

INTRODUCTION

Just be with Me... the gentle whisper of my Savior breathed across my heart as I berated myself for failing Him yet again. *What?* That a holy, awesome God would still want to even speak to me after time and time again of faithlessness. But it came again, *just be with ME*. That experience settled deep in my heart as I came to know the compassionate God I was serving so much more intimately in that quiet moment.

He wants *you*, friend. God's entire plan for humanity is to be in unbroken relationship with you and me. In these pages we discover a faithful God, holding out to us His steadfast love. In a world that seems to constantly be swirling from one extreme to another, we can hold firm in our great I Am who is the same today as He was in Genesis.

We begin our journey of discovery with an ordinary man named Abraham who decided to trust God and step out in faith into his destiny. Within this story we too receive this faithful covenant of God – that he will bring redemption to all humankind through Abraham's offspring. Even through Abraham's doubting and trying to work things out his own way, God held onto His promise.

We see this covenant at work through the trials, joys, and sorrows of Abraham's descendants as well: Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. Time and time again, despite doubt, deception, and arrogance; despite conniving and bitterness, God shows himself faithful to His covenant promise. Can we not believe that He would continue to be faithful to His covenant to bring the promised Messiah to reconcile all men to Himself?

In the Gospel of Mark, we see the fulfillment of this promise to Abraham. We are introduced to the Son of Man, the God-made-man who left the glory of heaven to act on our behalf – to make a way for flawed and failing human beings to be made right with a holy God.

Finally, we backtrack to Isaiah's prophecies and see Israel, God's beloved, has broken the covenant and become faithless. We see the heart-rending call of God intertwined with warnings of judgments to persuade God's people to return to Him. Our final note in Isaiah rests in God's promise that even though Israel has not been faithful, God remains faithful still. God would uphold His promise to send a deliverer, to restore a right relationship between Himself and humanity and to bless the whole world through this seed, through the advent of the Son of Man. Here too we receive the promise of things yet to come – eternity with Christ our Savior.

Dear friend, perhaps you have been faithless, perhaps you have given up or doubted or questioned God. He has not given up on you. Take these next few weeks and this blessed Advent season to seek out this God who devotedly loves you as you spend time in His Word. Rest in His faithfulness and know that You are loved by a God whose promise still stands.

SCRIPTURE UNION'S BIBLE READING METHOD

- PRAY** that God would speak to you from the Bible passage.
- READ** the Bible passage slowly and thoughtfully, perhaps more than once.
- REFLECT** on what you've read.
- APPLY** what you learn from the Bible to the situations in your life.
- PRAY** again, using your discoveries from the Bible to guide your prayers.

GOD'S BIG PICTURE

Genesis is a book of beginnings which extends beyond the creation story to the beginnings of God's revelation of His big plans for humanity. He will not remain remote from the people He has made but will come to visit them. He will not issue law from on high without establishing a relationship in which His law can be explored.

He will not show himself in splendid form only to disappear but will bind himself by a special kind of promise to be the God of the people in the ordinary events of their lives.

This series focuses mainly on Abram and his wife Sarai, whom God called to settle in the land of Canaan. On this adventure of faith, they make great strides – and some colossal mistakes. They try to second guess what God's plans are (never a wise thing to do), and sometimes seek to improve on God's way of doing things (always foolish!). This elderly couple receives the unlikely promise of a son, Isaac, and God proves Himself faithful.

We will also read of Lot and his family. Abraham's nephew was a troubled soul who couldn't settle. Even as he lived life on the edge of obedience to God's way, God remained faithful to him, as He is to us.

WHO DO WE THINK WE ARE?

In the popular television series *Who Do You Think You Are?*, celebrities explore their family tree, discovering a relative who ended up in the workhouse, an exponent of women's rights in Bengal, or even a royal ancestor. It's a journey of discovery.

Occasionally we discover something more about ourselves or our family. Perhaps something happens that reinterprets our past. Maybe we enter a new phase of life which shifts how we see ourselves – becoming a parent, receiving a cancer diagnosis, changing jobs, moving our home, retirement, bereavement. Often these changes are beyond our control and unwanted. They change who we think we are and how we describe ourselves to others.

