

## **A Biblical Reading of Faith and Heroes of Faith from the book of Hebrews 11:1 -12:1**

**Faith in General:** Faith is a gift from God. It is total dependence on God and a willingness to do his Will. It is complete and humble obedience to God's will, readiness to do whatever he calls us to do. Our relationship with God begins with faith which helps us realize that we are delivered from our past by Christ's death. It is a word with many meanings. It can mean faithfulness. It can mean absolute trust, as shown by some of the people who came to Jesus for healing. It can mean confident hope. It means believing in the impossible. It is not something we must do in order to earn salvation. Growing in faith is a constant process of daily renewing our trust in Jesus. Prayer is the key that unlocks faith in our lives. There is a difference between faith and belief. The word *faith* often has a deeper meaning. *Belief* often refers to an intellectual acceptance of facts. *faith* and *belief* are used interchangeably. The difference is not between the two words but between the concepts of mental agreement and wholehearted commitment. In modern usage, *belief* often refers to mental agreement, and *faith* refers to wholehearted commitment. Faith is more than belief. Faith goes like mustard seed in our life. A mustard seed is small but it is alive and growing. Like a tiny seed, a small amount of genuine faith in God will take root and grow. Almost invisible at first, it will begin to spread, first under the ground and then visibly.

## **What is Faith and who are the Faith Heroes according the book of Hebrews 11:1-12:2?**

**Faith is the realization of what is hoped for and evidence of things not seen (11: 1)** Faith is believing in God's promises even though we don't see those promises materializing. Faith is like an electricity which we don't see but we feel and experience. God called the universe into existence out of nothing. Our faith is in the God who created the entire universe by his word.

## **The Heroes of Faith in the Book of Hebrews (11-12)**

**Cain:** Cain was one of the sons of Adam and Eve. His birth is the first one recorded in Scripture, leading us to believe that Cain was Adam and Eve's firstborn: "Adam made love to his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain. She said, 'With the help of the Lord I have brought forth a man'" (Genesis 4:1). The name *Cain* is based on the Hebrew root word *qanah*, which means "possession." Cain was a rebellious man who rejected God's plan, ignored God's warnings, and received God's judgment. Cain is most infamous for being the world's first murderer. When his sacrifice was rejected by God while his brother Abel's was accepted, Cain grew angry (Genesis 4:4-5). God warned Cain against further sin, but Cain spurned God's warning and killed his brother Abel in a field (verses 6-8). God punished Cain by increasing his hardship and banishing him from society (verse 10-12). But God also marked Cain in some way to protect him from being killed by revenge-seekers (verse 15). Cain settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden, married a sister (or cousin or niece), and had descendants that are listed in the Bible to the sixth generation. Cain built a city (verse 17), and his descendants included nomadic herdsmen, musicians, and smiths (verses 20-22).

Cain's descendants, some of whom are listed in Genesis 5, grew more and more wicked. Lamech, the fifth from Cain, was a polygamist and a murderer, and he boasted of his sin (Genesis 5:23). All of Cain's seed were probably wiped out in the flood. Genesis 5 follows the more godly line of Seth, one of Cain's younger brothers. Seth's descendants included Enoch, Methuselah, and Noah.

The tragic story of Cain illustrates the damaging effects of anger and jealousy. The willfulness and disobedience of Cain are alluded to in Scripture as a caution to others who might follow in his steps. First John 3:12 warns us against a lack of brotherly love: "Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother's were righteous." Those who welcome evil into their hearts have a natural hatred for those who are righteous.

Hebrews 11:4 gives us a clue as to why Cain's offering was rejected: "By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did." Abel had faith, and, by inference, Cain did not. Cain did not receive the approval of God because his heart was not right with God. "Without faith, it is impossible to please God" (verse 6). Finally, Jude speaks against ungodly men "who pervert the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ" (Jude 1:4). These hypocrites within the church face certain judgment: "Woe to them! They have taken the way of Cain" (verse 11). Like Cain, they have rejected God's will; like Cain, they proudly continue to ignore God's warnings; and, like Cain, they will be judged in the end.

**Abel:** Abel was the second son of Adam and Eve (Genesis 4:2). The meaning of his name is uncertain. Abel was a righteous man who pleased God. Abel was a shepherd and is known for bringing God a pleasing sacrifice—from the firstborn of his flock. Cain, Abel's older brother, was a worker of the ground and did not bring God a pleasing sacrifice. Cain was angry at God's displeasure and murdered Abel. In a striking picture of the need for justice, God said that Abel's blood cried out to Him from the ground (Genesis 4:10). As part of God's punishment on Cain, the ground would no longer yield its strength to him and he would be a wanderer and fugitive (verses 11–12).

