

PATRIARCHS: Introduction

Subject: The Patriarchs have a unique place in the story of the Bible.

Main Idea: God is writing a story that will be known and celebrated throughout eternity.

Principles:

1. *Because God is sovereign, He knows all the details of human history and has determined its outcome.*
2. *Every individual has a place in God's story.*

Introduction

Everyone enjoys a good story. A major goal in our *GOD of the WORD* studies is to grasp the complete story of the Bible, from beginning to end. The second part of the book of Genesis, which is our text in this *Patriarchs* study, is one of the best places in the Bible to find a continuous and enjoyable story line, packed with life-lessons! In fact, I am confident you will find it hard to stop reading some parts of the story without continuing to their resolution.

The *Patriarchs* study only gives us part of a much bigger story, but it is an extremely important part. We find the Patriarchs' story in the book of Genesis. The first 11 chapters of Genesis were covered in the previous study, *Beginnings*. Genesis gives us so much critical information necessary for accurately understanding the rest of the Bible, that we have devoted two out of our eight studies from Genesis to Revelation *just* to cover this one book.

In this introduction, we will

- sketch the broader story of the Bible in order to understand where the Patriarchs fit in,
- recall what was covered in Genesis 1-11 leading up to our current study,
- then introduce the Patriarchs before ending with a personal story and application.

We will do so with the goal of seeing that God is writing a story that will be known and celebrated throughout eternity!

I. The Key Elements of the Story: All the key elements of God’s story of human history are revealed to us *now* in the Bible. This is a good time to review a few basics about the Bible and its story.

A. Background to the Bible

i. Authorship

1. In the introduction to our *Beginnings* study, we learned that the Bible has what many scholars call *dual authorship*. Essentially, this means that God and human beings co-authored it. Although its 66 books were written down by many different individuals (at least 40) over hundreds of years (1500, it seems), and although these books reflect the styles of these individuals and were originally written in their own languages, the Holy Spirit of God superintended the writing to ensure the original documents were without error.
2. Moses is credited with writing the first five books of the Bible, jointly called the Pentateuch. Some of the information in these books was revealed to him directly by God. Some may have been found in early records or passed on by oral transmission. But *all* was overseen by God so that what is written is exactly what God wanted written. He protected it from error and inspired all of it.

ii. Trustworthiness

1. Absolute Truth: It is popular today to doubt that any absolute truth exists anywhere. Absolute truth is something that “must be true for all people, at all times, in all places.”¹
 - a. The ironies about disbelief in absolute truth are that, first: to say that there is no absolute truth is, in itself, a claim of absolute truth. Therefore, it is a self-defeating argument.
 - b. And second, no one will actually live with the reality of this claim. For example, no disbeliever in absolute truth who is dying of a bacterial infection is going to refuse to take antibiotics purely on the grounds that there is no certainty that they have ever been effective for anyone, at any time, and in any place!
2. However, if absolute truth exists, then we can begin to make the argument for the existence of a Truth-Giver.
 - a. The Bible claims He is the One God, Yahweh, the Lord,
 - b. and that He has revealed Himself to mankind uniquely and exclusively by means of the written word of God and the incarnate Word of God (Jesus Christ, and by His Spirit). (2 Timothy 3:16, Hebrews 1:1-2, Revelation 22:18-19)
3. (More information about the Bible’s trustworthiness is contained in the Introductory Notes for *Beginnings*: brief summaries about manuscript reliability, scientific and archaeological evidence, etc.)

