SACRED – *simply a chapter read each day*

This the second month of our forty-month journey through the Bible is devoted entirely to Genesis, the opening book of the Old Testament. Once again, each day's reading is accompanied by a page of notes which seek to shed some light on the reading, or use a story to bring out an aspect of its meaning. Remember, though, the notes generally just pick up on one or two matters in the day's chapter – other things may stand out for you as you are reading. If so, that's great, it's how the Holy Spirit catches our attention as we engage with the scriptures.

As ever, my hope is that what is read will be an encouragement to us as we seek to grow in our discipleship.

Days	*Readings*
1 - 30	Genesis 1 to 30

Genesis – an Introduction

Genesis means 'origin.' It explains the beginnings of things. And so the fifty chapters take us from creation through the fall and the flood to the advent of the patriarchs. We meet some of the most memorable characters in the whole Bible: Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Esau and Jacob, and then Jacob's twelve children including Joseph. But above all we meet with God. The one, true, almighty God who is there at the creation of the world yet who yearns for relationship with his creation.

The theologian Walter Brueggemann observes that the book of Genesis is concerned with two things: "Genesis 1-11 concerns the affirmation that God calls the world into being to be his faithful world. Genesis 12-50 concerns the affirmation that God calls a special people to be faithfully his people. Genesis is a reflection upon and witness to these two calls. It is concerned with the *gifts* given in these calls, the *demands* announced in them, and the various *responses* evoked by them."

In reading the stories of these great characters above, then, we are invited to explore with them how we are to relate with this God and with one another. What is God like? What is expected of God's people? What is expected of us?

Several themes will emerge as we read on. There is the overriding theme of God's blessing. He made the world and saw that it was good. He blessed humankind with his grace, making a special covenant with them, a covenant which he would renew with specific individuals despite the flawed nature of their characters.

There is also the theme of judgement. Widespread sin will not sit comfortably with the holiness of God. As we shall see, there are consequences. Nevertheless, God doesn't remain angry for long: where there is judgement, grace will usually follow close behind.

The third theme is the emergence of God's special people and their struggle as they learn how to embrace that role. Sometimes this will come naturally, at other times it will play out through conflict and deceit, and at still other times God will seem to be hidden – yet even then his hand is at work shaping his people to fulfil their calling.

Who wrote Genesis? Traditionally it was thought Moses was the author of all the first five books of the Bible (the Pentateuch). At the end of the 19th century, however, Wellhausen developed the documentary hypothesis. He believed there were four separate sources for the Pentateuch – J, E, P and D - distinguishable by their take on religious practice. For instance, he noted that the early chapters of Genesis sometimes refer to God as God and sometimes as the Lord. Accordingly he separated the 'J' source (which uses 'Yahweh', God) from the 'E' source (which uses the more generic term 'Elohim', Lord, and includes intermediaries such as angels and dreams). The 'P' source denoted the Priestly tradition concerned with more formal rules and regulations for sacrifice and worship. And 'D' refers to the Deuteronomistic source. Wellhausen believed they should be dated around 850 BC for J, 750 for E, 620 for D and 500 for P, the latter being written during the exile. In terms of Genesis, it is argued that about half of it is 'J', a third is 'E' and the remaining sixth is 'P' – notably chapters 1 (a liturgical creation account), 17 (to do with circumcision) and various genealogies. As you can imagine, scholars have continued to debate this long and hard.

One thing any fragmentary hypothesis such as this fails to explain, of course, is why some future editor chose to put the text together in the way we see it now, complete with its idiosyncrasies such as repetitions and possible contradictions.

An alternative is to work from the narrative in the form it has been handed down to us, to enjoy it as storytelling, to learn from the stories spiritually, and to try to apply the principles learned in our own walks with God. This is the approach we shall try to take in the coming 50 days.

The majestic opening chapter of the Bible introduces the two main subjects of Scripture, God and man, and sets the scene for the ongoing story of their relationship. It begins with God. He is the subject of the first sentence which unambiguously asserts, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." The current consensus amongst astrophysicists is that the earth is around 13 billion years old – though opinion on its origins is more divided. And most would probably suggest that the length of time before our world was populated by humans was rather more than six days. But Genesis 1 is not meant to be the stuff of science text-books. Instead it is saying something extremely profound spiritually – that underlying all that is around us is a God who has a loving purpose for his creation. "He saw that it was very good."

The iconic photograph *Earthrise* captures the earth, 250,000 miles away coming up over the surface of the moon. It was shot by Bill Anders on the Apollo 8 mission. His co-astronaut Frank Borman said, "It was the most, beautiful, heart-catching sight of my life, one that sent a torrent of nostalgia, of sheer homesickness, surging through me. It was the only thing in space that had any colour to it. Everything else was either black or white."

As they prepared to return to earth they held a televised press conference at which the astronauts read out the first 10 verses of Genesis 1. This chapter tries to convey this magnificence, beauty and rhythm – the music of God's creation. We see this partly in the refrains: "And God said… and it was so… and God saw that it was good… and there was evening and there was morning (e.g. vv.9-10,13)."

Several alternative creation accounts are found in ancient-near-east (ANE) writings. They usually involve fierce battles between rival gods, the earth's creation being an unintended by-product (e.g. the Babylonian *Enuma Elish* myth). These pagan accounts were well-known. Genesis 1 is a corrective. There aren't many gods but one God; not a terrifying God but a loving one.

The first three and a half verses conclude the account of chapter 1. Creation is complete, and God rests. There then follows what appears to be a second creation account: one of the reasons behind the development of the multiple source hypothesis mentioned in the introduction. However, chapter 2 might also be seen as a progression rather than as an alternative. It offers a more detailed consideration of the origins and destiny of humankind. The narrative adopts a more story form, with God more intimately involved with his creation. Whereas in chapter 1 God called things into being by speaking, here he is a potter (v.7), a gardener (v.8) and a surgeon (v.21). This is a God of personal relationship.

David Runcorn's booklet *The Creation of Adam* offers a series of guided reflections on creation using a photograph of a sculpture at Chartres Cathedral. It shows Adam emerging into life under the creative hands of God. God is unhurried: Adam isn't just another item to be made within a busy day's schedule, but is unique, being deliberately shaped and encouraged into being. The flip-side of this is that creation is costly. God is giving of himself in the act of creation, like a parent, willingly and lovingly, with no guarantee as to how the creation will respond. Poignantly, in the photograph, a cross can be made out behind God's head.

