

# **God's Big Story: God Builds a Nation**

## **Genesis 37-50**

**A sermon preached by Dr. Calvin Warpula at the West  
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The Bible tells us God's big story. God's story is big because God is the author and planner of it and anything God does is big, really big. God's story begins in creation in Genesis chapter one verse one and continues through to the end of the Bible, 66 books 1,089 chapters and 775,000 words later in the last verse of Revelation, chapter 22, verse 21. God's story involves all of humanity as God creates us all, loves us all, and sends a savior for us all. God wants all people everywhere to be saved. His love and salvation are not parochial or prejudicial but world-wide and universal. In 1900 B. C., God begins to work out the details of his big plan with Abraham in Genesis chapter 12 when he gives that one man a seven-fold blessing that promises "in your seed (or offspring) all the nations of the world will be blessed." God begins with a 75-year-old man and his 65-year-old wife to make promises of a coming savior that will bless all peoples everywhere. After 25 years of waiting and watching, God fulfills his promise to this aged couple, now 100 and 90 years old, when little Isaac is born. Abraham's story is told in 13 chapters of the book of Genesis. He is best known for his great faith in God. Even when he was 99 years old and his wife 89, Abraham believed against hope and were able by God's power to father a child through his barren and infertile wife, Sarah. Abraham's faith is encapsulated in Gen. 15:6 where the Bible says, "Abraham believed God and it was credited to him for righteousness."

Though Abraham also had times of doubt and distrust, the main feature of his life is his faith in God, so much so that the New Testament calls him "the friend of God" and "the father of the faithful." Abraham was promised that all the land of Canaan would sometime belong to his descendants and that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore. Abraham's

greatest test came with he was about 115 years old and his only son through Sarah was 15 years old. God told Abraham to take “his son, his only son, the son whom he loved” and take him to Mt. Moriah, a three-days journey away, and offer him as a sacrifice to God. Abraham obeyed God. He believed that if he offered Isaac as a burnt offering on the altar that God could and would raise him from the dead, though Abraham had never known of anyone who was dead coming back to life. Abraham offered his son to God but just at the moment of killing Isaac as an offering, God stopped him, and said [read 22:16-18].

Abraham and Sarah only had this one son, Isaac. God promised to build a great nation out of Isaac. Some more years passed and Abraham’s beloved wife, Sarah, died and was buried in a burial plot at Machpelah, the only piece of real estate that Abraham ever owned in Canaan, the Promised Land. Now, Abraham is reduced to himself and his only son. Three more years pass. Isaac turns 40 years old and is still unmarried. If God is going to build a great nation out of him, something had better happen soon. God is not on man’s timetable. As God had waited 25 years before Abraham and Sarah had Isaac, so now God is waiting 40 years before Isaac even has a wife.

Abraham did not want Isaac marrying a local heathen woman so he sent a servant to some relatives in Haran, several hundred miles away, to find a suitable wife for his bachelor son. The servant returned from his journey with Rebecca, who herself was moving on faith to travel hundreds of miles to marry a man she had never met. Rebecca made a sacrifice in marrying this stranger because she never got to see her family again. Isaac and Rebecca married, but no child was born for 20 years. God is really stretching things out, isn’t he? Most of us in this microwave age want instant gratification. We hardly know the meaning of the word “patience.” When you do business with God, you learn patience.

Finally, Rebecca is pregnant but instead of one son, it is twin boys. Esau is born first, then Jacob. The name Jacob means, “one who trips up by the heel,” because when Esau was born Jacob was holding on to his foot, an omen that throughout his life Jacob was to be one who tripped up and deceived others. Finally, Abraham thinks, “I’m now 160 years and I have an heir.” Fifteen years later, Abraham, 175 years old, dies and is buried next to Sarah at Machpelah. His

75-year-old son, Isaac, and his twin 15-year-old grandsons, Esau and Jacob, attend to the burial details.

God does not do things the way we think he should. Instead, God does things that often surprise us and keep us waiting and guessing. Abraham was promised a great nation and all the land of Canaan, yet he died an old man having only owned a half-acre burial plot, and one heir and two grandsons. What can God do with that? How in the world is God going to fulfill his promise to Abraham to build a great nation?

Let's keep reading in Genesis. God knows what he is doing, though he is moving on his own timetable.

