

**SESSION OBJECTIVE: HEBREWS 11:17-22**

To better understand that faithful people are also often messy people.

Read the Text:

By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, 18 of whom it was said, "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." 19 He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back. 20 By faith Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau. 21 By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff. 22 By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his bones. (Heb. 11:17-22, ESV)

Study the Text:**The "Faith Family"**

Hebrews 11:17-22 considers the various acts of faith from Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, often recognized as the "patriarchs of the faith." The Old Testament calls God "the God of Abraham" four times. Additionally, the Old Testament refers to "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" (or some variation) 4 more times, and the New Testament uses this phrase five times. Abraham is the father of the faith, and because he exhibited faith before his circumcision, he can be called "the father of all who believe without being circumcised" as well (Rom. 4:11). Abraham's obedience to leave his "country and kindred" and go to "the land" that God showed him (Gen. 12:1) was reckoned to him as righteousness (Rom. 4:22; Gal. 3:6). Abraham's faithfulness to obey God was also modeled by his son Isaac and his grandson Jacob, which is why they are often included in the "god of" title.

However, when you read the narratives about their lives, you come to realize pretty quickly that these men were anything but "clean," "neatly put together" people. Often, when we think of "men (or women) of faith," we think of the model Christian, but the Old and New Testaments portray some of the messiest people as

some of the most faithful. To state it another way: faith is often exhibited by messy individuals (amen, and hallelujah). Below is a brief breakdown of key details about these individuals mentioned in our passage.

ABRAHAM

There are a number of examples of the “messiness” of Abraham’s life. Like, for example, when he pretended to be his wife’s brother so the Pharaoh of Egypt could... court her? Or when he got his wife’s servant, Hagar, pregnant? Or when he sent Hagar and his son off to essentially die alone in the wilderness because his wife was jealous? None of these examples are what you’d expect from the father of the faith. Additionally, none of these are even mentioned in Hebrews 11. The author of Hebrews specifically addresses another situation: the near-sacrifice of Abraham’s son, Isaac. God tells Abraham to go and sacrifice Isaac as “a burnt offering” (Gen. 22:1–2), and Abraham essentially does exactly as instructed. Genesis 22:10–11 says that, right as Abraham was about to kill Isaac with a knife, “an angel of the LORD” appeared to him and stopped it. He is subsequently given “a ram, caught in the thicket by his horns” to offer instead (Gen. 22:12).

To the modern reader, sacrificing your child seems impossibly *evil*. So why is Abraham lauded for such behavior? For one, it is at least implied that Abraham trusted God’s character enough to know God would do something to prevent harm coming to Isaac. Isaac was the promised heir. It made no sense for God to supernaturally provide him and Sarah a child that would be the heir to the promise, only for God to allow that child to die, and at the hands of Abraham no less (Heb. 11:18). But Hebrews 11 mentions something else: “He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back” (Heb. 11:19). Now, stop for a moment and actually consider the kind of faith it took to do this. Abraham was willing to **kill his son as a sacrifice** because he believed God would raise his child from the dead if God allowed him to go through with it. Beyond the obvious foreshadowing of what God the Father would eventually do for us in God the Son, the faith it took to do this is unbelievable. And yet, consider again the examples I provided of just how messed up Abraham was. He’s not the guy you’d expect to show this level of faith, but *he is*. Because faith is often carried out by messy people.

ISAAC

The author of Hebrews highlights Isaac next, and says little about him beyond: “he invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau” (Heb. 11:20). Jacob and Esau are, of course, his sons. And it is true that Isaac blessed both of them. But the ordering of importance in how he blessed them is what makes his story unique. Isaac clearly favored his son Esau because he was “a skillful hunter,” and “a man of the field” (Gen. 25:27). Conversely, Jacob was “a quiet man, dwelling in tents” (Gen. 25:27). Isaac “loved Esau” and his wife Rebekah “loved Jacob” (Gen. 25:28). This sets up the drama that eventually unfolds between the brothers. Isaac, preferring his son Esau because of the food he could provide, tells Esau he will bless him if he brings him some “delicious food” (Gen. 27:1–4). Rebekah hears this and devises a plan to intercept Isaac’s blessing (Gen. 27:5–29). Only when Esau returns does he realize his blessing (and his birthright) had been stolen from him. Isaac’s preference of one son over the other, even though God had clearly expressed that Jacob was the heir, created a familial rift that was never really resolved. His faith to follow the LORD did not negate his own mishandling of his household.