B. A Unified Narrative

i. Ignorance among Bible students

1. Many people are surprised to discover that the Bible tells one continuous story from beginning to end.
 - a. One reason for this is that Bible teachers sometimes emphasize the truths taught by the parts to the exclusion of instructing on the story as a whole.
 - b. Another reason is that so few people take the time to actually read the Bible from cover to cover.
2. My sincere desire is that the *GOD of the WORD* studies will communicate the way the parts of the story fit together into a whole, while creating sufficient interest in God's Word that each person who participates will want to spend the remainder of their life digging into to the "parts" to glean the many truths contained in them.

ii. The Story Summarized

1. *Genesis 1-11 (Beginnings)*

- a. The opening chapters of the Bible record the primeval history of creation, mankind's fall into sin, a cataclysmic flood sent by God to purge the Earth, and how the nations as we know them today emerged and spread over the Earth.
- b. In essence, we could say they tell us who God is, who we are, and how we came to be in the condition we find ourselves. We learn that "humanity is inadequate without God."ⁱⁱ
- c. However, in these early chapters of the Bible, at the very point at which God reveals the history of the entrance of sin into the world, we also find our first hint that God has a plan to redeem and restore His creation. He promised to do so through the seed (offspring) of the woman (Genesis 3:15). A Deliverer (Messiah) would restore humanity.

2. *Genesis 12-50 (Patriarchs)*

- a. The history in Genesis 1-11 clearly makes the point that the inclination of mankind, because of sin, is toward self-interest not toward God's interests.
- b. Therefore, God chose one man in whom He would work to build faith and through whom He would build a nation that would represent His interests in the world.
- c. Genesis 12-50 introduces Abraham's family and its patriarchs. This family eventually became the nation Israel.

- d. God entered a covenant with this family, guaranteeing very specific promises. These promises included a land of their own (Canaan), many descendants, and blessing (both to them and through them to the rest of the world.)
 - e. At the end of Genesis, we learn that Abraham's family left Canaan and went to reside in Egypt because of a famine.
3. *Exodus – Deuteronomy (Exodus)*
- a. The book of Exodus opens 400 years after the end of Genesis. At that time, the Hebrews (Israelites) had become a sizable group in Egypt. Threatened, the Egyptians forced them into slavery.
 - b. God used Moses, an Israelite with an unusual history, to lead the Israelites out of Egypt.
 - c. Then the Lord gave the fledgling nation civil, moral, and ceremonial laws by which they were to be governed.
 - i. These laws not only protected young Israel, but also were the means by which Israel would learn more about God's character. By obeying these laws, Israel could be God's representatives in the world.
 - ii. All Israel willingly entered a covenant with God: if they obeyed His laws, things would go well for them; but if they did not, they would meet disaster.
 - d. Before the generation of Israelites that came out of Egypt could even reach Canaan, their Promised Land, they had already failed so completely to trust and obey the Lord that God caused them to die in the desert, stating that their children would enter Canaan but they would not.
4. *Joshua – 1 Samuel 15 (Promised Land 1)*
- a. Joshua was Moses' successor. He led that second generation of Israelites in its military campaign in Canaan.
 - b. However, even this generation failed to obey God's command to take possession of *all* of Canaan. Because of this, God allowed Israel to suffer at the hands of raiding nations. But, out of compassion, over a three to four hundred year period, He raised up military leaders within Israel called "Judges" to assist her in that very dark period in her history.
 - c. Eventually preferring to be like the surrounding nations, Israel refused God's exclusive kingship over them and asked for a human dynasty of kings to rule them instead.
5. *1 Samuel 16 – Malachi (Promised Land 2)*
- a. God used the last Judge, Samuel, to anoint the first two kings of Israel: Saul and David.

- b. Israel reached the height of her economic, military, and spiritual prosperity under the leadership of David and his son Solomon. However, under Solomon's less wise son, the nation was divided. The northern tribes maintained the name *Israel* while the southern tribes became known as *Judah*.
 - c. For centuries after that, the northern and southern kingdoms were predominantly unfaithful to God.
 - i. During this time, God sent prophets through whom He issued warnings.
 - ii. Eventually, He followed through on His threat to bring disaster for their disobedience to Him. The Assyrian Empire overthrew Northern Israel and, roughly 150 years later, the Babylonians overthrew Judah.
 - iii. The people of Israel and Judah were forcefully carried off into captivity. While there, God graciously continued to speak to Israel through prophets.
 - d. 70 years later, God moved the heart of the reigning king of the Persian Empire, Cyrus, to allow the captive Israelites to return to their homeland. Some did so. Many did not.
 - i. Those who returned rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem and the Temple.
 - ii. However, they were deeply discouraged. Israel was not what she had been. God's prophets encouraged the people to keep their eyes on God's promises. They reminded the people that God still had a bright future for them. The Deliverer God promised would bring this bright future.
 - iii. The Jews expected political restoration from this Messiah. They believed that their primary problem was being controlled by other nations. But God had a much bigger plan of deliverance in mind. He would send a solution for *the root* of mankind's problem: sin.
6. *Matthew – John (Gospels)*
- a. After 400 years without a living prophet to speak in Israel, John the Baptist was born – the last “Old Testament” prophet. He announced the arrival of the Messiah.
 - b. The four Gospels give the account of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God's promised Deliverer.
 - c. Ironically, Israel, by and large, rejected Him as Messiah! They found Him and His message offensive. They preferred to await one who would not address their heart issues and