Personal relationship continues to be the theme towards the end of the chapter. "The Lord God said, 'It is not good for man to be alone. I will find a helper suitable for him'." (v.18) The medical detail shouldn't unnecessarily detain us, though Matthew Henry's comment is close to the spirit of the text: the woman was "not made out of his head to top him, not out of his feet to be trampled by him, but out of his side to be equal with him, under his arm to be protected, and near to his heart to be beloved." An ideal for companionship is being established here, an ideal of unity and intimacy. It remains central to a Christian view of marriage today.

The Fall. God had created the world and he saw that it was good. The Garden of Eden, which means 'delight', was like a paradise, and there's the beautiful image of v.8 as "the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day." This was humankind enjoying the most intimate fellowship with God. Yet all that would be lost.

The catalyst was the serpent. Why a serpent? It had often been associated with fertility cults, so its presence here might be symbolising Israel's choice between following the true God or other, false gods. There are parallels too with the Gilgamesh Epic, an ANE story where Gilgamesh discovers a plant that can bring eternal life, but a serpent swallows it thereby thwarting man's ambitions of immortality. It also had significance regarding the Law. Gordon Wenham argues, "according to the classification of animals found in *Leviticus 11* and *Deuteronomy 14*, the snake must count as an archetypal unclean animal. Its swarming, writhing locomotion puts it at the farthest point from those pure animals that can be offered in sacrifice. For any Israelite familiar with the symbolic value of different animals, a creature more likely than a serpent to lead man away from his creator could not be imagined."

The serpent sows the seeds of doubt, Eve succumbs, then Adam, and so disobedience and sin creep into the world. The culture of self-justification follows soon after – as the saying goes, 'Adam blamed Eve, Eve blamed the snake and the snake didn't have a leg to stand on!' God's perfect world has been blemished by the pinnacle of that creation. There are consequences. Judgement is swift and decisive. But did you notice v.21? Look again. Where there is judgement there is also mercy. Now that they are aware of their own nakedness, God clothes them. It's a reminder of their sinfulness but it's also an act of grace, and a hint that despite what's happened, God watches over them still. We should learn from this. When we sin, God doesn't turn his back on us for ever.

Sometimes siblings squabble, especially when they're young. It may be due to perceived unfairness that one has more parental attention than another, it may be due to jealousy of the other's achievements, it may be due to boredom – as any parent taking their children on a long car journey will testify! Whatever the reason, siblings sometimes squabble. Sadly, in many cases this carries on through to adulthood. I have taken several funerals where two of the grown-up relatives no longer communicated with one another. In my own family, I have two much older brothers: one seems to have been my father's favourite, one my mother's – at least according to how our family history is now relayed. It had an adverse legacy lasting many years. In Cain and Abel's case the legacy was permanent.

We are one generation into the story of humankind and already we're dealing with murder. It's not clear why God rejected Cain's offering. The only clue is that while Abel gave "fat portions from some of the first-born of his flock" (v.4) – that is, he gave of the best – Cain merely brought "some" of the fruits of the soil. He acknowledged God, but his worship was not an over-riding priority. Nonetheless, resentment and anger gave way to pre-meditated violence, and Abel's blood "cried out to (God) from the ground" (v.10). This expression founds two key Old Testament ideas: the idea of wrongs 'crying out' to be righted (familiar in the Psalms and prophets), and the idea of the 'life' being in the blood (which would become the hallmark of the sacrificial system).

The sin that infiltrated the Garden of Eden has escalated. It will continue to do so. Notice how sin is personified as "crouching at your door" and "desiring to have you" (v.7). Sin is a reality for us too. We may not be driven to murder like Cain, but anything that drives us farther away from God has a similar effect. But notice once again that where there is judgement, mercy quickly follows. Cain is punished, but is given a mark of protection (v.15). So with us. When we do fall short, there is the possibility of forgiveness.

James Ussher was an Anglican Archbishop and Primate of All Ireland back in the 17th century. Interpreting texts such as today's chapter literally, he calculated that the first act of Creation occurred during the night preceding 23rd October 4,004 BC. At the time it was hailed a breakthrough in biblical understanding, now it seems a little facile. But it does raise the question, what are we to do with these genealogies and numbers? Did people really become parents in their 180s (vv.25,28), and live to 969 (v.27)?

Scholars have come up with several suggestions. The genetic pool was purer in those days, so people lived longer. Or the numbers are not meant to be taken literally, instead they carry astronomical significance. After all, the numbers as presented imply Adam was still alive when Noah's father reached adulthood – something that is not directly mentioned. Or they are an answer to other ANE traditions where kings of Mesopotamia were said to have lived thousands of years. The fact is we simply do not know. Nor can we easily explain apparent contradictions in the genealogical sequences of chapters 4 and 5. We may be over-influenced here, though, by modern notions of family trees. For the Old Testament people of God, the function was to establish continuity between Adam, present at creation, and Noah, present at the flood. Further, in Hebrew genealogies, seven and ten were often significant. Ten generations (as here) represents completeness, while the seventh person in the list usually has special importance. In this case, this is Enoch, who lived 365 years, perhaps indicating a fully rounded life.

Notice the narrative rhythm is broken with Enoch. He didn't die but "God took him away" (v.24), something unexplained in the text. A little girl offered this appealing explanation. Enoch and God were really good friends and would take long walks together every day. One day they were so involved in their conversation, they didn't realize how far they had walked. God noticed how late it was and said, "Enoch, my friend, we've walked too far today. It's too late to go back now. Why don't you just come home with me?" And he did!

Sin has continued to escalate, to the point where "The Lord was grieved that he had made humankind on earth, and his heart was filled with pain" (v.6). His verdict was to wipe them from the face of the earth. But by now, we are beginning to learn something of God's character – and out of judgement there is the possibility of deliverance, this time through Noah. God gives Noah detailed instructions as to what he must do (vv.13-21). Then in verse 22 we read, "Noah did everything just as God commanded him." Imagine the scene. This is the Middle East - it's hot, desert-like, and Noah is told by God to build a boat the length of 1½ soccer pitches to withstand the imminent floodwaters. Would you have obeyed in the same way? Would you have withstood the derision of your neighbours watching your progress with incredulity?

In *Evan Almighty*, a modern film rendition, Evan Baxter is chosen by God to build the ark. He's a congressman. To the media he's the 'weirdo with the beardo.' Watch it if you can, it's very funny.

Remaining faithful to God's leading in apparently discouraging circumstances is very hard, but can lead to extraordinary things. Jackie Pullinger from the age of 20 wanted to be a missionary, but was unable to find support from any missionary organizations. A local minister felt she should buy a ticket on a boat going as far as possible, and then pray for God's guidance where to disembark. This she did, arriving in Hong Kong in 1966. She worked as a primary school teacher in the Kowloon Walled City, home to many criminal Triad gangs, and notorious for drug dealing and prostitution. Before long she devoted herself to full-time Christian ministry there, her work resulting in many, many people being delivered from addiction and given a new hope. Jackie Pullinger tells her story in the book *Chasing the Dragon*. I recommend it.