Earlier in Genesis, God promised Abraham he'd be the father of a great nation and would be blessed. He set out on a journey to an undisclosed destination. He took on new responsibilities, made decisions with unexpected consequences, took risks, and made mistakes. But along the way, with his wife and son, he was on a different sort of journey, a journey of faith to discover what it meant to be in an everlasting covenant with the 'Sovereign Lord'.

As Christians, we too are on a journey. Our faith is tested. We're called to trust God when circumstances change, when faced with uncertainty – or even a sense of God's absence? As you journey with Abraham and his descendants, may you discover more about your journey of faith in a trustworthy God, a journey that shapes and shifts who we think we are.

HAPPY FAMILY? FAITHFUL GOD!

At first glance, the stories recorded in Genesis chapters 28–35 seem very remote from life in (semi-) civilized societies in the twenty-first century.

After all, in Western cultures, especially within the church, we don't have much experience of 'buying' brides, bigamy, sexual abuse of slaves, idols, or superstitions surrounding the breeding of certain types of flocks. However, when we delve a little deeper, we see the jealousies, rivalries, heartbreaks, manipulation, deviousness and breakdown of relationships that are all too familiar. Which one of us has not experienced at least some pain in our closest relationships?

We are used to considering our relationship with God in very individualistic terms, but here we see God at work through a family, even though many of the individual members of that family might not have a personal relationship with God. We see God revealing Himself and working His purposes out through all the arguments, backstabbing, and self-serving actions.

Spending time considering this family from ancient times gives me hope for my own family and community. Human nature hasn't changed throughout the millennia, but fortunately, neither has God! Thousands of years ago, He promised Jacob, 'I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go...' (Genesis 28:15). And He still promises that to us today!

Over the next two weeks, we will look at some of the different characters within this story and see how they cope with the hand they are dealt, and how they react to what they learn about God.

JOURNEY OF A LIFETIME

As I write, two of the three best-selling books are autobiographies. Life stories fascinate us, especially when they offer insights into someone's personal life in the context of significant world events. The story of Joseph provides this dual perspective. His flaws and virtues, private struggles, complex emotional life and challenging family relationships are all explored. At the same time, his life intersects with momentous public events of international significance. The story is full of dramatic tension, ups and downs, failures and successes. No wonder it has inspired musicals, plays, and films.

In these chapters Joseph travels from Canaan to Egypt, from prison to high office. But he also travels a bigger personal journey from naivety to maturity, from self-centeredness to wisdom, from betrayal to reconciliation. This is no straightforward biography: it is also the story of a nation. Like Joseph, Israel was often seen by the larger neighboring powers as a pretentious upstart with ideas above its station. The challenge for Israel was to learn to live wisely in the context of an alien culture so that it could fulfill its unique divine destiny.

This life story gives us hope. Our lives, too, can be journeys into personal growth and usefulness in the service of God and society. We may not always be able to see God's hand outworking His purposes in and around us, but these chapters offer wisdom for us to implement in our own lives. If we do so, we will be more at the disposal of God as He writes His big story.

THE JOURNEY BEGINS

A popular genre of film is the 'road movie'. Mark's Gospel reminds me of this style - Jesus and His disciples are always on the move. Relationships develop, new people enter and leave the story as they make their way around Galilee and toward Jerusalem. More than the other Gospel writers, Mark keeps the action moving: 41 times he uses the Greek word *eutheos*, translated as 'immediately', 'at once', or 'straight away'.

As Jesus travels on, we learn more about Him through His interactions with others. As they realize who He is, some people choose to follow Him. Mark seems to be inviting his readers to make up their own minds about who Jesus is, and to decide if they will follow Him.

Over the next two weeks, we look at the beginning of the Gospel - Jesus is introduced as the promised Messiah and announces the arrival of God's kingdom. Something new is happening. Jesus challenges ideas about what God requires of people. As we see God at work through Jesus, we hear His radical teaching about repentance, forgiveness, and relationship with God. Mark invites us to wonder and respond.

