

A Family's Faith
Hebrews 11:20-22
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What kind of stories do you tell in your family? Maybe you tell your kids about when you were younger. Maybe you tell them stories you heard from your parents or grandparents. When your extended family gets together, are there certain stories that everybody knows but that get told again anyway?

When I meet with families to prepare for funerals, I ask them if there are any stories they want to share about their loved one who's died. Some families don't say much. Others tell me more than I could ever use. And sometimes they'll tell stories they don't want used in the funeral, but they're important memories. Talking like that is part of healthy grieving.

Some years ago, Nancy made a couple of photo scrapbooks for my parents. There are pictures that go back a few generations, as well as some from when my folks were young. There are pictures of my brother and me and our families. Looking through those photo albums with Mom, we recall people in our family and events that happened over the years. When Dad was alive, he nearly always had a story to tell about something that happened years ago.

How does faith get shared from one generation to another? Often it's through stories. Many of us heard about God and learned Bible stories from our grandparents and parents. We also heard from them their own experiences of life with God. We tell those stories to our children and grandchildren. If God's good news is best communicated in relationships, family relationships are a primary place to share the gospel, to talk about faith.

Abraham and Sarah must have told Isaac and others the story of how God called them and made promises to them. Then Isaac must have told the same stories and related the same promises to Jacob and Esau. Jacob then passed the stories along to his twelve sons, especially Joseph.

The writer of Hebrews mentions these three generations of this family in the verses we're reading today. In three verses, Hebrews covers the

second half of the book of Genesis. The writer focuses on what each of these patriarchs did right before he died. Each one blessed his son. They passed the blessing on to the next generation. Wrapped up in that blessing were all the promises, the covenant, the stories of God's faithfulness, and confidence that God would be faithful in the future.

In the Old Testament there's a concept that a blessing was something actual and real. It was almost tangible. If someone spoke a blessing, it would happen. The blessing that one generation of a family received could be passed on to the next generation. That's in the background of these accounts of Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph.

Let's take a quick look at each of their stories. Like the writer of Hebrews 11, we'll focus on how, by faith, they shared a blessing with the next generation and showed confidence in what God would do in the future. Remember, these are examples for us of living by faith. We're encouraged to step up and bless the next generation, to share faith with them, to show that we trust God to be faithful in the future as he's been in the past.

After Abraham's wife Sarah died and his son Isaac had grown up, Abraham sent one of his servants to where his relatives lived to find a wife for Isaac. The servant prayed for God to guide him and help him. He found Rebekah, the daughter of Abraham's nephew. So that would make her Isaac's second cousin. Rebekah returned with him to Canaan and she married Isaac.

After some time, Isaac prayed to the LORD on behalf of Rebekah, because she was childless. The LORD answered his prayer, and Rebekah became pregnant with twins. The babies jostled each other and she asked God what was happening. The LORD said to her,

Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger. (Gen 25:23)

When the twins were born, the firstborn was Esau. The other was Jacob, who came out holding onto his brother's heel. The name Jacob

means “he grasps the heel,” and that was a Hebrew expression for someone who’s a deceiver. Jacob lived up to his name. When the brothers were grown, Jacob tricked Esau into giving him his birthright. The firstborn son normally received a greater inheritance, but Esau gave that up to Jacob.

Even later, Rebekah told Jacob to go to his father Isaac and get the family blessing for himself. Isaac was very old and he was blind. Jacob pretended to be Esau and deceived his father. Isaac pronounced the blessing on Jacob instead of Esau. In their understanding, once the blessing was spoken, it couldn’t be taken back or transferred to someone else.

Hebrews doesn’t go into the trickery and deception of Rebekah and Jacob. It just says that by faith Isaac had confidence in what God was going to do in the future and blessed his sons Jacob and Esau. Here’s how Genesis records Isaac’s blessing of Jacob, whom he thought was Esau:

When Isaac caught the smell of his clothes, he blessed him and said, “Ah, the smell of my son is like the smell of a field that the LORD has blessed. May God give you heaven’s dew and earth’s richness—an abundance of grain and new wine. May nations serve you and peoples bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may the sons of your mother bow down to you. May those who curse you be cursed and those who bless you be blessed.” (Gen 27:27-29)

There are echoes here of God’s original blessing of Abraham.

Not long after Jacob left his father’s tent, Esau showed up to receive the blessing. Isaac said he had already given the blessing to Jacob. Esau begged for some blessing for himself. Finally Isaac said,

Your dwelling will be away from earth’s richness, away from the dew of heaven above. You will live by the sword and you will serve your brother. But when you grow restless, you will throw his yoke off your neck. (Gen 27:39-40)

The point Hebrews makes is that Isaac spoke of the future and looked to the future by faith. Do we have faith that God will continue to be

faithful? Do we trust that God will be with our children and grandchildren? Do we tell them that and pray for God to bless them?

Bob Tuttle told about praying one day and asking God, "Why have you blessed me so much?" Bob sensed the Lord saying to him, "Many of the blessings in your life are in answer to your dad's prayers for you." Tuttle says that made him double up on praying for his children.

Esau was angry with his brother Jacob, so Jacob left and went to stay with his mother's brother Laban. Uncle Laban proved to be as tricky and deceitful as Rebekah and Jacob. After twenty years in Laban's household, Jacob took his family and left to go back to Canaan. He had married Laban's daughters Leah and Rachel. Between them and their two servant girls, Jacob fathered twelve sons and a daughter. Jacob always favored Rachel. For years she was unable to have children, but she finally gave birth to Joseph. A few years later she died while giving birth to Benjamin. Jacob favored Joseph over his other children. As we'd say today, there was a lot of dysfunction in some of these families in the Bible.