25 years later my wife, Pam, and I, and our son Tom happened to be in Hong Kong one Sunday. We attended a service at her Hang Fook Camp, witnessing a faith that radiated joy and enthusiasm. Like Noah, her obedience to God's call had far-reaching consequences for many.

The Flood. As with the account of Creation, the Bible is not alone amongst ANE literature in depicting a great deluge that wipes out most of humankind. Best known is probably *The Gilgamesh Epic* from Mesopotamia which has some interesting parallels with Genesis. There are also significant differences. The 'gods' are at the end of their tether with humankind, not because of their sinfulness, but because they had become too numerous and too noisy. The gods vote for a storm but it's not unanimous, and a minority god, Ea, warned one of the humans, Utnapishtim (the hero of the story) about the impending disaster. A large boat was built to precise specifications, boarded and battened up, before the onslaught of a violent storm. (Comparisons will continue in chapter 8, with the boat coming to rest on a mountainside, and the sending out of birds for evidence of signs of life).

The existence of flood accounts from other cultures increases the likelihood that there was indeed some massive, catastrophic event at some point in the distant past. Recent scientific studies seem to support this. An environmental marine research project conducted by Tel Aviv University and EcoOcean has been studying secrets about civilization and climate change from the depths of the sea floor. Professor Andreas Weil comments, "From core samples, we see that a flood broke through the natural barrier separating the Mediterranean Sea and the freshwater Black Sea, bringing with it seashells that only grow in a marine environment. There was no doubt that it was a vast flood: one that covered an expanse four times the size of Israel" (*Science Daily*, 10 September 2007). It is clear too from the gospels that Jesus acknowledged Noah and the flood as a real event in the past (see *Luke 17:26-27*).

And what of God's role in all this? We'll delay answering this till tomorrow when we see what happened next. But notice how three times the passage emphasises that Noah didn't once question God's instructions, but acted obediently (vv. 5,9,16).

The flood waters recede, Noah opens the window in the ark, and he sends out first a raven then a dove to see whether the earth was habitable once more. The third time the dove was sent out, it didn't return, so Noah knew there was sufficient dry land.

Within the story, numbers play an important part and reveal a kind of symmetry. Once the ark is full there are seven days before the rains come (7:10). The storm lasts for forty days (7:12), there is flooding for 150 (8:3), Noah waits a further forty days before sending the raven and dove (8:6), another seven to send the dove a second time (8:10), and seven more before he sends it out for the final time (8:12). We've already come across the number seven, notably in the story of creation when on the seventh day God rested. The number forty is also a favourite of the Bible, appearing nearly one hundred times altogether.

So now that the flood is over what has the whole episode revealed to us of the character of God? First, it hadn't been his plan from the beginning to destroy the world. God had regarded his creation "and it was very good" (1:31). But humankind's wickedness, evil and violence had become too great. Second, we learn of God as judge, with the power to destroy as well as to create. He is not to be taken for granted. There are consequences for our own sinfulness. Third, though, we learn as well of God's love. The sentence was costly for him too: "The Lord was grieved … and his heart was filled with pain" (6:6). This is not like the capricious gods of the Gilgamesh story. And fourth, there is his mercy. As the waters flooded the earth, "God remembered Noah" (8:1). Those in the ark were redeemed and given a new commission (v.17).

Certainly Noah didn't respond to God as a victim who was fearful of some tyrant, but he responded with worship. His first action was to build an altar to God on which he made a sacrifice (v.20).

God blesses Noah and his family and invites them to "be fruitful and increase in number" (v.1), echoing the invitation at creation (1:28). It's a new beginning. God then establishes a covenant with Noah. A covenant is a solid promise made by one party to another which is one-way; not dependent on the other party fulfilling certain conditions (as in a contract). God's promise is not conditional on any action on the part of Noah or his descendants. It's about grace, and it's significant that the word 'covenant' is used around 300 times in the Bible; contract is used only twice.

In common law, a covenant was distinguished from a contract by the presence of a seal. In Genesis 9, God's covenant with Noah is sealed by a sign – a rainbow. *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* comments: "the Hebrew word for rainbow is the same word that is used to refer to the 'bow' as a military weapon. The idea implied by the Genesis passage seems to be that God has taken the weapon that he has used to judge his creatures and hung it in the sky. When humans see a rainbow after a storm, they are to be reassured that 'never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life.' In this passage, then, the rainbow becomes an image of God's mercy and peace after the storms of judgement."

These Noah passages give us encouragement in our own personal journeys of faith. When we are burdened by the knowledge of sin and the fear of judgement, like Noah, we can know that there is the possibility of redemption. When we are overwhelmed by the floodwaters of loss or despair, like Noah, we can know that there is the possibility of blessing and a new start. The words of the hymn *O love that wilt not let me go* capture this well.

O joy that seekest me through pain,
I cannot close my heart to thee:
I trace the rainbow through the rain,
and feel the promise is not vain
that morn shall tearless be.

In chapter 9 God invited Noah and his sons to "be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth" (v.1). Chapter 10 records their response to this. It's structured around the three sons. So Japheth's family tree is described in vv.2-5, Ham's in vv.6-20 and Shem's in vv.21-31. This is in reverse order of seniority, since we know from chapter 6 that Shem was the oldest, but is in keeping with the Jewish tradition of ordering genealogies, not chronologically, but in order of increasing significance in the subsequent unfolding of the story. It is Shem who would be ancestor to Abraham and David, and in due course Jesus.

On one level, chapters such as this are more difficult ones for us to read – simply a list of people, most of whom we do not meet again. They serve an important purpose, however, in linking together different stages of Old Testament history, with numbers once again playing a part. For instance, Japheth has 7 sons and 7 grandchildren, which may or may not be relevant. Of more interest is the fact that the total number of *all* the descendants of Noah's sons mentioned here is 70. 70 is the product of 7 and 10 and so may represent completeness – certainly '70' was often used to denote a large group of descendants.

The list also aims to demonstrate the breadth of their descendants. The blood-line has reached, indeed founded, many nations, some of whom we'll hear much more of, like the Hittites and Jebusites, some of whom we won't. The expansion of God's covenanted people has occurred in just a few generations. This tells us something about the wonder of life, and our part in its ongoing story. In my own family, I am one of four children. There are seven grandchildren and five great-grandchildren (so far) - that's 16 people whose existence is owed to that one union. Shortly before she died my mum was present at the baptism of Michael, one of those great-grandchildren. There's a photograph of her in a chair, holding him in her arms. 'Family' has a lasting legacy.