merely offer the political restoration they sought. (They are still waiting for such a man.)

- d. Ultimately, they plotted against and murdered Jesus.
 - i. Yet Jesus claimed His death was voluntary – that no one else had the power to take it from Him – only He had the power to lay it down. He also said He had the power to take it up again! (John 10:18)
 - ii. He claimed that He was actually laying down His life for His friends and that He was doing God’s work! (John 14:10, 15:13)
- e. Jesus promised to return one day and take all His followers to be with Him in Heaven forever.
- f. The Gospels end with an account of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead (as He predicted), His return (ascension) to Heaven, and His commission for His followers to make disciples of all nations.

7. *Acts, with the remainder of the New Testament (Acts 1 and Acts 2)*

- a. The book of Acts gives us the history of the earliest followers of Jesus Christ, after He returned to Heaven. In the first century after Jesus’ ascension to Heaven, many eyewitnesses were alive to testify to and record all that happened.
- b. Very early in the book we realize that these eyewitnesses were convinced that Jesus was all He claimed to be. They taught that Jesus’ death was the exclusive means by which we can receive forgiveness of sins, be saved from the death penalty of sin, and restored to a relationship with God. They claimed God’s salvation was available not only to Jews, but to everyone! (Acts 2:36-39, 4:12, 13:36-38)
- c. During this period of time, the Church, founded by Jesus, grew to include Gentile converts, especially under the missionary efforts of the Apostle Paul.
- d. Also, letters of instruction were written by the leaders of the early church to flesh out the teachings of Jesus and their implications. In addition to practical wisdom for everyday living, these letters complete the picture for us of who God is, what His plan is, and what is yet to come. The unique book of Revelation, the final letter of the New Testament, contains such prophecy.
- e. Since the story of the Bible includes the end of human history (as we know it), its storyline actually extends beyond the present.

Summary Statement: While the Bible seems “messy” in that it records a great deal of trouble and human drama, it tells *one continuous, unified story* from beginning to end.

Principle: *Because God is sovereign, He knows all the details of human history and has determined its outcome.*

God is writing a story that will be known and celebrated throughout eternity!

It is very difficult (if not impossible) for us to imagine how we can be responsible for and free to make real choices in life, and at the same time, God can know and determine the outcome of human history.

- The Bible assures us not only of God’s triumph in human history, but also of the triumph of His good purposes in the life of each person who loves Him! Romans 8:28 says, “And we know that *in all things* [emphasis mine] God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose.”
- The Bible ascribes absolute sovereignty to God alone.

Application: Have you come to the point where you count yourself among those who love God? If so, is there anything in your life you are not convinced God can “work for the good”? Do you live with that assurance so that your heart is at peace?

- You should be aware that the very next verse in Romans (8:29) defines what God considers “good” in our lives: that we are conformed to the image of His Son, Jesus Christ.
- What specific area of your life will you ask God for helping in trusting Him to work for “good”?
- As we begin to see God working out His purpose for our lives, we began to see our lives fitting into the grand story that He is writing.

Throughout eternity, we will rejoice over the truth and message of the Bible and the beauty of its story, even our own part in it!

Transition: We have considered some of the key elements told in the story of the Bible. Now let’s consider some of the particulars of God’s story, beginning with a little background to the story of the Patriarchs.

