Family Legacy

First in a new series title “Spiritual Heritage”

# Scripture: Gen. 20:1, 2; 26:1-9; 27:5-19; 37:31-36

# Key Thought: By studying the legacy of the biblical patriarchs, we rejoice in our heritage and learn from their mistakes.

# Introduction:

(Take a family picture or family item as illustrations)

If you have ever dug into your family history, you have no doubt found it very interesting. You discover some things. Maybe someone was guilty of a crime. Maybe someone else was a minister of the Gospel. Maybe another one had a child by a temporary partner. Maybe someone was a horse thief. Maybe someone was a government official. Maybe someone was the town drunk. Family heritage usually contains both some great notes and a few not so great.

But one thing we discover in family histories is that traits are usually passed down. What we talk about most are physical traits. Someone has his father’s nose, for example. But spiritual heritage in particular, which is the subject of this series of messages, is very much something that is passed down from generation to generation. That is certainly been true in my family. Both of my parents and all four of my grandparents were regular attenders in the some country church in which I was raised. My wife’s father was a minister and her grandfather was a Sunday School teacher.

But not-so-good family characteristics are passed down just as well. I once knew a family with 4 adult children. The father was an alcoholic. He was deceitful and had no use for God. The mother was not a Christian either and was unable to control the children. As the children grew up, three children were turning out like the father. One however, had become a Christian, went to college and graduated. Why didn't all of them see the folly of their father’s way and change? Negative example exerts powerful influence too.

But one in that family did change. We are not locked into the pattern of our parents. I’m sure you all could name someone who grow up in a great homes, but did not turn out so well. For better or worse, change is possible.

This morning I would like us to examine the issue of family inheritance by looking at the inheritance of Abraham and his descendants. There were many good things about this patriarchal family. But not everything was perfect. It never is. How did they deal with that?

# The Family Heritage of the Patriarchs.

## Abraham's heritage of promise

Abraham’s family were, above all, the inheritors of the divine promises made to Abraham. There was the promise that the family descended from Abraham would eventually be huge – numbering like the stars (Gen. 15:4).

There was also the promise that Abraham would be a blessing and that “all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Gen 12:2, 3).

Abraham’s son Isaac and his grandson Jacob were each in turn assured by God that they were personally the inheritors of these promises made to Abraham (Gen. 26:24; 28:14). That was the special and unique part of the inheritance of Abraham.

## Abraham's heritage of faith

A spiritual character trait that we can observe in Abraham and each of the patriarchs that followed him in Genesis is faith.

Abraham demonstrated faith when he believed God’s promise that he would have an heir, that his servant Eliezer would not be his heir.

Then the word of the Lord came to him: “This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.” He took him outside and said, “Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”  
 Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.   
 Gen 15:4-6 NIV

This same trait–faith in God– is shown by Abraham’s son Isaac. He and his wife were childless as Abraham had been.

Isaac prayed to the Lord on behalf of his wife, because she was childless. The Lord answered his prayer, and his wife Rebekah became pregnant.   
Gen 25:21NIV

Jacob’s (the third generation) test of faith comes a little later in his life. When he is returning to Canaan after serving his father-in-law for many years, Jacob hears that his brother Esau is coming to meet him with a detachment of armed men. Jacob was afraid. Then Jacob prayed to God for safety from Esau and for a favorable reception from him. He based his request on the promise of God to his family line. It was a prayer of faith and God answered by granting him favor with Esau (Gen. 32:9-12).

Joseph (the 4th generation) also exhibited the family trait of faith in God. When we was unjustly imprisoned in Egypt, he asked God for help in interpreting dreams. God granted his requests more than once– first in the case of two fellow prisoners and then in the case of Pharaoh himself. (Gen. 40:8; 41:16).

Faith in God was a great strength of Abraham’s line.