God, again, does not meet human protocol because God chooses to work through the younger son, Jacob, instead of through the first born, Esau. Jacob's story is interesting, intriguing and fascinating as it is told in Genesis chapters 26-36. Jacob's story continues through chapter 47 when he dies in Egypt. But how did Jacob get to Egypt and what is he doing here?

Jacob, like us, is a man of faith and unfaith. He is a man who trusts God at times, and yet at other times he is a schemer, a deceiver, and a manipulator. He bargains with his brother, Esau, to buy the family birthright for a pot of soup. With his mother, Rebecca's, scheming he tricks his aging, blind father Isaac to give him the family blessing. When Esau discovers that Jacob has now gotten the family blessing in addition to the birthright, Esau seeks to kill his brother. Jacob flees to Haran, his mother's homeland. On the way, he sleeps under the stars with a rock for a pillow. God gives him a dream of a ladder going into heaven with angels ascending and descending on it. God speaks to him and says [read Gen. 28:13-25].

In Haran, Jacob finds work with his uncle, his mother's brother, Laban. Jacob is attracted to Laban's daughter, Rachel, and agrees to work for seven years for the right to marry her. Seven years pass like seven days because Jacob loves Rachel so much. But Jacob who schemed to get Esau's birthright and his father's blessing, is tricked himself by Laban who pulls switcheroo on the wedding night. In the cover of darkness, Jacob unknowingly sleeps with Leah, Rachel's older sister. The big deceiver has been deceived. The next morning when Jacob discovers the switch, he is angry. Laban explains that in their society the older

sister must always marry first. So Jacob agrees that if after a month he can additionally marry Rachel that he will work for the next seven years to pay for his bride. Laban agrees. Jacob now has two wives, one paid for with seven years of past work, and the other paid for with seven years of future work. This is the first “buy now, pay later” plan in the Bible. Maybe this is where we got the ideal of installment buying.

The less-loved wife, Leah, begins to have children, while Rachel remains childless. Bang, bang, bang, bang, four children in a row. Rachel is angry and furious. She wants children, too. So she delivers her handmaid, Bilhah, to Jacob, and says, “Sleep with her, and have children by her, and I’ll count them as mine.” This reminds us of what Sarah suggested to Abraham that he do with Hagar. So Jacob complies and over the next two years, Bilhah has two children. Leah has stopped bearing and is jealous of Rachel so she suggests that Jacob sleep with Zilpah, her maid, and have children by her. Jacob agrees complies and two children are born to Zilpah who will count as Leah’s family. Later, Leah bears two more sons and a daughter.

This is a big mess, isn’t it? Fellows, if you ever get the idea that polygamy is a good idea and that you would like to have more than one wife, read this story. Every polygamous marriage in the Old Testament has squabbles, jealousies and family fights. Polygamy was allowed by God as a concession to man’s weaknesses. But it is not God’s original plan. Jesus spoke of God’s ideal plan of one man and one woman as God created and placed in the Garden of Eden. This is God’s will for us now.

Finally, after years of frustration, Rachel has her first child, a little boy. They named him Joseph. He became Jacob’s favorite because he was the son of his favorite wife. Jacob worked for over 20 years for Laban in Haran. The tensions between them increased because Jacob’s personal flocks and herds were increasing much more rapidly than Laban’s. Jacob decided he needed to leave the country. Under the cover of darkness, he slipped away with all his flocks and herds and his two wives and two concubines and his eleven sons and one daughter. He traveled to the land of his birth, the land of Canaan, the land that was promised to his grandfather, Abraham, and his descendants. On the way, Jacob wrestles with an

angel of God who gives him the new name “Israel” which means, “He who wrestles with God.” Jacob’s descendants will now be known as Israelites.

In Canaan, they established themselves and began the work of shepherding their sheep and goats. Here another son, Benjamin, was born to Rachel but she died in childbirth. Jacob’s favorite two sons were Joseph and Benjamin.

The messes in the family continue. Reuben, the oldest son of Jacob, sleeps with his father’s concubine, Bilhah. Simeon and Levi kill an entire village of men after tricking them because one of them had slept with their sister, Dinah. Judah fathers his own grandchildren through incest with his daughter-in-law, Tamar. How is God going to take this hodge-podge, imperfect, troubled family and build anything, much less a great nation?

God’s ways are not our ways. He does not do things the way we think he should. But what can God do with this mess?