II. The Particulars of the Story

A. Background to the Patriarchs' Story

- i. Four Main Events: As I already briefly mentioned, the opening 11 chapters of Genesis describe four main events: Creation, the Fall (of man into sin), the Flood, and the Dispersion of Nations.
- ii. Limited Influence of the Faithful Few
 1. God created human beings in His image – different from all the rest of His creation. Sadly, early in the storyline, we learn that the first man and woman rebelled against God by disobeying the one restriction God put on them. The result has been that every human being since that time has been born with a sin nature. And because of that, we are hopelessly incapable (by our own effort) of returning to the position of friendship with God for which He created us.
 2. Genealogies are contained within Genesis 1-11 that record, from Adam through Seth, a small number of individuals who were faithful to God. In this list, we find both Enoch and Noah. Chapter 11 links Abram to Seth. Abram was also to become a friend of God. We are encouraged by their stories.
 3. Yet Genesis 1-11 teach us that, once the cycle of sin and death began, even the Flood God sent to cleanse the Earth and His dispersion of the nations at Babel were only temporary fixes. They slowed the destruction of sin but didn't do away with it.
 4. The faithful few still handed down a sin nature. Their influence was quickly smothered by sin's contamination and degradation, even on their own descendants. Man's hopeless condition is emphasized in Genesis 4-11 by:
 - a. Cain's murder of Abel
 - b. the ungodly lineage of Cain
 - c. the subsequent condition described, in which only one God-fearing person remained on the planet (Noah)
 - d. the world's depraved state in Noah's day, such that *he alone* walked with God
 - e. God's resulting decision to cleanse the earth of all mankind, except for Noah's family, by a flood
 - f. the sin of Noah's own son, Ham, after the Flood
 - g. the return of the pattern of godless living, especially propagated by men like Ham's descendant Canaan
 - h. mankind's refusal to obey God's order to fill the earth by insisting on corralling in cities
 - i. the widespread worship of manmade deities, exemplified and encouraged by the building of the tower of Babel

- j. the need for God to disperse the nations forcefully (by confusing languages) as a means of slowing the disintegrating impact of corporate sin on humanity
 - 5. In addition to the Biblical record, archaeologists have discovered ancient Mesopotamian and Egyptian literature that, while affirming the Bible's record with regard to key events, also reveals the rejection of the God of Creation by ancient mankind in favor of a pantheon of far lesser gods.
- iii. Conclusions from Genesis 1-11
 - 1. *Sin held mankind captive to a cycle of spiritual decline*: Genesis 1-11 clearly establish through many years of history that
 - a. *human efforts to fix the problem of sin are inadequate*
 - b. and that, while God had, to that point, *slowed* the infestation of sin by extreme measures, *He had yet to enact His plan to free His creation from sin altogether*.
 - 2. *God was (and is) still in control*: While sin dominates the world in Genesis 3-11, it does not commandeer God's story! Sin cannot usurp God's final authority. He is pictured as the Sovereign Lord over His creation:
 - a. when He dictates the outcome of Adam and Eve's sin to them and to the serpent, promising an ultimate Deliverer,
 - b. when He flushes the world with cleansing floodwaters,
 - c. and when He forcefully causes Earth's human habitants to spread out by confusing their languages.
 - 3. *God's victory plan includes working through the few rather than the many*.
 - a. Beginning with Seth and Noah, we get the idea that God's plan for the world includes working through human individuals – who tend to be in the minority amongst their contemporaries.
 - b. As the story goes on, we will see that no matter how bad the state of things, God always has a small group of people – sometimes a single individual – who remain faithful to Him, who represent His interests, and through whom He works to accomplish His plan.
 - c. Do you see yourself that way? One sole individual called to represent God well in the midst of a corrupt society?
 - d. The Patriarchs lived in Canaan where God was virtually unrecognized. (I say “virtually” because Melchizedek, a Gentile who was a faithful priest of God, was Abraham's contemporary.)