Every fortnight or so a small team from the local church I was at when I wrote this goes into a primary school with 'Open the Book', a dramatized telling of Bible stories. The stories are taken from the *Lion Storyteller Bible* as adapted by Bob Hartman. This one - 'The Tall Tower' - is a great favourite with all the children, as the builders suddenly start to become confused by the different languages. Here's an extract:
"Hey, you," called the tall man, "pass me some mortar."
"Fortwort?" snorted the short man. "Hort mort a bortle." (which means something like, "What did you say? I can't understand you.") God chuckled. He was enjoying this.

One of the purposes of the story is to warn humankind (including ourselves) about false pride and self-sufficiency. Reaching for the heavens (v.4) is a metaphor for trying to displace God. Nations should take heed. So should individuals. The *Life Application Bible* challenges us to consider what 'towers' we may have built. It comments, "we may build monuments to ourselves (expensive clothes, big house, fancy car, important job) to call attention to our achievements. These may not be wrong in themselves, but when we use them to give us identity and self-worth, they take God's place in our lives. We are free to develop in many areas, but we are not free to think we have replaced God."

The location of the tower, Babel, sounds like the Hebrew word for confused – and from it we get our own word 'babbling'. The story may also carry an advance warning that Babylon would have a part to play in the unfolding story of God's people. That nation would itself be identified in due course with arrogance and godlessness.

The final part of the chapter continues with the genealogy for the Shemites. From Noah, the righteous man who built the ark, we go through the generations until we arrive at Abram, son of Terah. In total, ten generations have passed, once again representing a complete cycle. And it's Abram's story that we will now follow.

Most commentators discern a natural break between chapters 11 and 12. From now on, the emphasis of scripture will move on to God's calling of a special group to be his faithful people. The emphasis of Genesis will be on the lives of the fathers of that faithful people, the patriarchs. It begins with Abram.

The Lord speaks to him, indicating from the outset that Abram has a special relationship with God. And he commands him to "leave your country (and) go to the land I will show you" (v.1). Abram was no stranger to the nomadic way of life. His family had already uprooted from Ur (north-west of the modern city Basrah) to Haran, near the border of Turkey and Syria. This would have been a hazardous journey of nearly 700 miles. Now Abram obeys God's call and travels over 500 miles south to Shechem, Bethel and on to the Negev.

At Shechem, the Lord appeared to Abram, the first of several 'appearances' of God to the patriarchs, though we are not told what form they exactly take. What we *are* told is that Abram responded by building an altar. He did the same at Bethel and "called upon the name of the Lord" (v.8). Abram didn't take his relationship with God for granted – it needed to be cultivated and sustained. There will be places in our lives where we have felt especially close to God – perhaps in a church, or in the midst of beautiful countryside, or anywhere we've sensed God's presence when we called out to him. We may not build altars there (it may not be practical!), but they remain sacred spaces for us.

Having surveyed the length of the land that God has promised his offspring, Abram travels on to Egypt. This episode is paralleled elsewhere in Genesis and it may be an early warning of conflicts with that country: indeed there are some overtones of the Exodus story. But it also serves as a reminder that despite his chosen people acting faithlessly, God's promise will still hold firm. Abram leaves intact and in peace.

A farmer hired a man to work for him. His first task was to paint the barn and the farmer told him it should take three days to complete. But the hired man was finished in one. So the farmer asked him to cut wood, telling him it would take four days. He did it in two. The farmer was amazed, so he showed him a huge mound of potatoes and asked him to arrange them into three piles: potatoes that were good enough to sell, seed potatoes, and scraps for the pigs. The farmer said it was a small job and shouldn't take very long. At the end of the day the farmer came back and found the hired man had barely started. "Why haven't you done what I said?" the farmer asked. The man replied, "Look, I don't mind hard work, but I can't make decisions!"

Abram, Sarai and Lot return to Bethel. They've become wealthy, but disputes have arisen between their herdsmen. Abram presents Lot with a choice (vv.8-9). Brueggemann observes a change in his character: "In contrast to the calculating self-serving of chapter 12 here Abram is magnanimous in the extreme. Whereas his inability to trust the promise had made him fearful in the preceding tale, here his trust of the promise makes him gracious and generous." He offers Lot first choice, and Lot chooses the land in the plain of the Jordan. Did he choose well? At the time the consequences of the decision were viewed in terms of apparent fertility, wealth and prosperity – the grass looked greener. Politically, Lot might have done better to delay deciding until he'd explored the local area: the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah would prove less welcoming than he'd presumed. In terms of family, perhaps he should have deferred to his uncle, or sought an alternative resolution to the conflict that didn't involve separation. And spiritually, going his own way meant going away from Abram, a person visibly blessed by God. The clergyman, H.E. Fosdick, said, "He who chooses the beginning of a road chooses the place it leads to." It rings true for me: some of the choices I've made have not been good. They've caused deep problems. We'll see where Lot's leads in due course.

Having made his choice and gone to live in Sodom, Lot finds himself caught up in civil war. He is captured along with all his possessions. News of his nephew's plight reaches Abram who comes to his rescue. The fact he had 318 trained men in his household (v.14) indicates just how wealthy and powerful Abram had become. God had truly blessed him.

Abram then meets with Bera, king of Sodom, and the mysterious Melchizedek, king of Salem – probably referring to Jerusalem. They react in very different ways. While the latter is generous and gracious, the king of Sodom gives nothing. Instead he issues a grudging demand before he's even heard what Abram has to say: "Give me the people and keep the goods for yourself" (v.21). As with Babylon in chapter 11, it's another early warning that a place will be associated with godlessness in the future.

Returning to Melchizedek, he is described not only as a king, but also as "priest of God Most High" (v.18). He blesses Abram. This dual identity of king and priest has led to Melchizedek being seen as a forerunner of Jesus– not in terms of direct ancestry but in terms of role. This is alluded to in the New Testament letter to the Hebrews (chapter 7). There are further resonances with the "bread and wine" Melchizedek brought out. Was this a kind of eucharist? A covenant meal shared between Abram and the high priest? Or was it merely another aspect of Melchizedek's generosity when bread and water might have satisfied the protocols of hospitality?

Abram responded by giving him "a tenth of everything" (v.20), presumably meaning a tenth of the booty he had plundered from those he had conquered. The subsequent verses imply that Abram didn't benefit personally from the other nine-tenths either, but what is established here is the principle of tithing. It's a challenging principle for us today. How much of our income do we give (back) to God in thanksgiving for the many blessings he bestows on us?

