abraham's death, the promise is represented by Isaac alone.
3. Rebekah learns that she will be the mother of two nations (Edomites and Israelites) and that the younger shall be superior to the older. It is important to point out that for these people, the superiority of the eldest was always affirmed. Again, God works contrary to human will or expectation.
4. Jacob means "he takes by the heel", "the supplanter", "cheats". Remember the significance of names as conveying personality characteristics. Even at birth, Jacob was after what belonged to Esau.
5. The boys grew up separately from each other because they typified two different ways of life. The tension and conflict finally grew until they were forced out into the open.
6. The birthright was supposed to go to Esau. He is caricatured here as stupid, slow, unkempt, unthinking and callous to spiritual things. He comes in hungry, maybe thinking that Jacob offers blood soup when it is really only lentils. In verse 32, does Esau consider the birthright nothing, or does he speak out of his present situation? "Since I am starving, the birthright is not worth discussing." Jacob demands confirmation with an oath so the agreement could not be rescinded later. Only what God had determined from the beginning (verse 23) comes to pass. Encourage discussion on how God can and does work through deceit and treachery.

B. Genesis 27:1-45

1. The power to bless was significant. It was believed that eating would increase the strength and potency of blesser and blessing.

- 2. Rebekah and Jacob exploit a man's blindness. Notice how Esau's appearance and smell are ridiculed. The greatest lie of all is in verse 20: blasphemy in invoking God as part of the deceit.
- 3. Isaac no longer has any power left to bless Esau. He ends up giving the opposite of what Jacob received. He couldn't give his favorite son anything.
- 4. Ironically, Jacob's stay with Laban lasted 20 years. Mother and son never saw each other again.
- 5. This story is about the bankruptcy of a family, broken relationships and bitter feelings. Yet somehow, God has acted in and through this, in spite of it, and is accomplishing a purpose. Again, the promise is central.
- 6. Here we have an act of God that takes the most ambiguous human act and makes it part of the divine promise. We often stumble over the ways God works through the cross and the brokenness of our lives, deceits, sins and hatreds. Where God seems least present is where God is most found, in situations that seem to deny it.
- 7. God's plan involved breaking into this family. Yet God's plan, God's saving purpose and intention, once again transcends the brokenness, works through it, within it and in spite of it.

Session 5:

Promised: Forgiveness and Guidance

- A. Genesis 28:10-22

- 1. God renews the promise. Verse 15 is a special addition designed specifically for Jacob, providing protection and return. Jacob receives an unbreakable assurance that the promise still holds.
- 2. We are reminded of the promise in many ways: sacraments, worship, Bible study, the warmth and friendship of another. Stimulate discussion on the various means of grace.
- 3. The emphasis is on God's initiative: unprompted, unsolicited. God calls, finds, accepts us in the midst of guilt. We cannot understand or deserve, only receive. Grace is unsolicited, unmerited favor bestowed by God. Jesus Christ is our supreme bearer of grace. Just as God entered specifically into the life of Jacob, so Jesus is God made real and visible.

- B. Genesis 29:15-30, 30:25-43

- 1. Perhaps these stories about Jacob's path in God's covenant parallel our own as we try to live out the promise in the midst of our humanity.

Session 6:

Promised: Reconciliation

- A. Genesis 32:9-12, 22-31

- 1. Jacob realizes something of the divine nature of his opponent and tries to get a blessing for him.
- 2. In revealing his name, Jacob had to describe himself: admit his character (the supplanter, the cheater). Isn't this what we do in confession?
- 3. God's response was forgiveness and promise. God doesn't reveal God's name: God will not allow God's mystery and freedom to be touched. But God shows freedom by blessing. Jacob must first give up his question about the name; perhaps for us that means giving up our need to control God or the promise.
- 4. Jacob receives a new name, which signifies a new relationship. The stolen blessing becomes legitimate, the promise is confirmed once again and Jacob's prayer is heard. (verse 11)
- 5. The new name "Israel" means "may God rule"; the contrast with his former name is that now the emphasis is on God and God's action.

• 6. The greatest miracle of all is seeing God firsthand. Experiencing grace.

• 7. Reconciliation with God is what our life of faith is all about.

• B. Genesis 33:1-11

• 1. Reconciliation with God, then, leads us out to experience the grace of being reconciled with those from whom we are estranged. Once again, the promise overcomes all that threatens.

• 2. Christian life is never lived in solitude. The forgiveness which makes right our relationship with God is only the beginning. From there we are equipped and encouraged to go out and be sources of healing and renewal.

• 3. In spite of his guilt, Jacob is forgiven by God and by Esau. His life is spared; the promise is protected and guaranteed.

• 4. The promise always works through humanity and ugliness and is triumphant in spite of all obstacles.

• 5. Does God create evil or simply work through what humanity creates for itself through its sinfulness and in its freedom?