When Adam and Eve had another son, they named him Seth—the name sounds like the Hebrew word for "appointed"—because Eve said that God had appointed her another offspring to replace Abel (Genesis 4:25). Seth's offspring were considered to be the righteous lineage; it was through Seth's line that Enoch and Noah and eventually all of humanity came. Genesis 4:26 says Seth had a son, Enosh, and it was during those days that "people began to call on the name of the LORD." Abel had worshiped God rightly, and now Seth's family did the same.

Jesus identified Abel as the world's first martyr (Matthew 23:35). Hebrews 11 commends Abel for his faith: "By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did. By faith he was commended as righteous, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith Abel still speaks, even though he is dead" (verse 4). Abel "speaks" in that he demonstrated true worship of God and his actions remain an example of faith and righteousness. Abel's blood is also mentioned

in Hebrews 12:24, where it is compared to the sprinkled blood of Jesus, another righteous man who was murdered by evildoers. Jesus' blood "speaks a better word than the blood of Abel." Abel's blood cried out for vengeance against the murderer; Jesus' blood cries out for forgiveness of the murderers (Luke 23:34).

Abel was righteous, but his death only demonstrated the sinfulness of humanity and highlighted the effects of the Fall. Abel was murdered and Cain punished. Abel's blood cried out for God to make it right. Jesus was righteous—completely so—and His murder led to the possibility of life. Jesus' death highlighted human sinfulness, but He conquered sin and death in His resurrection. The blood of Jesus is crucial to our salvation. His blood speaks a good word—one of atonement and hope. The blood of Abel's sacrifice was a shadow of Jesus' sacrifice in the NT.

The Bible does not give much information about Abel, but we can learn several things from what it does tell us. Abel demonstrated true worship by his faith and through his actions. We know that we cannot please God apart from faith (Hebrews 11:6). We are called to worship the Lord in spirit and in truth (John 4:24). Abel was persecuted for his faith; we will be as well (John 15:20; 2 Timothy 3:12). God heard the cry of Abel's blood and responded; God is attentive to our lives and our needs. In Abel's story we also see that God's plan is not thwarted. Cain was banished, but Adam and Eve were given Seth, through whom Messiah ultimately came. Even as God pronounced a curse upon sin in Genesis 3, He also promised a Savior (Genesis 3:15). Abel was a victim of the reality of human sinfulness, but the promised Savior, Jesus, did come, and His blood speaks a better word.

**Enoch:** Enoch is mentioned in Gen 5:18 who was the great-great-great-great-grandson of Adam. Gen 5:22–24 says, "After he became the father of Methuselah, Enoch walked faithfully with God 300 years and had other sons and daughters. Altogether, Enoch lived a total of 365 years. Enoch walked faithfully with God; then he was no more, because God took him away." Heb 11:5 gives a little more detail: "By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death: 'He could not be found, because God had taken him away.' For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God." This being "taken away" is what Enoch is most famous for. Only two people in the Bible are said to have been chosen by God to escape death, Enoch and Elijah. Enoch appears to have been given this privilege due to being a man who walked faithfully with God (Gen 5:24) and pleased God (Heb 11:5). For what purpose was Enoch taken away? The Bible does not specifically say. The most common assumption is so that he could serve as one of the two witnesses, alongside Elijah, in the end times.

**Noah:** We first hear about Noah in Genesis 5, which begins with "this is the book of the generations of Adam." Noah represents the tenth generation from Adam. The genealogical account of Noah reads, "When Lamech had lived 182 years, he had a son. He named him Noah and said, 'He will comfort us in the labor and painful toil of our hands caused by the ground the LORD has cursed'" (Genesis 5:28-29). Right from the start, we see that Noah is going to be special as he is the only member of this genealogy whose name is explained. His father, Lamech, states that his son, Noah, will bring relief ("Noah" sounds like the Hebrew word for "rest or relief"). God indicts mankind with these words: "The LORD saw how great man's wickedness

on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time” ([Genesis 6:5](#)). God determined to "wipe from the face of the earth the human race I have created—and with them the animals, the birds and the creatures that move along the ground—for I regret that I have made them" ([Genesis 6:7](#)). Yet, even in this situation, there is hope: “But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD” ([Genesis 6:8](#)). Despite the rampant wickedness that was increasing exponentially upon the earth, there is one man who stands out—a man whose life was characterized by the hand of God’s grace upon him. Noah found favor with the Lord. God was about to send judgment upon the world for its wickedness, but He extends His saving grace to Noah and his family.