## Abraham's heritage of deception

But things were not perfect in the line of Abraham. In Genesis chapter 20 we read the story. Abraham and Sarah and their household with their nomadic lifestyle, entered the territory of a powerful king named Abimelek. For some reason, Abraham was afraid that Abimelek would kill him to get his wife. This fear was apparently not totally unfounded because when Abimelek noticed Sarah, he did take her into his household. But Abraham had paved the way for trouble by telling a half-truth – a half-truth that hid the most important piece of information as half-truths do. Abraham had told Abimelek that Sarah was his sister. In fact, she was his half-sister, but that was not the important fact that Abimelek needed to know. God protected Sarah and Abraham by warning Abimelek in a dream. But it was a sorry incident (Gen 20).

But the point for us today is that is not the end of the story! Abraham’s son Isaac used the same deception in his lifetime. He also found it necessary because of a famine to migrate into the kingdom of Abimelek. He also lied to the king by saying that his wife Rebekah was his sister. In fact, she was a cousin, but again, that was not what Abimelek needed to know. Abimelek discovers the ruse and condemns Isaac for it (Gen. 26:1-9).

But apparently deception had become a family trait. In the very next chapter we read how Isaac’s wife Rebekah and his younger son Jacob deceived the elderly and now blind Isaac. Isaac felt that the end of his life was near and he was preparing to give his patriarchal blessing to his oldest son Esau. But Rebekah and Jacob connived to steal the blessing for Jacob. Their deception is discovered too late. Jacob had to flee for his life from Esau (Gen. 27:5-19).

But the story of trickery in the family history of the patriarchs in not over. Jacob’s sons apparently have learned the evil art as well. This time Jacob is the victim. He had given his favorite son, Joseph, a special robe and sent him off to check on his older laboring brothers who were watching flocks. The jealous brothers sell him to slave traders, and then convince Jacob that Joseph was killed by a wild animal (Gen. 37:31-35).

But the story of the patriarchs has a better ending. After Joseph has risen to be second in command in Egypt, his brothers come to beg food during yet another famine in Canaan. At first Joseph treats them shrewdly, (Gen. 42:14), but as the story proceeds, Joseph deals honestly and mercifully with his brothers, despite what they had done to him (Gen. 45:4-7).

The point I want us to see is that even in this, the patriarchal family that God chosen as the ancestral family of Israel, the nation through which God would reveal himself to the world, things were not perfect. So even though we may have a great family heritage, it may not be perfect. But that is not the end of the story either. Let’s make some observations together.

# Observations about Abraham’s family legacy and ours

## Both good and bad things were passed down

The first observation that I would like to make is that in the family legacy that we investigated, both the good traits and the not so desirable ones were passed down to the generations that followed. I would add that traits which we intentionally try to pass down may be successfully passed on to the next generation. But in addition, many things are passed on to the next generation unconsciously by example. In this way some things are passed down that we wish were not. If the example agrees with the teaching, that which is passed down is all the stronger. If the example contradicts the teaching, frequently the example is stronger than the teaching.

In the case of the patriarchs, we observed how each generation showed the faith of Abraham. Faith in God was passed down. This was likely quite intentional. Each generation inherited the special promises of blessing from God as well. Yet, there was that nagging bad habit of deceit showing up generation after generation too, apparently passed down unwittingly like a bad cold.

I read about a young father who was headed out on foot for another binge drinking night at the local watering hole. As he was walking in the freshly fallen snow, he looked back and saw his small son stretching his strides, trying to follow in his Dad’s big tracks. The boy saw Dad look back and yelled with a grin, "Daddy, I'm coming in your tracks." The father stopped. Something made him think more deeply about the meaning of what his son had said. And as a result, he changed not just his temporary destination but some other things about his life as well. He realized that his son indeed was going to “follow in his tracks” and he wanted to be more intentional about what kind of example he was giving.