God has called Abram and promised to make him into a great nation and bless him (12:2). Although he has become wealthy, he owns no land and he has no offspring. He reminds God that his only heir will be one of the servants in his household. This reads more like an earnest plea (as in some of the psalms) than a petulant complaint. God, in any case, responds positively. He will bless Abram with both. His descendants will be as numerous as the stars (vv.4-5) and will inherit a vast stretch of land (vv.18-21).

What happens next? "Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness" (v.6). Arguably, this is the key verse of the whole book - repeat it again to yourself. Abram's response is not mere stoic acceptance of an uncertain future – a 'que sera sera, whatever will be will be' kind of philosophy. No, Abram trusts that what God has spoken *will* come to be. It's a response of faith. And this faith is counted as righteousness. We'd normally associate righteousness with obedience to the law, acting morally, that is, with *doing* things. But here it's associated with *believing* things. In a couple of months time we'll see in Romans (chapter 4) how St. Paul uses this episode to build up a doctrine of 'justification by faith' not works.

Faith, though, does not inoculate against adversity: Abram's descendants will, in time, be "enslaved and ill-treated" (v.13). Rather, faith is what brings hope when we're struggling *through* adversity – hope that God will bring restoration once more. Such faith has sustained many people when life was at its bleakest. Consider, for example, the following words found scratched on a German air-raid shelter wall in the Second World War:

I believe in the light, even when the sun doesn't shine.
I believe in love, even when it isn't given.
I believe in God, even when his voice is silent.

May such faith sustain us too when we know times of adversity.

Have you ever had that experience where you've been waiting for something, run out of patience, tried to take matters into your own hands, but ended up worse off than when you began? I remember one day when I was at primary school. The bell had gone for the end of the lunchtime break, it had started to rain and we (class 3a) were locked out of the classroom. This meant having to queue outside getting wet. I then noticed a window was open. I climbed in, on to the teacher's desk and jumped down. Easy! I went over to the door to let the others in, thinking how clever I'd been. The key, however, wasn't on the inside of the door (why would it be?) and so I was stranded when the teacher turned up.
"Moon, you're out of bounds. You're in detention!"
Things got worse. Five minutes later he noticed a muddy footprint on the register. "Moon … !!"

Abram had been promised descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky. Sarai still wasn't pregnant, though, and she wasn't getting any younger! Disappointment coupled with impatience led to a new plan. She suggested Abram sleep with her maidservant, Hagar (v.3), with a view to building a family that way. The first mistake was to lose patience with God's promise. The second was for Abram to agree. When Hagar did conceive, her relationship with her mistress, not surprisingly, began to deteriorate. But God was looking out for her. He sent an angel to comfort and guide her. She returned and bore a son, Ishmael (v.15).

As we read through the accounts of the patriarchs we will see that despite walking so closely with God, they are far from perfect. We have already seen Abram be liberal with the truth (the encounter with Pharaoh in chapter 12); now his 'one flesh' union with Sarai has been flouted. He is a sinner. And there are consequences. Yet, as we shall see, God does not give up on him. He will not break his covenant. All this gives us hope that when *we* fall short of God's standards, he will not give up on *us*.

Abram was 86 years old when Ishmael was born (16:16). Thirteen years have passed since then (v.1), thirteen years of continuing childlessness for Sarai. The Lord now appears once more to Abram to confirm his covenant with him. This time there is a change of name for Abram to Abraham (v.5). In the Old Testament a person's name was seen as very important, as it often expressed something about their character, or the circumstances surrounding their conception, or their likely destiny. Although 'Abram' and 'Abraham' sound similar, there is a subtle difference in their meaning. 'Abram' means 'exalted father'; Abraham means 'father of many'. This new name emphasizes that he will yet have many descendants, beginning with Isaac (v.21) whose birth is foretold. Isaac means 'he laughs', a reference to Abraham's reaction to the news (v.17).

God describes the new sign of his covenant with Abraham – namely circumcision (vv.10-14). Why circumcision? First, by its very nature, it is irreversible. It is therefore analogous with God's covenant – having made it, God will not break it. Second, it is not an action that would have been taken lightly, particularly by the adult males in Abraham's household! As such, it demonstrated obedience and commitment to God. This aspect of circumcision was expanded upon by later writers who spoke of a "circumcision of the heart" (see *Jeremiah 4:4*). That is, such prophets urged the people to turn afresh to God in a new and committed way.

Modern medical research suggests circumcision may also have health benefits. A study by E.J. Schoen, published in the Cancer Journal for Clinicians in 1991, researched 50,000 cases of penile cancer in the USA from 1930 to 1990. 10,000 of these resulted in death, but only 10 of these deaths (0.1%) were in circumcised men. This is in a country where the majority of males (around 80%) are circumcised at birth. So God may have had a third, practical reason for requiring circumcision as a sign of the covenant!

Chapters 18 and 19 revolve around Abraham's three visitors and the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. Who were these visitors? One of them would seem to be the Lord himself, the other two are angels (see 19:1), with all three having the appearance of men. Abraham prepared quite a feast for them: a whole calf and huge quantities of bread (a seah of flour is around 8 litres!). Was this an example of generous hospitality or did he suspect who his visitors might be? After they'd eaten, the Lord prophesied the birth of a son, this time with a specific time frame – within the next 12 months.

As the three got up to leave, the Lord decides to tell Abraham of his intentions towards Sodom and Gomorrah. There then follows this extraordinary passage where six times Abraham intercedes on their behalf. By now Abraham is aware of his visitor's identity – look, for instance, at the language and tone of v.27. We will find several Old Testament prophets interceding on behalf of Israel (Samuel for example), but it is rare to find a man of God interceding on behalf of the Canaanites, as Abraham does here.

A threefold repetition is a common literary device in the Old Testament, so the 'six' times here has extra significance. The passage shows us, first, that God can be approached. Abraham speaks with reverence, but there is a highly conversational air about the exchange. We too may be so bold as to approach the almighty God. Second, God listens. He doesn't simply dismiss Abraham's pleas, but allows him to negotiate. This encourages us to pray, confident that God will listen when we do. And third, God's mercy is revealed once more. In v.26 the Lord says, "If I find 50 righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake." By v.32, for the sake of 10 he will not destroy it. This isn't a matter of arithmetic – 10 righteous people can save all the wicked, but 9 is not enough. Rather, it opens up the possibility that all can be saved by *one* truly righteous person. It points us, therefore, to God's own Son who did just that.