- iv. God's Promise: Into this seemingly desperate situation, Abraham suddenly appears on the pages of Genesis.
 1. You will recall that in Genesis 3:15, God made a promise to eventually crush mankind's enemy by sending a Deliverer. The opening 11 chapters certainly emphasized the need for this!
 2. Through Abraham and his family, God began to work His ultimate and final solution to sin.
- v. Time Frame: Although opinions somewhat vary, Abraham lived around 2000 years before the time of Christ.
 1. The first 11 chapters of Genesis represent prehistoric, un-datable history. The period of the Patriarchs is the first that most scholars feel comfortable attempting to date.
 2. In 1 Kings 6:1, a particular event in a given month in the fourth year of King Solomon's reign is indicated as occurring 480 years after Israel came out of Egypt. Scholars can be fairly certain of the dates of Solomon's reign. From this date, they work backward 480 years to the time of the Exodus, and continue backwards based upon biblical chronology and time frames.
 3. The period of time covered in Genesis 12-50 seems to have occurred between approximately 2091 and 1876 B.C. – a total of around 215 years.

B. The Four Men in the Patriarchal Narrative

i. Joseph's Unique Role

1. The fourth and final character highlighted in Genesis 12-50, Joseph, is a patriarch of Israel in the same sense that all his 11 brothers were patriarchs – each man's descendants became a "tribe" of Israel.
2. Joseph also plays a critical role in the development of the story, the history of Israel, and the fulfillment of God's promises. (I am confident you will love reading his part of the story!)
3. However, he is the only one of the four who is not an ancestor of Jesus Christ (and therefore, is the only one of the three not included in the genealogy of Christ in Matthew 1.)

ii. Men Who Needed Help!

1. Whereas men like Seth, Enoch, and Noah are introduced to us as faithful, obedient God-followers, that is not the case with the Patriarchs. These were men who had a lot to learn, men whom we watch God transform as we read their stories.
 - a. Joshua 24:2-3 explains that the reason God called Abraham away from his family of origin is because they were pagan idolaters. Their family of origin was not one to brag about!

- b. Yet, as we will see, each of the Patriarchs learned to yield to the purpose of God in his life. Each discovered his inadequacy apart from Him. And each became a friend of God.
 2. Beloved pastor and author, Ray Stedman, has pointed out that, despite their many failures (and sometimes *through* their failures) the life of each Patriarch highlights a different aspect of our relationship with God.
 - a. Abraham's life is a portrait of faith.
 - b. Isaac's life is a portrait of sonship.
 - c. Jacob's life portrays sanctification.
 - d. And Joseph's life pictures glorification.ⁱⁱⁱ
- iii. God's Promises in Jeopardy?
 1. Another common thread throughout the Patriarchs' story is what appear as ongoing threats to the fulfillment of God's promises. Again, many of these threats result from the Patriarchs' own failures.
 2. This brings a tension to the story. In a greater sense, this tension is not resolved until Jesus the Messiah is crucified and victoriously resurrected. (Ultimately, it will not be resolved until the end of time when Satan, God's enemy and our enemy, is destroyed. However, that outcome has been assured by Jesus' victory.) But there is some sense of resolution at the end of Genesis, and even more by the time we reach the Book of Joshua.
 3. These threats included:
 - a. The possibility that, first Lot, then Eliezer, then Ishmael, would become Abraham's heir, rather than a son of Sarah.
 - b. The possibility that a son might be born to Sarah that was not Abraham's, when on two occasions she was almost taken into the harem of a foreign king.
 - c. The possibility that Abraham's sacrifice of his son Isaac would jeopardize God's plan and promises.
 - d. The possibility that Abraham might not "acquire a wife for Isaac in a way that would neither lead to assimilation with the people of Canaan nor require Isaac to leave the land."^{iv}
 - e. The possibility that the hostility between Jacob and Esau would result in murder.
 - f. The possibility that Jacob might never return to Canaan when he left to find a wife (he was gone 20 years!)^v

iv. Summary: Patriarchs

1. The part of the Bible in which the Patriarchs' story is told is critical to understanding the means by which God determined to carry out His plan of salvation for all the world.
2. More specifically, this part of the Bible helps us to understand that the giving of specific promises to the Patriarchs *launched God's plan of salvation*. By the end of Genesis, we begin to see these fulfilled in small measure.
3. While the lives of all four Patriarchs revolve around the very same promises of God, in these chapters of Genesis, we find that God's work in each man was distinctive.