Ronald Kernaghan writes: 'The Gospel of Mark is not the unsophisticated story it is sometimes mistaken to be. Its message is complex and nuanced. It addresses the deepest human needs and beckons us to follow a little bit further along.'

*Ronald J Kernaghan, *Mark*, IVP, 2007, p38

CHANGING THE WORLD

Want to change the world? Me too. And I guess Jesus' impetuous disciple Peter might have signed up for that, as well.

Mark's Gospel – the earliest of the four – may well have been written by John Mark, one of Jesus' followers. He became Peter's assistant in Rome.

With much of the narrative sounding like a first-hand account, perhaps Peter shared stories of his time with Jesus, and John Mark wrote them down.

Who knows? Maybe the fact that the word 'immediately' occurs so much in Mark reflects the way Peter was and how he told the story. Just a thought. He was an 'immediate' kind of guy, responding quickly and decisively, even though his hasty actions sometimes meant things went awry later.

In chapters 3 to 6 of Mark, we see Jesus as a kind of action man – here, there and everywhere, teaching and healing, though there's much more healing than teaching. But Mark also shows Jesus to be our 'action God', as heaven – or God's kingdom – breaks in on earth, and people's lives and understandings are changed beyond all recognition. Ultimately, of course, Jesus' death and resurrection change everything forever.

So, as we breathlessly chase after Jesus around the countryside of these four chapters, how can we join Him in changing the world? By letting Jesus surprise us all over again in these well-known stories and by allowing them to impact our own relationship with Him. That's where the changing of the whole world must begin.

NOT ANY OLD GOD

It is still not the case that most people are atheists. A YouGov poll* of the general population found that ‘there is a tendency to believe in the friendlier parts of faith’: angels, the afterlife and so on. I confess that I rather prefer those bits myself. Unfortunately, ‘spirituality-lite’ views of the supernatural tend always to overlook the realities of human nature. They also ignore most of what we can discover about God.

The writings of Isaiah take us directly into the company of the real, eternal Lord of all. He is neither vague, nor easy-going, nor an optional, pick ‘n’ mix aspect of life. His presence is intensely and shockingly real.

At times in these passages, we find Him frustrated, weary, angry, judgmental (as only He is entitled to be), politically engaged, and uncompromising about human wickedness. He exercises terrifying power.

Isaiah also reveals our God as splendid, majestic, and utterly righteous.

On the face of it, this supernatural being is intolerable. To expose feeble human beings to such a one would seem cruel, even if well deserved.

Yet there is more here. Though written in the centuries BC, Isaiah truly is a Christian book. God is great. God is good. Yes, but let’s get to the point. God is also Jesus: merciful, compassionate, longing to redeem us for Himself.

Religious ideas come and go. Deep in Isaiah, the truest and most precious One of all is to be found. He is forevermore.

*YouGov report 2016/03/26 o-we-of-little-faith

LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

How are you feeling as we approach the end of the year? Excited or exhausted? Overwhelmed and underprepared?

Bubbling with joy or barely hanging on?

These chapters of Isaiah contain expressions of God's deepest anger with His people and some of His most dire prophecies. Things were going to get very bad for them, in consequence of their disobedience and lack of faith. And yet, even while foretelling His people's destruction, God gave them a message of hope. In the midst of the darkness, a light would shine.

Nowadays, our Christmas celebrations start early in December (if not before), but traditionally Advent was a season of preparation, of waiting in the darkness for the promise that seemed so long in coming. The candles lit on Advent wreaths on each of the four Sundays before Christmas are points of light, reminding us of the hope, faith, joy, and peace we have in Jesus. Similarly, there are points of light throughout these chapters, reminding us of the hope, joy and peace that Jesus will bring about for those who stand firm in their faith.

As we draw to the end of another year, let us listen to God's Word to His people, heed the warnings for those who put their faith in false gods, and trust Him for the ultimate fulfillment of His promises through this ancient prophet.