

My family

Standing in the driveway around the age of four as my father packed the car with his belongings to leave my mother, older sister and I was a landmark and life-altering moment. I still remember the tears and despairing chaos of that moment; my own, my mother's and my older sister's. As anxiety-inducing as were the regular loud verbal, and sometimes physical, fights between my parents, watching dad backing his car out never to return left an ever-present wound and an ache that, though attenuated over time, deeply imprinted my life and personality. Almost forty years have passed, but my parents' acrimonious divorce was not so much an isolated event in time, but more like the releasing of a chaotic energy that stubbornly refuses to be completely tamed or nullified.

In reflecting on recurring themes in my ministry to date, the experience of my parents' acrimonious divorce, and the subsequent family dysfunction, is not a theme per se, but a back-drop and back-story that colours and permeates everything else.

Family- a mixed and colourful reality for us all.

The world was wrecked by humans, God begins a plan to put it back together and he begins with a married couple and ultimately families.

- Isaac marries his cousin Rebekah- prayer involved in finding a marriage partner. Families involved.
- Isaac tries to protect himself by making out that Rebekah is his sister, just like his dad, Abraham did.
- Rebekah give birth to twins: Esau and Jacob Esau is a man v wild, hairy hunter and rugged bloke. Jacob likes to stay at home and bake with mummy.
- Jacob deceives Esau and receives his fathers blessing- unheard of that the younger would inherit. God inverts our customs and cultures to fulfill his purposes. Esau gives away his future for a bowl of bean stew!
- Jacob has a dream and encounters the God of his fathers. The promises given to Abraham are now given to him.
- Jacob and Rachel (& Leah)
- Jacob falls in love with Rachel and is willing to work for seven years to win her hand in marriage.
16 Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the older was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. **17** Leah had weak eyes, but Rachel had a lovely figure and was beautiful. **18** Jacob was in love with Rachel and said, "I'll work for you seven years in return for your younger daughter Rachel."
• **19** Laban said, "It's better that I give her to you than to some other man. Stay here with me." **20** So Jacob served seven years to get Rachel, but they seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her. (Ge 29:16–20).
- His Uncle Laban tricks him and gives him his other daughter, Leah on the wedding night. He then promises Rachel for another 7 years work.

- Leah and Rachel have a baby bake off and throw in their maids to try and have the most children.
- God blesses Jacob materially like he did Isaac and Abraham.
- Jacob runs away from his father in law after amassing wealth.
- Jacob wrestles with God. A breathtaking and deeply mysterious event. Imagine going 12 rounds with God Almighty? Jacobs name is changed to Israel.
- Jacob has to face his past as he meets up with Esau. The last time he saw him, Esau had promised to kill Jacob.
 “But the story of the conflict between Jacob and Esau does not end with Genesis. As their names and the oracle make apparent, Jacob and Esau are the forefathers of two nations, Israel and Edom, who were bitter rivals throughout the OT period” Hebrews warns “See to it ... that no one be immoral or irreligious like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears” (Heb 12:15–17).
- Jacob has 12 sons, and a daughter Dinah, who is raped.
- Rachel dies giving birth. ('give me children or I'll die', be careful what you ask of God.)

1. God is at work to rescue, redeem and renew all things through the mundane and normal workings of everyday life. Look at how unremarkable, and in a sense, how supernatural the narratives of these families are. Decades of life are condensed into a few pages. They go about their work, get married, and meet God- rarely. And yet in hindsight we see how God is working in their lives and through their lives.

Both Isaac and Jacob find their wives in the mundane daily working life. Perhaps our expectations through decades of soppy Hollywood movies and romance novels has made us think meeting someone has to be some dramatic event. When in fact they meet amidst the normal routines of daily life and working life.

Reminds me of Paul- make it your ambition to live a quiet life. And Jesus, do not worry about tomorrow.

11 and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own business and work with your hands, just as we told you, 12 so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody. (1 Th 4:11–12)

Beware of Gnosticism- a spiritual life lived 6 feet above the ground, and the promise of special knowledge and special events that lead to spiritual fulfilment. In Christ God has become flesh and blessed and inhabited our physical and so called mundane world.

2. Marriage and children are a gift of God and are very good things to be received with gratitude.

God performs the first wedding Adam and Eve, and God fulfils the last wedding the people of God joining with their God for eternity. And the first public miracle we see of Jesus in the gospel of John is enjoying the wedding and turns water into wine!

WBC “Bigamy is not explicitly condemned in the OT, unless Lev 18:18 refers to it. However, Ge 2 records that the Lord only created one wife for Adam, which implies that anyone who takes an extra wife is going beyond what God intended. Furthermore, all the polygamous marriages of Genesis turn out to be disasters.”

The family stories in Genesis clearly show us that there are no perfect soulmates who are completely fulfil us out there to marry. There are only people like ourselves; flawed inconsistent broken and needing love.