C. My Story (and Your Story)

- i. The Story Continues: God is writing a story that will be known and celebrated throughout eternity!
 1. It is easy to forget that the characters of the Bible were real people, just as we are. Although our life stories aren't included in the pages of the Bible, it doesn't mean that our part in the story God is writing of *all* human history won't be known and celebrated throughout eternity.
 2. The particulars of the story of human history are worked out in the *lives of people*: people who are in the Bible *as well as* those who are not.
 - a. (Just to be clear: I am *not* suggesting that our personal experiences can be translated into lessons that have the same authority that we find in all the pages and narratives in the Bible. I *am* affirming that God is still working in human history. (This is the message of the New Testament books of Acts and Revelation. Furthermore, according to John 17:20, while on earth, Jesus prayed for those in the future. Until Jesus returns and all prophecy is fulfilled, we have not arrived at the end of the story of human history.) I *am* affirming that God is still bringing Himself glory through the unique work He accomplishes in and through each believer today.)
 - b. The canon of the Scriptures is complete. That is, there aren't more Biblical "books" or chapters yet to be written or that were excluded. Yet God is still writing the particulars of the story of human history through the lives of individuals today. And, just as His work in the life of each Patriarch was unique, each believer plays a unique role in that story as well.

ii. My Part (... at least to date.)

1. Psalm 107:2 says, “Let the redeemed of the Lord tell their story.” In order to encourage you to consider your own part in the story of human history, the grand story God is writing, I am going to share with you a bit of the story God has written so far with my own. It is *His* story. And it is all to His glory!
2. To the best of my parents’ knowledge, they were both the first among their entire extended families to know the Lord. Through all eternity, I will praise the Lord for calling them out of darkness and giving my siblings and me a heritage of faith. My father went to Bible college, became a pastor, then taught for about ten years on the undergraduate level before going on to spent 23 years teaching Old Testament and archaeology at a seminary. My mother, at home, was transparent in modeling the Christian pilgrimage and her love of the Lord and His word.
3. I don’t remember the time I received Christ as my Savior. My parents tell me I was quite young. I asked to be baptized at age 10. Although I can’t recall all the circumstances of my encounters with God as a child, I clearly remember being moved by Him through sermons, missionary talks, and even while lying alone on my bed at night.
4. As a young adult, I had the privilege of attending a Christian university. I sometimes made poor choices in those days, yet the Lord was faithful to me.
5. After university, the Lord gave me a Christian spouse and, within 11 years, four children. We moved a number of times for employment. Each place we went, we became involved in a local church, and I attended a weekly Bible study.
6. While there is no doubt in my mind that I was a true follower of Jesus Christ through all these years, the Lord worked to grow my love for Him and His word in a much deeper way when I was in my thirties through a particular Christian para-church organization.
 - a. As I grew in my knowledge of the Bible and love for the Lord, during what I now see to have been a special season of preparation in my life, I became convinced the Lord was calling me to a ministry of Bible teaching, a conviction that was affirmed by others.
 - b. For the first time in my life, I began to consider that God was writing a story with my life. I began to see my own personal history in light of this story, even though I had *no idea* exactly how the story would continue to unfold. I only assumed that my passion to teach God’s word was likely to

be part of it. It is difficult to understand my story without realizing how deep my conviction became that God was calling me to a life-long teaching ministry. It became a tremendous burden and passion in my life to discover and follow God's leading in this.