Back in the Promised Land, Jacob and his sons were shepherds. Because Jacob favored Joseph, the other brothers resented him. They planned to kill him, but instead threw him in a cistern. When some merchants came by on the way to Egypt, they sold Joseph as a slave then went home and told Jacob that Joseph was dead.

Jacob mourned the loss of his favored son. He lived with that sorrow for many years. Meanwhile, in Egypt, Joseph had many adventures and went through many trials. Because of God's blessing, he eventually became second in command of the nation of Egypt. He prepared the nation for a famine that was coming. When the famine hit, Jacob and his family back in Canaan needed grain. Jacob sent his sons to Egypt to buy grain. They met Joseph but didn't recognize him. Finally he revealed himself to them. All of Jacob's family went to Egypt to live, to survive the famine.

Jacob, also called Israel, went to Egypt. He was now a very old man. After several years there, he talked to Joseph about the future. He worshiped as he leaned on his staff. The staff was the sign of being on a journey, of being a pilgrim. He told Joseph to bury him in Canaan, not in Egypt. Joseph had married and had two sons named Ephraim and

Manasseh. Jacob/Israel told Joseph to bring his sons to him so he could bless them. Jacob gave the greater blessing to the younger son. He had tricked his father into doing that, but now he intentionally gave the younger one the greater blessing. That kind of irritated Joseph, but Jacob was looking to the future and seeing how God would work. He blessed Joseph and said,

May the God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked faithfully, the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day, the Angel who has delivered me from all harm—may he bless these boys. May they be called by my name and the names of my fathers Abraham and Isaac, and may they increase greatly on earth. ...In your name will Israel pronounce this blessing: “May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh.” (Gen 48:15-16, 20)

Jacob/Israel went on to bless his other eleven sons before he died. But Hebrews focuses on his blessing Joseph’s sons and worshiping. Maybe the writer points out that Israel worshiped as another example of faith. Again, the emphasis is on passing along what God has promised and given, sharing God’s blessing with another generation.

After Jacob/Israel died, Joseph and his brothers and their families stayed in Egypt. Joseph lived to be one hundred and ten years old. He saw the fourth generation of his family. Joseph said,

“I am about to die. But God will surely come to your aid and take you up out of this land to the land he promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.” And Joseph made the Israelites swear an oath and said, “God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up from this place.” (Gen 50:24-25)

By faith Joseph saw that Israel’s family would not live in Egypt forever. They would leave there some day and God would take them to the Promised Land. God would keep his promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Another translation of Hebrews 11:22 says it this way:

And it was by faith that Joseph, when he was about to die, confidently spoke of God's bringing the people of Israel out of Egypt. He was so sure of it that he commanded them to carry his bones with them when they left! (*New Living Translation*)

It was around four hundred years later that Israel was delivered from Egypt and they did take Joseph's bones with them to bury in the Promised Land (Ex 13:19; Josh 24:32).

God remains faithful from generation to generation. God gives a blessing through parents to children. That's the ideal, anyway. Sometimes parents don't bless children. In those cases, God can make a way to bless and give grace anyway. Still, don't we want to join God in blessing each other? Abraham was blessed to be a blessing and we're children of Abraham through Christ. God's blessing includes his grace, mercy, goodness, promises, faithfulness, and love. God wants to pour that blessing upon us and through us.

When I pray, "God, bless so and so," I try to have in mind the fullness and richness of blessing in Scripture. There's the blessing we see in these accounts of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. God's covenant promises and faithfulness, God's care and provision, love and mercy. I want the blessing I pray for to include what Psalm 1 says:

Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers. Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous. For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.

I like to think about Jesus pronouncing the blessing of God's kingdom on all kinds of people (Mt 5:3-12). I think of Paul's declaration that God has "blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ" (Eph 1:3). When I pray for God to bless you, I want it to include all of that.

There are other ways we can bless others, especially in families. Some years ago a book came out called *The Blessing*. It's about families and the need we all have for approval and affirmation from our parents. It draws on that OT concept of the blessing that we see in the accounts of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and others. The writers unpack five elements of the blessing that we can share with our children and with each other in the family of God. The five ingredients of blessing are

- Meaningful Touch
- A Spoken Message
- Attaching "High Value" to the One Being Blessed
- Picturing a Special Future for the One Being Blessed
- An Active Commitment to Fulfill the Blessing

(Gary Smalley and John Trent, *The Blessing* 27)

Parents can bless children. Children can bless parents. Brothers and sisters can bless each other. Brothers and sisters in Christ can bless each other in these ways.

Appropriate meaningful touch might be a handshake or a hug or a hand on the shoulder or laying hands on someone's head. We've heard the case studies of children who failed to thrive because they never knew a parent's or caregiver's loving touch. Meaningful touch communicates so much to us. We need that. In today's culture, we need to be reminded to recognize the appropriate relationships and setting for touch—and the need for consent.

We actually say to another person what we hope for them. By faith, we can speak to each other words of life and hope and affirmation.

By faith, we show others that they're valued.

By faith, we envision a positive future for the person we want to bless. We express what they can be by God's grace, with God's help.

By faith, we actively seek to help them experience the blessing of God's grace, mercy, peace, love, care, provision.

There's another great blessing in Scripture that I include when I pray for God to bless someone. I often pray this for myself, for my family, for all of you.

The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace. (Numbers 6:24-26)

May we share that kind of blessing with each other. May our families be places where that blessing is received and passed on from generation to generation.