[Genesis 6:9](#) marks the beginning of the flood narrative, and it is here that we learn the most about Noah’s life. We learn that Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation, and that he walked with God. One can almost see a progression of spirituality in this description of Noah’s life. By saying Noah was righteous, we know that he was obedient to God’s commands. He was blameless in his generation, standing out among the people of his day. While they were engaging in debauchery, Noah was living an exemplary life. Finally, Noah walked with God, which puts him in the same class as his great grandfather, Enoch ([Genesis 5:24](#)); this implies not only an obedient life, but one that has a vibrant and intimate relationship with God.

We see Noah’s obedient life demonstrated in his willingness to obey without question the Lord’s commands regarding the ark ([Genesis 6:22](#); [7:5, 9](#); [8:18](#)). God told Noah to build a large boat in the middle of the dry land. Noah’s trust in God was such that he promptly obeyed. Noah’s blameless life is made manifest as he obeys the Lord in light of the approaching day of wrath. The apostle Peter tells us that Noah was a “herald of righteousness” ([2 Peter 2:5](#)), and the author of Hebrews says that he “condemned the world” ([Hebrews 11:7](#)) through his righteous actions. Throughout the long delay of the coming judgment, Noah continued to faithfully obey the Lord. As evidence of his walk with God, after the flood, Noah built an altar and offered sacrifices to God ([Genesis 8:20](#)). Worship was a central part of Noah’s life.

**Lessons from his life:** Practically speaking, Noah is an example of a life of faith. Hebrews 11:7 says of Noah, “By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.” Noah didn’t need to “test” God before going into action; God commanded, and he obeyed. This was typical of Noah’s life. Noah was part of the godly line of Seth, of whom it was said, “At that time men began to call upon the name of the LORD” ([Genesis 4:26](#)). Noah was the result of generational obedience and faithfulness toward God. If we were to model our lives after Noah, there is no better rule to follow than to be “righteous, blameless in our generation, and to walk with God.” In other words, be right with God, be right with others, and have a reverent and worshipful relationship with God. You can almost hear the words of Jesus echoing here when He responds to the lawyer’s question regarding the greatest commandment ([Matthew 22:37-39](#)).

Theologically speaking, we can also draw some lessons from Noah's life. First and foremost, Noah's life shows us the eternal truth that we are saved by grace through faith ([Ephesians 2:8](#)). God's grace was upon him, aside from which Noah would have perished with all of the other wicked sinners in the flood. Noah is also a prime example that God saves His elect. We see that God was patient concerning the coming judgment while Noah built the ark ([1 Peter 3:20](#); [2 Peter 2:5](#)). The Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials. This truth is explicitly stated in [2 Peter 3:8-9](#), as we learn that the Lord will postpone final judgment until all of the elect reach repentance. Finally, Noah's life serves as a reminder that judgment on sin will come. The Day of the Lord will come ([2 Peter 3:10](#)). Jesus uses the life of Noah as a foreshadowing of what it will be like when the Son of Man returns in final judgment ([Matthew 24:37-38](#); [Luke 17:26-27](#)).

**Abraham:** Aside from Moses, no Old Testament character is mentioned more in the New Testament than Abraham. James refers to Abraham as "God's friend" (James 2:23), a title used of no one else in Scripture. Believers in all generations are called the "children of Abraham" ([Galatians 3:7](#)). Abraham's importance and impact in redemptive history are clearly seen in Scripture.

The life of Abraham takes up a good portion of the Genesis narrative from his first mention in Genesis 11:26 all the way to his death in Genesis 25:8. Although we know much about Abraham's life, we know little about his birth and early life. When we first meet Abraham, he is already 75 years old. Genesis 11:28 records that Abraham's father, Terah, lived in Ur, an influential city in southern Mesopotamia situated on the Euphrates River about halfway between the head of the Persian Gulf and the modern-day city of Baghdad. We also learn that Terah took his family and set off for the land of Canaan but instead settled in the city of Haran in northern Mesopotamia.

Abraham's story really turns interesting at the start of Genesis 12. In the first three verses, we see the call of Abraham by God: "The LORD had said to Abram, 'Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you'" (Genesis 12:1-3).