- c. But there were two things that seemed real obstacles to me – obstacles I had to depend on God to overcome. First, I had no reason to feel I was qualified to teach or lead others. Yes, I had some real training. But even this, I knew, barely equipped me to serve the Most High God. I was literally terrified! And second, although my passion to teach was great, the opportunity for me to actually do so rarely came!
 - d. If others had not continued to affirm my calling, some quite adamantly, I would have had serious reason to doubt it, for as it turned out, no clear opportunity to teach regularly presented itself for another 8 years! This opportunity finally came through the venue of the same para-church organization that had already been a vehicle of such personal spiritual growth and encouragement in my life (and with the blessing of my own local church.)
7. Once I started to teach regularly, for the first time, I felt that I was doing *exactly* what God had created me to do. I felt I had found my niche – my place in God's plan. The group of 200 that I taught met mid-weekly and together we experienced God's blessing.
- a. However, even then, while I taught through the venue of that organization, I continued to sense there was something more – something else that God had in mind. At the time, I could only assume this must be related to an even greater teaching role within the organization.
 - b. Because of our growing interest in foreign missions, our family discussed moving overseas. I spoke with the executive director of the organization I taught through about being used by them to teach the Bible in Kosovo, a place we visited and thought God might be calling us to. This must be it, I thought! God had given us passion for overseas ministry and God had given me passion to teach the Bible in some way beyond the class I was in. This move made sense to both of us.

8. But, much to our surprise, this was *not* God’s plan. He was not calling us to move overseas at all, nor was He going to lead me to continue teaching through the venue of that same organization. I had clearly interpreted the passions God put in me but, in retrospect, I realize that I had come to wrong conclusions about exactly how God wanted to use me.
- a. After nearly 20 years in the southwestern United States where God developed such passion in me to teach, we found ourselves, by God’s clear leading, moving *not* to another country, but to the spiritually and physically cold climate of the northeastern U.S. Upon leaving the place and people we had so cherished, and the responsibilities in which God had used me, I came to a crisis point.
 - b. I knew that I was leaving behind a flourishing, well-organized teaching ministry God had given me with no assurance of any such opportunity in the new location. Yet there was no doubt about God’s call.
 - c. I recall a morning when I locked myself away in a room with God’s word and came upon the story in Genesis in which God asked Abraham to sacrifice his only son – the son God had promised him. I was aware that God was asking me to sacrifice something I believed He had given me, something I too had waited a number of years for. He was also asking me to give up my own expectation of the way I thought He would write my story.
 - d. Knowing that Hebrews 11 tells us Abraham obeyed God, believing God could raise Isaac from the dead, I determined I, too, would obey. I concluded that if I conceded to follow God to the new location, He might still raise up an opportunity for me there within the organization that had become so valuable to me spiritually. But I realized that I must also conclude, as Abraham did, that if God preferred to consume the sacrifice I was about to make and permanently removed this ministry opportunity, He could and would raise up “new life” by leading me to serve Him by teaching in another venue.
9. In our new location, I struggled to find God’s place for me to minister, still believing I was to teach. Nevertheless, many family adjustments kept me semi-occupied. Our two youngest children, were teenagers at the time, still living at home.

- a. A year and a half after moving, our older, married son was deployed with his job in the military into a war zone and, while there, his wife became too ill to care for their infant son. She and the baby moved in with us for a time. Eventually, due to personal tragedy in her life and our son's ongoing deployment, we became the sole providers for our tiny grandson. This continued for 2 years. Our grandson was a challenging infant and toddler, to put it mildly. His needs made it difficult for me to leave the home much at all.
 - b. During these first years in our new location, I was tempted at times to believe God had forgotten the passion He had given me for "something more" in the way of teaching.
 - c. Living in a rural community where I knew almost no one, I found myself completely cut off from any opportunity to teach the Bible, except occasionally on a one-on-one basis. I knew doing so was of tremendous value in God's eyes and I contented myself with it. But I could not shake the belief that there was something more.
 - d. The local church we attended asked if I was willing to teach a small group, but the reality was, I could not possibly do so under the circumstances. So I read and memorized Bible passages on my own, prayed, and just waited, wondering (if our son was killed, something that was a real possibility) if I might be raising our grandson for the next 20 years.
 - e. I reminded myself of God's faithfulness. Although I no longer had any idea what He wanted me to do, I still believed He had called me to teach His precious word and that He would show me His plan one step at a time. After all, *He* is the one writing the story. And I knew from the lives of Bible characters, that a season "in the wilderness" was sometimes part of what God included in the particulars of a person's "story."
10. Almost four years after we moved to the new location, our son was released from his service in the military. Now a single father to a son who did not know him, another year went by in which the two of them resided with us. This lessened my responsibilities to my grandson considerably. Additionally, our own youngest children were now mostly grown.