The saga of Sodom and Gomorrah continues. It does not end well for the two cities. We already know from 18:20-21 that the outcry against them is great and their sin grievous. Now we witness a graphic demonstration of how far they had fallen: "all the men from every part of the city – both young and old – surrounded the house" (v.4). Their intention was clear. They wanted to rape these visitors. Gordon Wenham writes: "Homosexual acts between consenting adults, though condemned (later) in the Old Testament as incompatible with the creator's plan, were tolerated in most other societies in the ancient Orient. But homosexual rape was not: in Assyria it attracted the death penalty, and elsewhere it was used as a demeaning punishment for prisoners of war. But Lot's visitors were not prisoners, but guests, and all the rules of oriental hospitality demanded their protection, not abuse."

Extraordinarily, Lot tried to protect his guests by offering the mob his virgin daughters instead (v.8), but it just made them all the more angry, and they threatened to turn on Lot himself (v.9). Without the intervention of the two angels, things could have turned out very badly for Lot and his family. God's judgment on the people of Sodom is as swift as it is devastating. It's a warning to any nation, then and now, about what the possible consequences might be of so openly rejecting God's standards.

And what of Lot's family? His wife became a pillar of salt (v.26) after disobeying a direct command (v.17), his sons-in-law didn't take the threat seriously and stayed behind (v.14) and his two daughters initiated incest (vv.31-38). And Lot himself? He was hospitable and offered his visitors protection, but at the same time he betrayed huge character flaws. He dithered in the face of God's commands (vv.18-20), he tried to give his virgin daughters to the men of Sodom, and he later allowed them to get him drunk and sleep with him. Importantly, he was saved not through his own righteousness but because God remembered Abraham (v.29).

In the late 1990's a student won first prize at the Greater Idaho Falls Science Fair by urging people to sign a petition demanding strict control of the chemical "dihydrogen monoxide." There were seven reasons: (1) it was known to cause excessive sweating, (2) it was a major component in acid rain, (3) it could cause severe burns in its gaseous state, (4) accidental inhalation could kill you, (5) it contributed to erosion, (6) it decreased the effectiveness of car brakes, and (7) it had been found in tumours of terminal cancer patients. 43 of the 50 people he asked said they would support a ban. Six were undecided. Just one realised that the chemical was better known as water!

The fears and worries we have are often based upon "facts" like these. All the facts above were completely accurate: (1) you cannot sweat without water, (2) rain *is* water, (3) steam can burn, (4) you can drown in water, (5) rain washes away soil, (6) sudden braking can cause cars to slide in wet conditions, and (7) water is in *every* cell in our bodies! All the facts were accurate… but they failed to tell the whole story.

Abraham's encounter with Abimelech is an example of this. His fear of being killed caused him to lie about Sarah's true identity. Yet Abimelech turned out to be a godly man, receptive to the presence of God in his dreams (vv.3-7). It is *he* who was both morally upright and generous. Abraham has been chosen by God, but his own choices are questionable. This is surprising given the similar encounter with Pharaoh that occurred previously (12:11-20). Despite all that has happened since, Abraham seems to have learned little. Perhaps, this serves to emphasise the strength of God's promise. Abraham will become a father of many nations through God's grace not his own merits. The chapter ends with God re-opening the wombs of Abimelech's people – a hint that if he has the power to do this for them, Sarah's hopes of a child may yet come to fruition.

The waiting is over, and at last Sarah gives birth to a son. She is overcome with joy: "God has brought me laughter" she says (v.6) and, as instructed by God (17:19), the baby is named Isaac which means 'he laughs' (v.3). After all the years of hope and expectation, doubt and frustration, God's promise is being fulfilled. The story then moves forward in time. In Jewish culture, children were generally breast-fed much longer than would be the case in modern Western societies. A child might not have been weaned until they were three years old. Abraham holds a feast to mark this event (v.8). We should understand that infant mortality in the Old Testament world was quite high, so a child reaching the age of two or three was something worth celebrating. It seems increasingly likely that the promises made to Abraham will indeed be fulfilled through Isaac. However, there is one person present who is rather less impressed with this favoured child.

A little boy had to visit a doctor's surgery for a vaccination. After the nurse gave him the injection, she tried to put a plaster on his arm. "Please could you put it on the other arm instead?" he asked.
"But, why? I'm supposed to cover up the injected part of your arm to let your friends know not to touch it."
"You really don't know anything about my friends, do you?"

Children aren't always very kind to one another. While everyone else was celebrating, the teenage Ishmael was "mocking" (v.9). Sarah wants him banished (along with his mother Hagar) and God endorses this (v.12). It is easy to have some sympathy with him. He wasn't a stranger or an adopted son, but the first-born of Abraham, the man of the covenant. The circumstances of his birth were not his fault, after all. Yet God has compassion too. He will make Ishmael into a nation as well (v.13). And there are clues that Abraham also won't let him go completely. He gives them a skin of water: an old goatskin probably only holding around three gallons. Perhaps, his intention was that they wouldn't stray too far away.

This chapter comes as quite a surprise to the unsuspecting reader. Abraham is commanded by God to sacrifice the son for whom he and Sarah had waited so long. What's going on? How does this fit with God's promise to make Abraham a father of many nations? Yet Abraham doesn't question God or try to negotiate with him as he had concerning the inhabitants of Sodom in chapter 18. Instead he leaves without delay - "early the next morning" (v.3).

I wonder how the individuals felt. Did Abraham *know* that God would provide an alternative? That would demonstrate great faith indeed on his part – and show that he'd come a long way from the deception of chapter 20 and, before that, from taking matters into his own hands by sleeping with Hagar. Clearly, he was very close to his son: the dialogue of verses 7-8 is affectionate in tone – witness the words "father" and "my son" twice.

And Isaac? At the point where he was bound and laid on the altar (v.9) and saw his father taking his knife (v.10), he must have been terrified! These days we'd expect him to need many hours of counselling afterwards! But that would be to miss the point of the story. Abraham *does* act faithfully, and the promise of many descendants is endorsed by the angel of the Lord. God may not call *us* to take quite such drastic actions, but Abraham's faith and obedience is both a challenge to us and an encouragement.

With New Testament eyes, though, we see a deeper meaning. Re-read Abraham's words: "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son" (v.7). He did. Here it was a ram in the thicket that God provided as a substitute for Isaac. Years later the lamb he provided was his own son, Jesus, to die as a substitute for all people on the altar of Calvary, and cleanse them from their sins. How fitting that the location was in the region of Moriah (v.2). We learn in *2 Chronicles 3:1* that Mt. Moriah was where Solomon began to build the great temple of the Lord. So the scene here is very close to the actual place where Jesus was crucified.

Sarah has seen the son of her old age reach manhood, and now she dies (v.2). In the next part of the story it will be Isaac who takes centre-stage. Abraham is left to negotiate the purchase of some land as a suitable burial site for his wife.