Jacob is 108 years old and God moves slowly with some invisible, improbable steps to build a nation. Over the next 39 years in Genesis, it’s amazing how God uses sinful men with sinful attitudes, a conniving, lying government leader’s wife, an imprisoned Joseph, a forgetful man, and a severe famine to build Jacob’s small clan into a nation of hundreds of thousands. God overcomes all prejudices, sibling rivalry, kidnapping, lying, imprisonment, and suffering to bring about a wondrous plan. Truly God’s ways are not our ways.

Here’s how God did it.

Joseph is a young man, 17 years old, who is favored by his father, Jacob. Jacob gives him a beautiful coat that makes his brothers jealous of him. Joseph dreams about his brothers and family bowing down to him and that increases and builds the hostility. While keeping sheep a long way from home, when Joseph comes to visit them, they capture him and sell him as a slave to a passing caravan of Midianites who are on their way to Egypt. The brothers then kill a goat and tear Joseph’s robe and dip it in the blood and tell their father Jacob that they found the robe. Jacob recognizes the coat and vows to go to his grave mourning over the death of his son whom he thought was killed and eaten by a wild animal.

Joseph, only 17 years old, is sold by the Midianites to an Egyptian official named Potiphar. Joseph works in Potiphar's house. God blesses his diligence so that he becomes the manager of the household. Like a scene from "Desperate Housewives," Potiphar's wife notices how handsome Joseph is and she begins to solicit him for a sexual rendezvous. Joseph resists her again and again. He says, "How can I commit this great sin against God?" Potiphar's wife then schemes against Joseph and tells her husband that "the Hebrew slave tried to rape me." Potiphar is angry and throws Joseph into prison. Where is God now?

God is with Joseph in prison. In our adversity, hardship and deepest need, God is still with us. Joseph soon rises to the top and becomes a trusted inmate with leadership responsibilities. Two of the king's men, a cupbearer and a baker, who are also imprisoned, have dreams. Joseph says that his God can interpret the dreams. Joseph says that in three days the cupbearer will be released and assigned back to his previous job and that the baker will be hanged. Joseph requests that the cupbearer remember him to the king when he is released but the man forgets about Joseph for two years. By now, thirteen years have passed for Joseph in Egypt. He is now thirty years old. During that time, he has not seen any of his family or heard one word from them. Joseph is all alone in Egypt in his faith in the true and living God of heaven.

Then Pharaoh himself has a dream and no one can interpret it. The cupbearer remembers Joseph and how he interpreted his dream. Pharaoh calls for Joseph to come to the palace to interpret his dreams. In Pharaoh's presence, Joseph gives credit to God for interpreting dreams. Joseph says that the dreams mean that there will be seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine. He advises Pharaoh to store up food during the years of plenty so that when the famine comes there will be food to eat. Pharaoh can think of no one better than Joseph to head up the government program to store food. Joseph is given full authority to do whatever he wants to in Egypt, second only to Pharaoh himself.

During the seven years of plenty, Joseph supervises the storing up of 20% of all the harvests in big grain pits. A high-ranking pagan priest gives Joseph one of his daughters to marry. Joseph has two sons born to him. He names the first one Manasseh, which means, "God make me to forget my father's house." The second son is named Ephraim which means, "God make me fruitful in this foreign land."

During his time in Egypt, Joseph becomes fully acculturated in the Egyptian language, dress, and shaved head and beardless. He looks, talks and “walks like an Egyptian”—hey, that might be a good song title?

The seven years of bumper crops pass and the seven years of famine begin. The famine strikes all over the world and Jacob and his sons and their families in Canaan are also affected. They hear that there is food in Egypt so the brothers come down to buy food. They come before Joseph but since he is now an Egyptian they do not recognize him, but he recognizes them, though it has been 22 years since he has seen them. Joseph thinks, of course, that they are the same hardhearted men who sold him into captivity. Joseph also knows that his father, Jacob, had not come to rescue him, or to search for him so he doesn't want anything to do with his dad, either. The only one that Joseph cares about is Benjamin, his younger brother, his mother's son. After finding out about the men's family, Joseph gave them food and asked that the next time they come they must bring Benjamin. To make sure that they will return Joseph holds Simeon as a slave until they return.

