

Lessons from the Lives of the Patriarchs

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The New Testament tells us that many Old Testament historical accounts were recorded as examples for us to avoid (1 Cor 10.6, 11). Of course, many Old Testament stories teach positive lessons as well. The lives of the patriarchs are particularly instructive for believers today. This study discusses ten lessons--five negative and five positive--we should learn from the patriarchs.

It should be noted that this study is not comprehensive; that is, it does not cover all patriarchs or all the lessons their lives teach. In addition, the reader should be aware that patriarch is defined broadly to include their contemporaries (e.g., Lot, Laban, etc.) and the women in their families (e.g. Sarah, Rebekah, etc.).

Negative Lesson: Compromise

Unfortunately, the patriarchs did not separate themselves completely from the worldly practices of the people around them. This is perhaps most clearly seen in the life of Lot and his family, who chose to live in a wicked city, forsook moral values, and saw great personal loss as a result (13.12; 19.1ff). To a lesser degree it is seen in the lives of those who practiced polygamy and were willing to perpetuate their seed via surrogate motherhood--Abram and Sarai (16.1ff; 25.6); Esau (26.34-35); and Jacob, Leah, and Rachel (30.1ff).

Positive Lesson: Obedience

On a more positive note, the patriarchs often exemplified obedience to God. This virtue was perhaps never more vividly displayed than in Abraham's willing sacrifice of his son, Isaac (22.1ff).

Negative Lesson: Faithlessness

The patriarchs were prone to act outside the context of faith in God at times. For example, Abraham and Sarah found it difficult to believe God's promise that they would bear a son in their old age (17.15-19; 18.9-15).

Positive Lesson: Faith

Hebrews 11 recognizes many of the patriarchs as people of faith. God revealed himself to them and they acted on his word. God told Abram to leave his homeland for a land that he would later show him; Abram obeyed and became the father of the nation of Israel (12.1ff). Having received God's promises in a dream, Jacob pledged his loyalty to God (28.18ff) and afterward lived a very changed life.

Negative Lesson: Deceit

The lives of the patriarchs contain more than a hint of deceit. In at least two instances Abraham and Sarah misled the people around them concerning their identity as husband and wife (12.10ff; 20.1ff). Their son, Isaac, and his wife, Rebekah, did the same years later (26.6ff), illustrating the influence that a poor moral example can have on future generations. Rebekah conspired with her son, Jacob, to deceive Isaac and steal Esau's blessing (27.5ff). Jacob himself was later tricked by his father-in-law, Laban, into marrying Leah rather than Rachel (29.20ff).

Positive Lesson: Tithing

Tithing was a part of at least two patriarchs' lives. Abram gave tithes of the spoil he collected during his rescue of Lot from captivity (14.18-20). Jacob vowed to give God a tenth of all he would give him (28.22).

Negative Lesson: Conflict

Many patriarchs were involved in (often unnecessary) conflict. Lot and Abraham were divided over the land that was available to feed their respective flocks and herds (13.1ff). Sarai despised Hagar for her

conception of Ishmael (16.4ff). Later, rivalry between Isaac and Ishmael led Sarah to expel Hagar from her household (21.9ff). Jacob and Esau were in conflict over the inheritance of their father's birthright and blessing (25.29-34; 27.30ff). Leah and Rachel developed an intense rivalry as each attempted to gain the favor of Jacob (30.1ff).

Positive Lesson: Conflict Resolution

Happily, some patriarchs learned to manage conflict. Abram unselfishly offered Lot his choice of the land for his livestock (13.8ff). Jacob and Esau overcame their youthful rivalry and treated each other with dignity and respect in their later years (32.1ff).

Negative Lesson: Preferential Treatment

Favoritism was a part of family life among some of the patriarchs. Isaac and Rebekah each favored a particular son (25.27-28; 27.5ff). Perhaps in imitation of his parents' behavior, Jacob loved his second wife and her children more than his first wife and her children (29.30; 33.1).

Positive Lesson: Wise Mate Selection

At least two patriarchs demonstrated careful selection of a mate. Isaac waited until the age of 40 before marrying Rebekah, and he did so only after his father, Abraham, carried out a careful selection process (24.1ff). Jacob worked 14 years to earn the right to marry Rachel (29.15ff). Both Isaac and Rachel married relatives who shared their same heritage.

Lesson Plan (Adult)

Objectives:

- To remind participants that family ties can be a source of blessing or pain.
- To persuade participants that their values and actions will determine to some extent whether the lives of their relatives are blessed or painful.
- To involve participants in a discussion of healthy and unhealthy family life.
- To persuade participants of the relevance of biblical history to contemporary life.
- To encourage participants to practice healthy family values and transmit them to the next generation.

Procedure:

1. Introduce the lesson by asking how many of the participants will be spending time with relatives that do not live in their homes around Christmas. Mention that the family is a powerful institution, exerting both positive and negative influences. State that in the course of the lesson we will look at biblical examples of healthy and unhealthy family traits.
2. Ask the participants to read 1 Corinthians 10:6, 11 aloud. Then explain that the life lessons discussed will come from the book of Genesis, chapters 12-33, drawing on the experiences of three patriarchs-- Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob--and their relatives.
3. Discuss as many life lessons as time will allow. Involve participants where possible, asking for feedback, suggestions, or comments.
4. Conclude with an exhortation to be faithful in family life, practicing positive values and transmitting them to younger relatives.