Tim Keller: Ministering in the center of New York City, in the late 1980s, Kathy and I were constantly struck by the deep ambivalence with which Western culture views marriage. It was then we began to hear all the now society-wide objections-marriage was originally about property and is now in flux, marriage crushes individual identity and has been oppressive for women, marriage stifles passion and is ill-fitted to psychological reality, marriage is "just a piece of paper" that only serves to complicate love, and so on. But beneath these philosophical objections lies a snarl of conflicted personal emotions, born out of many negative experiences with marriage and family life. Mom 11 I'm tired of listening to sentimental talks on marriage. At weddings, in church, and in Sunday school, much of what I've heard on the subject has as much depth as a Hallmark card. While marriage is many things, it is anything but sentimental. Marriage is glorious but hard. It's a burning joy and strength, and yet it is also blood, sweat, and tears, humbling defeats and exhausting victories. No marriage I know more than a few weeks old could be described as a fairy tale come true. *Meaning of Marriage*, 21

Divorce and its effects on children has been termed the “divided-world”, where a child “lives in the world of the mother and the world of the father in two separate and distinct spheres.” Children typically internalise the parental conflict which leads to “troubled ruminations about parents”. The observed effects on children growing into adults are increased distress and deficiencies in well-being.

“parental alienation” (PA). PA is defined as “the incidence of a parent denigrating the other parent to the child with the intent to increase animosity and alienation of the child to the other parent.”¹ Studies have shown that children who experience parental alienation typically have “lower self-sufficiency, higher rates of major depressive disorder, lower self-esteem, and insecure attachment styles as adults.”

In addition to the physiological health issues with persistent high levels of anger in children, there are also “behavioural problems, poor academic achievement, drug use, truancy, bullying, depression, violence, juvenile delinquency, and promiscuity.” Concerning adolescents whose parents have divorced, studies have shown them to

¹ Naomi Ben-Ami and Amy

experience more loneliness and less life-satisfaction than their peers of unbroken families.

The view of self in the formation of children into adulthood is intrinsically connected to the security and consistency of nurture and support provided by primary caregivers. Most typically parents are the primary caregivers, and where love and nurture are consistent the child is more likely to develop positive models of self and others. Obviously the converse is true. Studies concerning adults whose parents were conflicted tend to have higher levels of negative views of both self and others.

This is hard to hear if you are divorced, and be assured that God's grace and blessing will sustain you and help you. And, the good news of Genesis is that God will still work in and through your life.

Timothy Keller "So in our society we are too pessimistic about the possibility of "monogamy" because we are too idealistic about what we want in a marriage partner, and this all comes because we have a flawed understanding of the purpose of marriage itself. 37

Marriage and children are a gift of God and are very good things to be received with gratitude.

3. Sometimes the life of faith involves wrestling with God. Have you ever wrestled with God? Because you will never know who you truly are and you will never know who God truly years until you have wrestled with him and been hurt by him. God is not a great cosmic therapist here to make you happy, fulfil all your dreams, and bless your romantic ideas of your life. God is a wild and free and powerful being who cannot be pinned down and cannot be boxed in any way. And sometimes it really seems as though God is working against us, even though he says he loves us and wants to bless us.

I'm sure that while Abraham and Sarah were barren for 25 years, and their Son Isaac and Rebekah were childless for 20, they doubted and wondered about God's promises.

4. No matter how wonderful, no matter how dysfunctional, your family is, God is able to use you and your life for his purposes.

Esau's marriage choice upsets his parents as he marries foreigners.

Favouritism of Isaac with Esau and Rebekah with Jacob is unwise.

One of the points worth noting here is that the rivalry between siblings. First of all you have Cain and Abel, then Isaac and Ishmael and their struggles in the struggles between their mothers. Jacob and Esau and the trouble and struggles the Bay have together. Then you have Rachel and Leah sisters who are also are competitive and struggle against one another. And a bit later you will have the struggle between Jacob's own sons especially as they all gang up against a little brother Joseph.

The picture here is one of dysfunctional families. In fact, since the fall they are only dysfunctional families. The point is that some are less dysfunctional than others. So something you need to understand today is the state of your family is no hindrance or opposition to what God wants to do in your life and through your life. And nor is the relative health and wealth and how many of your family a precursor to God doing great things in your life. It is often by struggle, strain and toil that we discover the gifts and the character and begin to depend on the power of God in our lives. There is a curse of affluence in which people never discover really what they're made of because they never pushed or stretched

WBC: "There is no disguising the failures of the chosen line. Noah stumbles. Abraham goes astray more than once. Isaac and Rebekah are partisan. Jacob is at times positively obnoxious, and the author of Genesis does not disguise his disapproval of such conduct. Yet despite all their sinfulness, God's chosen are preserved and blessed. God's saving purpose is not thwarted by human weakness, though it may be delayed. God chooses the patriarchs not because they are particularly loveable characters but because of his declared intention that in them all the families of the earth should find blessing. So the patriarchs emerge from Scripture not as lily-white heroes but as real men of flesh and blood, red in tooth and claw."

16 Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore **God is not ashamed to be called their God**, for he has prepared a city for them.

17 By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, **18** even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." **19** Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death.

20 By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau in regard to their future.

21 By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph's sons, and worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff.

So, whatever your family situation and experience...

11 Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters.²

² *The New International Version*. 2011 (Heb 2:11). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.