## God did not wait to bless until everything was perfect

There is something encouraging that I observed in this story of the patriarchal line as well. As we read in the Bible, we realize that there are sometimes when the blessings of God are restrained because of sin, because of moral defect. We think of the people of Israel at Ai where they suffered defeat because Achan had hidden some of the forbidden gold in his tent for example (Josh. 7). But in the case of the patriarchs, it is encouraging to know that the promised blessing of God continued upon the family line of Abraham, even though they were not perfect.

Sometimes we are too hard on our self and become convinced that if we are not perfect, God cannot accept us, or will not bless us. This does not line up with Scripture. God blessed the patriarchs despite the deception that was part of their family tree. After appropriate discipline, God continued his blessing upon David despite his egregious sin with Bathsheba. God chose Peter is a leader of his church despite his impetuousness.

All this gives us great hope too. Our lives may be a shambles up to now. Our family heritage may be a mess. But God is not barred from blessing our future just because of our family past, our own sins, or our personality weaknesses. God looks for possibilities. God wants to forgive the past and help us move into our future. So we should not give up in discouragement when we think about the difficulties that we need to overcome, whether they are things from our own past, or from our family history.

When the negative dynamic appeared it interfered with the blessing

But we also do need to take warning from the story of the patriarchs. Whenever the negative and sinful dynamic of deception showed up in their family story, it caused problems. In the first incident between Abraham and Abimelech, the deception caused tension in the relationship between the two. In the case of Rebecca’s and Jacob’s deception of Isaac, Jacob had to flee for his life from his brother Esau. He ended up staying with his uncle Laban, who in turn deceived him, costing him an extra seven years of his life working for Laban. Jacob endured all kinds of grief at the loss of his favorite son Joseph, so he thought, and it caused him to live in fear of the loss of his other son by his wife Rebecca. All these difficulties were brought about by deceptions.

So in our lives, it is no secret that our sins and failings cause difficulty. Just because God does not forsake us, is no excuse to give up on becoming the people that he wants us to be. Just because God does not take away our blessings when we fail, does not mean that we should become lazy and cease to pursue holy living and righteousness as he asks us to do. Paul thought about God’s blessings to us and encouraged just the opposite;

Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God. 2 Cor 7:1

## God was at work to affirm the good and overcome the evil

Another observation I make is that God was at work to change those things that displeased him. God warned Abimelek to leave Sarah alone and Abimelek chastised Abraham for his half-truth. Abimelek also admonished Isaac for his lie about his wife Rebekah. In the case of Jacob, the circumstances of his life repeated showed how deceit causes problems.

God may choose to bless our lives even though there are negative things but he loves us too much to let the negative things go unchallenged. He will work circumstances, interpersonal relationships, work situations, and bring spiritual conviction in order to bring the problems to our attention and encourage us to deal with them.

God’s love for us desires the best for us and obeying God’s commands results in our best life now. It is a principle that,

Wholeness and holiness go together!

God’s work in the story of the patriarchs reaches its finale in Joseph. Joseph pleased God by choosing honesty at last. God who enabled Joseph to conquer the deceitfulness in his heritage will also help you and me to overcome the negatives in our family legacy.

# Practical ways to deal with negative dynamics in a family heritage

So if you are looking at your situation I encourage you to take heart. God is on your side.

Here are some practical suggestions to help.

1. Keep perspective. Be thankful for all the good things. The patriarchs always kept in mind the promises of God to their family. And they were thankful for the present evidences of God’s blessings in the prosperity that he had sent to them. The habit of thanksgiving always helps us to keep perspective. Keeping in mind the many promises of God to us is an even bigger encouragement. Promises like;

God has said,  
“Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.”   
 So we say with confidence,   
“The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. Heb 13:5-6 NIV

How we think is crucial. It largely determines our future.