- a. Right at this time, I received a phone call asking me to if I would reconsider teaching a Bible study at our local church. A small window of opportunity seemed to be opening, for I knew before I even hung up that God was telling me this His doing and I should accept.
 - b. Five people showed up at our first meeting. Formerly, I was accustomed to a format of lively dialogue over the portion of the Bible we were studying and I wasn't sure five people (since there would no doubt be some absences) was enough to sustain such discussions week after week. But upon hearing my concern, the few who came, much to my surprise, insisted that they would make this a matter of regular prayer and that God would grow our numbers. By God's grace, He had sent me a small but committed group!
11. The other details of "my story", as God has been writing them in the years since, can be summed up by saying that God has done exceedingly, abundantly more than I could have asked or imagined (Ephesians 3:20). That small gathering blossomed into multiple groups and the development of an 8-semester study from Genesis to Revelation that is currently being translated for use by the house churches of China. I am completely in awe of the story God has been writing with my life. Every step of the way has been completely orchestrated by Him. Each day I continue to be utterly dependent on Him. Because my natural abilities are so limited, He receives my praise each day as I observe Him work through my inadequacies, all to His glory.

Summary Statement: The Patriarchs' story is of four men who inherit God's promises and the unique way God works in each of their lives. But, even with the canon of Scripture complete, God is still working out His grand story in human history and in the lives of His people.

Principle: *Every individual has a place in God's story.*

Application: What kind of a story is God writing with your life?

- Each of us will have some chapters in our life story that are more adventuresome than others. But some of the chapters that seem dull while we are living them may, in hindsight, be the times when we see God was shaping us or working through us in the most important of ways.
- Are you convinced that God only writes wonderful stories in the lives of *other* people, but He can't or won't write such a story with you in it?

- Perhaps the problem is that you just haven't opened your eyes to consider your role in His grand story. Or perhaps you primarily see many "loose ends" in your personal history and can't yet envision how your life could ever become part of a greater story.
- Personally, I am convinced that,
 - just as the characters of the Bible were unable in their lifetimes to see how the story God was writing in *their* lives was part of one greater, continuous, unified story, one day in Heaven, we will see that the story of each of *our* lives, like a portion of a beautiful tapestry that God has woven together, is just one part of a grander story that will be known and celebrated for all eternity.
 - I believe it will bring us untold joy to be made aware of the inter-connectedness of "God's grand story" as we ponder it throughout eternity, and it will give us all the more reason to glorify and praise Him without ending.

Conclusion

Just as God worked uniquely in and through each Patriarch to accomplish His objective, He works in each of our lives in unique ways today.

- As we consider the lives of the Patriarchs in this study,
- as we consider the distinct nature of each man and the unique work of God in each,
- and as we consider how each man's life was really part of a bigger story God was writing,
- will you ask God to give you the vision to see and faith to believe that He is also writing a story with *your life*?

He is writing a story that will be known and celebrated throughout eternity!

ⁱ Geisler, Norman L. and Turek, Frank. (2004). *I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist*, 37. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books.

ⁱⁱ Stedman, Ray C. (2012). *Adventuring Through the Bible*, 55. Grand Rapids, MI: Discovery House Publishers.

ⁱⁱⁱ Stedman, Ray C. (2012). *Adventuring Through the Bible*, 66-67. Grand Rapids, MI: Discovery House Publishers.

^{iv} Hill, Andrew E and Walton, John H. (1991). *A Survey of the Old Testament*, 98. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

^v Hill, Andrew E and Walton, John H. (1991). *A Survey of the Old Testament*, 96-98. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.