When all that food ran out, the brothers know that if they are going to survive they must go to Egypt again and take Benjamin with them. Jacob says, “No, don't take my only remaining son of my beloved Rachel,” but he realizes there is no other way to survive so he consents for Benjamin to go to Egypt.

When they arrive, Joseph sees Benjamin and tells the men to go back home with more food provisions but that Benjamin will live with him in Egypt. At that, the men show that they are different men than what they were 22 years ago. They beg for Benjamin's life. Judah volunteers to stay forever and be a slave if Joseph will let Benjamin go home. Judah says that their aged father would die if Benjamin does not return. Joseph hears the men talking in Hebrew and he can understand their language. They blame themselves for what they did to their brother 22 years ago and that their father thought that he was dead. Joseph now sees a different heart and a different attitude in these brothers of his. They are different men than they were 22 years ago. Joseph weeps at their confession. He knows that he has power to save them and his aged father and bring them all to Egypt so they can survive. In a tearful scene, of kissing, hugging, and rejoicing, Joseph says to his brothers, “I am Joseph your brother.” The men are astounded

that Joseph is still alive and has risen from a slave to being the Prime Minister of Egypt, the most powerful country in the world. It's almost impossible for them to believe that such good fortune has happened. Joseph forgives them and says, [read Gen. 45:5-11]. Joseph sees the providence of God in this entire story. God has overridden all the evils, errors and shenanigans of men and brought about a means to save the entire clan of Jacob from starvation and extinction.

The brothers return to Canaan with plenty of food and even carts and wagons to carry them and their families to Egypt. Pharaoh hears what is happening and gives them the land of Goshen on the east side of the Nile delta, some of the finest lands in Egypt. The aged Jacob, now 130 years old, and all his clan, some 70 of them in all, come to Egypt. Jacob lives here for the next 17 years. Before he dies at age 147, he told his family, "Do not bury me in Egypt. Take my body back to Machpelah so I can be buried beside Leah with my father and mother and grandfather and grandmother." He told them, "This land is not our land. It is not our home. Someday, somehow, God will take us back to Canaan. I do not want my bones left in Egypt." He had faith that God would keep his promise to Abraham, Isaac, and to him that Canaan would eventually be their home. When Jacob died the others were once more afraid that Joseph would punish them for their betrayal of him by selling him as a slave. But Joseph said to them, [read 50:19-21].

Egypt was good to the clans of Jacob. Here they prospered, grew and multiplied. After 54 more years, Joseph himself grew weak and knew he was about to die. In the last paragraph of Genesis, it is recorded that he called his brothers together and told them [read 50:24-26]. Four hundred years later when the Israelites left Egypt they were a mighty nation of over a million strong. God had taken one man, Joseph, and turned the evil circumstances of his life into a blessing that eventually saved Israel and allowed them to grow into a mighty and powerful people. Four hundred years later, Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt. The request of Joseph had been passed on from generation to generation to generation so that when they did leave, they carried his mummified body with them. His remains were finally buried in the promised land of Canaan in the territory that was given to the descendants of his son, Ephraim.

Wow. What a story. God works in strange ways through imperfect, sinful people to accomplish great good. God overcomes all obstacles. No power of evil can overcome or stop the power of God. God accomplishes his purposes. The Lord keeps his promises. Joseph's story is a perfect illustration if Romans 8:28 [read it].

The God who worked in Joseph's life is still God today. He has not changed, grown old, or lost his power. No matter what, he can work in your life. He can turn curses into blessings, misfortunes into prosperity, and make all things, even sinful, evil things, work together for the good of those that love him. Our God is an awesome, powerful, loving, creating, controlling God.

Today, this same God wants to work in your life, too. The story we told today culminates in the story of Abraham's descendant, Jesus of Nazareth, according to the flesh. Jesus is God's universal savior. He tells us, "Go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teach them to obey all things I have commanded you, and I will be with you always, even to the end of the world." God's book says that by faith in Christ we are children of God and that if we belong to Christ then are we Abraham's seed and heirs of that great promise to him. Truly, all nations of the world are being blessed through Jesus today. God's big story began in creation, continues today, and ends around his heavenly throne with believers from all nations, tribes, peoples and languages praising and serving God forever and ever. Amen.

Today, you can be a part of God's big story. Jesus stands before us today, opens his hands, and says, 'Come unto me all you that weary and are heavy laden and I will give you rest.' Come now, while we stand and sing

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