Negotiation skills have never been my strong point. When I was 22 years old I bought my first car. I'd decided I wanted a black mini with tinted windows, though the reason for this now escapes me. I managed to track one down at a garage somewhere in Wolverhampton. £1,899 with a £500 trade-in allowance. I then made three key mistakes in my negotiation technique. I spoke to the guy on the forecourt. "Hello. You've got a black mini. I've been searching everywhere for one, it's just what I want." That was the first mistake – never declare your hand too early. Having looked at the car, we then got around to price. "I don't have a trade-in so shall we just knock-off the £500?" "No. That's not how it works," he replied. My second mistake was not walking away there and then. Eventually, we settled on £1,800 (!) with a 12-month warranty thrown in. And the third mistake? Buying the car at all! It simply wasn't in very good condition and, no, the warranty didn't help!

The negotiation in this chapter is much more carefully measured, like a ritual being played out. Sometimes we can make the mistake of attaching too much earnestness to the characters in biblical narratives. Here we should just enjoy the exchange between two wily operators, Ephron the Hittite and Abraham. The former probably has no intention of giving the land away; the latter will not pay over the odds. And so, with "my lord" and "listen to me" as repeated refrains, a deal is struck that satisfies both parties. Why is it included here at all? God is not mentioned at all, nor is there evidence of divine guidance. Brueggemann hesitantly suggests "it is possible that securing the grave with a clear legal title is a symbolic but concrete guarantee of possession of the whole land." I suspect this is the best we can do.

Abraham is well aware of the promise that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars in the sky (15:5). To get there, his son Isaac will need a wife. But who can be trusted with so weighty a responsibility? The passage sets the precedent that the favoured people of God should not intermarry with the Canaanites. Later on, the prophets will echo the warnings against marrying non-Israelites, even though there are notable exceptions. And in the New Testament, Paul advises, "do not be yoked together with non-believers" (*2 Corinthians 6:14*), mindful of the compromises that can occur where a Christian marries a non-Christian. Here Abraham charges his servant with finding a wife for Isaac from among his own kin (vv.3-4).

There is much to enjoy in the story. It is concerned with ongoing fulfillment of divine promises, yet there is an earthiness in the detail. The servant seems to savor eyeing up this beautiful woman and assessing her family's wealth - there's room to stay the night, space for the camels and fodder provided. Laban too becomes more hospitable once he notices the gold nose ring and bracelets. And so the 'deal' is struck, and Rebekah becomes Isaac's wife.

The story also has a highly spiritual dimension. "The Lord" is explicitly mentioned 19 times in the chapter, emphasizing how the affairs of men are controlled by the hand of God. He is part of the vocabulary used by Abraham, the servant, Laban and Bethuel. There is an expectation that God will act. Note that Abraham's servant prays as soon as he arrives at the well (vv.12-14), and he gives thanks afterwards (vv.26-27).

How do we act when confronted with the big decisions of life? Do we call on God deliberately to seek his guidance, or do we offer up a prayer as a last resort? If we really believe he loves us, then we should expect him to be interested in how our lives are shaped. And afterwards, like the servant here, we should remember to give him thanks.

The chapter begins with the death of Abraham. Taking the figures literally, his dying when 175 years old (v.7) implies this is not a chronological account. Isaac had been born when his father was 100 years old (21:5) and himself became a father at 60 (v.26), so Abraham had 15 years as a grandparent, even though the account of the birth of his grandchildren comes after the account of his death. However, as we have already seen the Old Testament writers often tended to complete various details of one person or family line, thereby leaving the way clear to discuss the continuing story via its new main characters. Here it is a signal that the narrative will now be taken up with Esau and Jacob.

Their conflict begins in their mother's womb. The NIV translation says "the babies *jostled* each other within her" (v.22), but this is to understate the violence of their struggle. The Hebrew word actually means to 'smash' or 'crush.' It is used in *Psalm 74:14* to describe a monster's head being smashed, and so suggests here the start of a bitter rivalry. Rebekah is bewildered, and receives words of prophecy from God: "two nations are in your womb … and the older will serve the younger" (v.23).

The twins' rivalry continues at birth. Esau (meaning 'red') is born first, closely followed by his brother who is grasping Esau's heel. He is named Jacob (meaning 'he grasps the heel', and figuratively 'he deceives'), itself a prophetic warning that Jacob will go to any lengths to catch up with his brother. The two grow up, each the favourite of one parent, and their rivalry surfaces once more. Birthright was very important in Jewish culture. To be the first-born son was to have a specially privileged position in the family, like in our own traditions where the first-born son often inherited the estate (the second joined the armed forces, and the third the church!). Here, Esau is famished, and Jacob gives him some stew in exchange for the birthright. Neither comes out of it well. Jacob is mean-hearted, cold and calculating. Esau despises things that are very important. It will not be the last we hear of it.

I was once due to take the funeral service for a lady in her eighties who had died. I visited the family in Otley prior to the funeral to discuss the service and to listen to them talking about her life. She had not enjoyed any great wealth, she'd not travelled beyond the shores of Britain, and she'd had sporadic employment helping out in shops. "She was just an ordinary lady," the daughter said, "She never really did anything very special in her life!"

And yet there I was in what had been her living room, surrounded by her children, grandchildren, and even great-grandchildren, several on the brink of tears, as they grieved for this person who'd meant such a great deal to them. Her life may have been unremarkable in terms of grand headlines, but she and her husband had loved much and been much loved in return.

How about Isaac? Given that he is hailed as one of the patriarchs of the Jewish faith, we know very little about his life. There are the stories of his birth and his close shave as a sacrificial lamb, but these are really stories about Abraham: the events happen to Isaac rather than being shaped by him. Tomorrow we'll read the story of his death-bed blessing, but again this is as much a story about his sons as Isaac himself. He was even a bystander when his marriage was arranged – it was Abraham's servant who acted as go-between. So what was Isaac like? It is only in this chapter that we see episodes from his life where he was centre-stage.

He too has an altercation with Abimelech where he lies about the true identity of his wife. He shows great patience regarding the quarrelling over wells, willing to move on rather than engage in costly conflict (vv.18-23). And most importantly, God is content to renew his covenant with him, to which Isaac responds with an act of worship (v.25). Yet, elsewhere he is spiritually lazy – he doesn't intercede in Esau's choice of, or number of, wives. In common with his father (and sons), then, the evidence is mixed.

Another master-piece of storytelling. We'll consider each of the four characters involved in turn. First, Isaac. He is old and virtually blind (v.1). The fact he was fooled by Jacob wearing a goatskin (v.23) suggests his sense of touch was also impaired. And once again he appears spiritually compromised: on this momentous occasion he is about to give his blessing, yet he is distracted by the needs of his stomach. His desire for tasty food provides the opportunity for deception. When he discovered the truth, Isaac "trembled violently" (v.33), but the blessing has a life of its own. Once given it can't be rescinded. The covenant will pass to Jacob.