God calls Abraham out from his home in Haran and tells him to go to a land that He will show to him. God also makes three promises to Abraham: **1) The promise of a land of his own; 2) the promise to be made into a great nation; and 3) the promise of blessing.** These promises form the basis for what will later be called the Abrahamic Covenant (established in Genesis 15 and ratified in Genesis 17). What really makes Abraham special is that he obeyed God. Genesis 12:4 records that, after God called Abraham, he went "as the LORD had told him." The author of Hebrews uses Abraham as an example of faith several times, and refers specifically to this impressive act: "By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going" (Hebrews 11:8).

**Faith of Abraham**: The concept of family meant everything to a person living in the time of Abraham. In that time, family units were strongly knit; it was unusual for family members to live hundreds of miles apart from each other. In addition, we're not told anything about the religious life of Abraham and his family prior to his calling. The people of Ur and Haran worshiped the ancient Babylonian pantheon of gods, in particular the moon god, Sin, so God called Abraham out of a pagan culture. Abraham knew and recognized the call of Yahweh, the LORD, and obeyed willingly, not hesitantly.

Another example of Abraham's life of faith is seen in the birth of his son, Isaac. Abraham and Sarah were childless, yet God promised that Abraham would have a son (Genesis 15:4). This son would be the heir of Abraham's vast fortune with which God blessed him, and, more importantly, he would be the heir of promise and the continuation of the godly line of Seth. Abraham believed the promise of God, and that faith is credited to him as righteousness (Genesis 15:6). God reiterates His promise to Abraham in Genesis 17, and his faith is rewarded in Genesis 21 with the birth of Isaac.

Abraham's faith would be tested regarding his son, Isaac. In Genesis 22, God commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac on the top of Mount Moriah. Abraham faithfully obeying the God who was his shield (Genesis 15:1) and who had been extraordinarily gracious and good to him up to this point. As with the earlier command to leave his home and family, Abraham obeyed (Genesis 22:3). We know the story ends with God holding back Abraham from sacrificing Isaac, but imagine how Abraham must have felt. He had been waiting decades for a son of his own, and the God who promised this child to him was about to take him away. The point is that Abraham's faith in God was greater than his love for his son, and he trusted that even if he sacrificed Isaac, God was able to bring him back from the dead (Hebrews 11:17-19).

One obvious lesson to draw from Abraham's life is that we are to live a life of faith. Abraham could take his son Isaac up to Mount Moriah because he knew God was faithful to keep His promises. Abraham's faith wasn't a blind faith; his faith was a settled assurance and trust in the One who had proved Himself faithful and true. If we were to look back on our own lives, we would see the hand of God's providence all over it. God doesn't have to visit us accompanied by angels or speak from burning bushes or part the sea waters to be active in our lives. God is superintending and orchestrating the events of our lives. Sometimes it may not seem that way, but Abraham's life is evidence that God's presence in our lives is real. Even Abraham's failures demonstrate that God, while not protecting us from the consequences of our sin, graciously works His will in us and through us; nothing we do will thwart His plan.

Abraham's life also shows us the blessing of simple obedience. When asked to leave his family, Abraham left. When asked to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham "rose up early the next morning" to do so. From what we can discern from the biblical narrative, there was no hesitation in Abraham's obedience. Abraham, like most of us, may have agonized over these decisions, but, when it was

time to act, he acted. When we discern a true call from God or we read His instructions in His Word, we must act. Obedience is not optional when God commands something.

Theologically speaking, Abraham's life is a living example of the doctrine of *sola fide*, justification by faith alone. Twice the apostle Paul uses Abraham as an example of this crucial doctrine. In Romans, the entire fourth chapter is devoted to illustrating justification by faith through the life of Abraham. A similar argument is made in the book of Galatians, where Paul shows from Abraham's life that the Gentiles are heirs with the Jews to the blessings of Abraham through faith (Galatians 3:6-9, 14, 16, 18, 29). This goes back to Genesis 15:6, "Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness." Abraham's faith in the promises of God was sufficient for God to declare him righteous in His sight, thereby proving the principle of Romans 3:28. Abraham did nothing to earn justification. His trust in God was enough.

Another thing we learn from Abraham's life is that faith is not hereditary. In Matthew 3:9, Luke 3:8, and John 8:39, we learn that it is not enough to be physically descended from Abraham to be saved. The application for us is that it is not enough to be raised in a Christian home; we do not enter into fellowship with God or gain entry into heaven based on someone else's faith. God is not obligated to save us simply because we have an impeccable Christian pedigree. Paul uses Abraham to illustrate this in Romans 9, where he says not all who descended from Abraham were elected unto salvation (Romans 9:7). God sovereignly chooses those who will receive salvation, but that salvation comes through the same faith that Abraham exercised in his life.