The greatest detriment to many people’s success tomorrow is their thinking today. If their thinking is limited, so is there potential. But if people can keep growing in their thinking, they will constantly outgrow what they’re doing. And their potential will always be off the charts. (John C Maxwell, Thinking for a Change, p. 12)

1. Once we have a good perspective and can rest in the assurance that God’s presence will help us through, then we feel safe to take the second step. We must step up and acknowledge the issue, the influence, the family habit that is causing difficulty or does not please God. Don’t get angry, frustrated, and play the blame game. Many people do that and it only delays the day of reckoning and keeps them from taking responsibility to do something about it. Awareness of a problem is the beginning of healing. The longer we deny that there is a problem, the more the issue will trouble us.
2. Pray for insights. Apply God’s Word and allow God’s Spirit to help. King David found that when he listened for God’s Spirit, he received helpful insights. He wrote:

I bless the Lord who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me. Ps 16:7 NRSV

One insight we need is to remember that our own perspectives and interpretations change.

The making of meaning (interpretations) is an ongoing process – something you’re creating, perpetuating, modifying, or destroying over time. You are constantly making your own meaning in every situation. (Alive and Aware, by Sherrod Miller, Elam W. Nunnally, and Daniel B. Wackman, p. 62)

As we learn more information about ourselves, about those who have gone before us, and about life in general, we look at things differently. We are people in process. We are people becoming who we will be tomorrow. Remembering that helps us to give ourselves some grace, some benefit of the doubt, to not be so hard on ourselves.

We are making choices about how we will look at things as we go. The issues we are facing today are stepping stones in the process of our becoming.

For everyone who does not reject God’s influence, the Holy Spirit is actively involved in our process of becoming. All the more so if we are intentionally cooperating with God’s intentions and leading in our minds and heart. The Holy Spirit is in the process of transforming our thinking (Rom. 12:2).

You have put off the old self with its habits and have put on the new self. This is the new being which God, its Creator, is constantly renewing in his own image, in order to bring you to a full knowledge of himself. Col 3:9-10 TEV

1. Think creatively. Discover options. Look for solutions. This is just simple problem-solving. But sometimes we don’t thing to apply it to our emotional and relational struggles.

A 1994 Miss USA pageant contestant was asked the following question, “If you could live forever, would you? and why?” This was her answer.

“I would not live forever, because we should not live forever, because if we were supposed to live forever, then we could live forever, but we cannot live forever, which is why I would not live forever.” (illustration in Thinking for a Change p. 97)

Obviously thinking creatively on the spot was not her forte. We face the difficulties of our lives, whether they are today’s problems or whether they are inherited issues, we need to think about options and be able to think creatively.

John C. Maxwell quotes author and creativity expert Ernie Zelinski,

“Creativity is the joy of not knowing it all. The joy of not knowing it all refers to the realization that we seldom if ever have all the answers; we always have the ability to generate more solutions to just about any problem. Being creative is being able to see or imagine a great deal of opportunity to life’s problems. Creativity is having options.” John Maxwell continues, “It almost seems too obvious to say, but if you are always actively seeking new ideas, you will learn. Creativity is teachability. It’s seeing more solutions than problems. And the greater the quantity of thoughts, the greater the chance of learning something new.” (Thinking for a Change, John C Maxwell p. 107, 108)

1. Seek help, support, and counsel. Perhaps there was little opportunity for getting advice in the days of the patriarchs but later in Israel’s kingdom period, the wisest men encouraged seeking counsel.

The way of fools seems right to them, but the wise listen to advice.   
Prov. 12:15 NIV

Where there is strife, there is pride, but wisdom is found   
in those who take advice. Prov. 13:10 NIV

Listen to advice and accept instruction, that you may gain wisdom for the future. Prov. 19:20 NRSV

Sometimes we may need a professional counselor. Sometimes we simply need a friend who will listen. I was reading this week about the role of a true friend.

True friends help us to be humble. They don’t trample on us. They don’t compete with us. They don’t tell us how good they are, thereby compelling us to tell them how good we are. True friends are honest with themselves as they are with us. Thus they help us to find the freedom to be weak. If we are willing to be weak together, then he (Jesus) become strong in us. When two or three are gathered together in his strength, then he is in us. And he is our friend as well as our Lord. (Pressure Points, Don Osgood, p. 94)