JACOB

Jacob is messy in his own way. Though he is tricked, he marries the wrong woman and subsequently works to marry her sister as well (Gen. 29:1–30). As mentioned above, he tricks his brother into selling his birthright, and also steals his blessing. His name, after all, means “heel grabber” (Gen. 25:26). And yet, through his own messy life, he understands the importance of a father’s blessing, and chooses to bless the sons of Joseph, though they had an Egyptian mother (Gen. 48:1–7). And, like himself, who, though he was the youngest, was

blessed as the oldest, chose to bless Ephraim, the younger brother, with greater blessing than his brother Manasseh, the older brother (Gen. 48:20). He also blessed his son Joseph, who had become an important figure in Egypt, setting the stage for the eventual Exodus.

JOSEPH

It is, therefore, reasonable for Hebrews to include Joseph at the end of this section. Of the four mentioned, Joseph has the most impeachable character. However, this does not prevent him from living a “messy” life. He is sold into slavery (Gen. 37:12–36), accused of rape (Gen. 39:11–19), forgotten in prison (Gen. 40:23), only to eventually be given the second most powerful position in all of Egypt (Gen. 41:46). He is said to have “made mention of the Exodus,” even giving “directions concerning his bones” (Heb. 11:22), which is directly mentioned in Genesis 50:24–25. Joseph’s faith played out through a messy life, though he was not responsible for most of the messiness.

What About Now?

That Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are the patriarchs of the faith sends a clear message: sometimes morally complicated people are also the most faithful people. The inclusion of Joseph adds a second layer: sometimes our lives can be messy even when it isn’t our fault, but that doesn’t preclude our call or our ability to live by faith. When you understand that “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23), you realize that everyone is kind of messy, if they are being honest. Maybe you haven’t had affairs, sold your brothers into slavery, cheated people out of an inheritance, or almost killed your child, but you may be too controlling, co-dependent, unforgiving, or something else. None of that means you cannot live by faith. Faith does not preclude moral failure; it does redeem it, or rather, the God who is the object of our faith does.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Genesis 22:1–12. In your own words, describe the events in this passage.

2. Read Hebrews 11:17–18. How does this passage shed further light on Genesis 22:1–12?

Day Two

1. Read Hebrews 11:19. What did Abraham believe God would do if he was successful in sacrificing Isaac?

2. Read Hebrews 11:20. What did Isaac do to both Jacob and Esau?

Day Three

1. Read Genesis 27:26–29 and 39–40. What were the blessings Isaac bestowed upon each of them?

2. Read Hebrews 11:21 and Genesis 48:17–20. What blessings did Jacob bestow upon Ephraim and Manasseh?

Day Four

1. Read Hebrews 11:22. What did Joseph make mention of before he died?

2. Read Genesis 50:24–25. What specifically did Joseph say before he died? How does this set up Exodus?

Discuss the Text!

Session 27 Discussion: Failure & Faith

Hebrews 11:17–22 introduces the patriarchs, most of whom faced failures in their lives, yet still exhibited great acts of faith along the way. Their lack of obedience in some ways did not prevent them from obeying God in other ways. Talk as a group about how easy it is to relegate faith to only the “put together” people in the church, and how this misses the narrative of not only this text, but the rest of Scripture (i.e., Moses, the Judges, David, Paul, etc.).

1. Icebreaker: When you imagine a “person of great faith,” what qualities or kind of life first come to mind? How do Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph challenge that picture?
2. What happens when the church emphasizes acceptance without repentance?
3. What happens when the church emphasizes discipline without grace?
4. What part of your life currently feels messy? What would it look like for you to take one concrete step of faith in the middle of the mess this week?
5. Kid Talk: Have your child draw a picture. Ask them if they made any mistakes. Ask them, assuming they made at least one mistake: “Should you throw it away since you messed up? Or would it be better to correct the mistake as best you can, and enjoy the picture regardless of the messiness?” Now connect it to God’s relationship with us. God does not “throw us away” when we make mistakes. Through *repentance*, he corrects us and continues to use us, no matter how messy we are.

Takeaways:

1. Faith is often carried out by some of the messiest people in the Bible.
2. Failures in some parts of our lives do not negate faithfulness in other parts of our lives.