Rebekah. She had seemed the perfect wife: beautiful, helpful and willing to leave home under God's guidance. Now she seems manipulative and deceitful, openly defiant at the prospect of being cursed (v.13). Yet before we rush to condemn her, we need to remember the prophecy she received as the babies jostled in her womb – "the older will serve the younger" (25:23). Perhaps she saw it as her role to engineer events so the prophecy would be fulfilled.

Esau had earlier despised his birthright – letting his appetite get in the way of things of more lasting importance, as his father did. He had married against custom, not one but two Hittite women, who were a source of grief to his parents. Now his birthright was lost through foul-play rather than neglect, but history would judge him harshly. He warrants just three mentions in the New Testament (Jacob has 25), two of which are far from complementary! Paul, quoting Malachi, notes that God says "Jacob I loved but Esau I hated" (*Romans 9:13*), while in Hebrews, Esau is described as "godless" (12:16). For all that, though, Esau is devastated by the turn of events; it's hard not to feel some sympathy for him.

And Jacob, actively involved in the deception. The ends justifying the means is not a general Biblical principle. Nonetheless, it is he who receives the blessing. And it's his story the narrative now follows.

Jacob flees from the scene, partly in response to his mother's concerns about his safety given Esau's threats, partly in response to his father's command to find a wife from amongst his own kin. Meanwhile, Esau marries another Canaanite woman to register his anger at his father. Notice, it is Isaac he wishes to provoke, not Rebekah, even though it was she who instigated the deception. He seems to blank her out altogether.

On his way to Haran, Jacob stopped for the night. As he slept he dreamt of a stairway from heaven to earth, on which angels were ascending and descending. Above the stairway was God himself affirming the covenant he had made with Abraham and Isaac. It would now apply to Jacob too. The dream marks a key stage in Jacob's journey. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the previous episode, God is choosing Jacob – all peoples of the earth would be blessed through him and his offspring (v.14). And God promises to watch over him wherever he goes (v.15). Jacob need fear his brother no longer.

Jacob's reaction is to take the stone he had used as a pillow and erect it as a pillar, naming that place Bethel which means 'house of God' (vv.18-19). This is more than just a stone to mark the place where God had appeared to Jacob in a dream. In Jacob's eyes God is somehow present in the pillar and he consecrates it by pouring oil over it. Such action borders on idolatory: it would be prohibited by the second of the Ten Commandments. But before we pass judgement on Jacob for this, we should understand that the religious practice of the patriarchs predates the giving of the Law. Theirs was an embryonic spirituality, exploring how to respond to this living God who promised to bless them. In the beginning the relationship between God and humankind had been so simple – he walked in the garden in the cool of the day (*Genesis 3:8*). Now his appearances were more sporadic – they needed to be marked in some way as reminders of his presence for the future. The patriarchs realised that their relationship with God was the most important thing to sustain them. It is still true today.

Have you heard of Victor Lustig? He was the Bohemian con-man who managed to sell the Eiffel Tower for a quarter of a million francs. The Tower had been built for the *Exposition Universelle* - the World Fair held in Paris in 1889. Lustig's idea came to him when reading a newspaper article in 1925 decrying the cost of painting and maintaining the tower. Claiming to be a senior government official, he told a group of carefully selected targets that the city intended to sell the Eiffel Tower for scrap, but that the deal was to be kept secret until its completion to avoid any public outcry. One dealer, Andre Poisson, looking for a way to enhance his reputation in the Parisian business community, agreed to the sale and paid up. Lustig escaped with the money, while Poisson was too humiliated to complain to the police. We are left to wonder how anyone could have been so duped!

In today's Bible passage, we are left to wonder how Jacob could have been so duped by his uncle. At the same time we might be forgiven for feeling he had it coming to him anyway! Jacob arrives in Paddan-Aram, criticises the local shepherds for being lazy (v.7), sees Rachel (v.9), and promptly moves the stone away from the well single-handed in a show of virility (v.10). He then kisses her (v.11). Jacob is not slow in coming forward. It is all rather different from when Abraham's servant came looking for a wife for Isaac. Note that, unlike then, God is not granted one mention in the first 30 verses, by which time over 7 years have passed and Jacob has two wives.

There are no clues in the story as to how Jacob did get duped. He was in fine physical health, unlike his father whose blindness contributed to his being deceived. Rachel was "lovely in form and beautiful" (v.17), Leah was not. Jacob was in love with Rachel (v.18) – presumably there was a chemistry between them. Yet duped he was. Laban's words in v.26 will have had a deep resonance for Jacob regarding the right relationship between the older and younger offspring in a family. Even so, conflicts and rivalries will still surface, as we'll see.

When Henry Ford and his wife celebrated their golden wedding anniversary, he was asked what the secret was of marital bliss and harmony. He replied, "It's just the same as in the automobile business: stick to one model."

Following Laban's trickery, that option wasn't left open to Jacob, and not surprisingly there were problems. Leah was unloved, but the Lord opened her womb and she gave birth to Reuben, a name that sounds like the Hebrew for 'he has seen my misery'. She hoped that Jacob would now love her (29:32), probably in vain. It didn't stop him sleeping with her, though, and three more children followed – Simeon, Levi and Judah. Meanwhile, Rachel "became jealous of her sister" (v.1). She had Jacob's love, but no children. Her desire to build a family led her to offer Jacob her maidservant, Bilhah. He accepted and two more sons followed. Then it was Leah's turn to do the same through her maidservant Zilpah with a similar outcome. The dialogue in the mandrakes episode (vv.14-15) shows that the sisters' antagonism continued unabated. Leah then produced two more sons as well as Dinah, Jacob's only daughter. Finally, Rachel herself has a son, Joseph.

What are we to make of it all? Primarily, we need to see it in the context of the promise that God had made to Abraham and Isaac, and renewed with Jacob. He would make them into a nation with numerous descendants. This had seemed somewhat precarious given Isaac had effectively been an only child (of the promise) while his own two children had fought so bitterly. Now through all the arguments and deceptions and rivalries, God's promise was starting to be fulfilled. Walter Brueggemann notes: "The narrative is a delicate balance. On the one hand, there are mandrakes and handmaidens and names of children which suggest the powers of fertility. There is a suggestion that births can be wrought by careful planning. But at the same time, there is the overriding theological affirmation: God is the only cause of new life."

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Unless otherwise specified, all Bible quotations used in these notes are taken from the New International Version, 1979.