Finally, we see that James uses the life of Abraham as an illustration that faith without works is dead (James 2:21). The example he uses is the story of Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah. Mere assent to the truths of the gospel is not enough to save. Faith must result in good works of obedience that show a living faith. Abraham was justified by his faith, and his faith was proved by his works.

In the final analysis, we see that Abraham was an exemplary individual, not so much in his piety or perfect life (he had his shortcomings), but because his life illustrates so many truths of the Christian life. God called Abraham out of the millions of people on the earth to be the object of His blessings. God used Abraham to play a pivotal role in the outworking of the story of redemption, culminating in the birth of Jesus. Abraham is a living example of faith and hope in the promises of God (Hebrews 11:8-10). Our lives should be so lived that, when we reach the end of our days, our faith, like Abraham's, will remain as an enduring legacy to others.

Sarah: Sarai began her life in the pagan world of Ur, in the land of the Chaldees, which was located in the area now known as Iraq. She was the half-sister, as well as the wife, of Abram (Abraham). Sarai and Abram had the same father but different mothers, according to Genesis 20:12. In those days, genetics were purer than they are today, and intermarriage was not detrimental to the offspring of unions between relatives. Also, since people tended to spend their lives clustered together in family units, it was the natural course to choose mates from within their own tribes and families.

When Abram encountered the living God for the first time, he believed Him (Genesis 12:1–4; 15:6) and followed after Him, obeying His command to leave his home to go to a place he had never heard about, much less seen. Sarai went with him.

Their journey brought them to the area called Harran (Genesis 11:31). Abram's father, Terah, passed away in this city, and Abram, Sarai, and their nephew Lot and their retinue continued their journey, allowing God to lead and guide them. With no housing and no modern conveniences, the journey must have been very difficult for all, especially for the women. During their journey, there was a famine in the land, prompting Abram and Sarai to go to Egypt (Genesis 12:10). When they did, Abram feared that the Egyptians would kill him because Sarai was beautiful and they would want her as a wife. So he asked Sarai to tell everyone that she was Abram's sister—which was technically true but also meant to deceive. Sarai was taken into Pharaoh's house, and Abram was treated well because of her. But God afflicted Pharaoh's house, and the couple's lie was revealed. Pharaoh returned Sarai to Abram and sent them on their way (Genesis 12). Sarai and Abram came back to the land now known as Israel. They had acquired many possessions and a great deal of wealth in their travels, so Lot and Abram agreed to split up in order that the massive herds of cattle would have adequate ground for grazing (Genesis 13:9).

Sarai was barren. Abram was worried that he would have no heir. But God gave Abram a vision in which He promised him a son and that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky (Genesis 15). God also promised Abraham's offspring the land of Canaan. The problem was that Sarai remained childless. Ten years after God had made His promise to Abram, Sarai, following cultural norms, suggested that Abram have a child with her servant, Hagar. The child born of that union would be counted as Sarai's. Abram agreed, and Hagar conceived a son—Ishmael. But Hagar began to look at Sarai with contempt, and Sarai began to treat Hagar harshly, so much so that Hagar ran away. God met Hagar in the desert and encouraged her to return to Abram and Sarai, which she did (Genesis 16).

Thirteen years after Ishmael was born, God reaffirmed His covenant with Abram, this time giving him the sign of circumcision as well as changing his name. Abram, meaning "high father," became Abraham, meaning "father of a multitude." God also changed Sarai's name, meaning "my princess," to Sarah, meaning "mother of nations." God told Abraham that He would give him a son through Sarah. This son—Isaac—would be the one with whom God would establish His covenant. God would bless Ishmael as well, but Isaac was the son of promise through whom the nations would be blessed (Genesis 17). Isaac means "he laughs." Sarah laughed when she was told that she would have a son in her old age 90 years old and had been barren her entire life. (Genesis 18:9–15).

God remained faithful to His promise to give Abraham and Sarah a son. They named him Isaac, and "Sarah said, 'God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me.' (Genesis 21:6–7). Though she may have previously laughed in disbelief and secrecy,

now Sarah laughed with joy and wanted her situation to be known. God had been faithful to His promise and blessed her.

Unfortunately, the tension between Sarah and Hagar remained. When Isaac was weaned, Abraham held a feast. But Ishmael, Hagar's son, was mocking Isaac. Sarah told Abraham to get rid of Hagar and Ishmael and that Ishmael should never share the inheritance with Isaac. Abraham was distressed at this, but God told him to do what Sarah said and that his descendants would be numbered through Isaac. Abraham sent Hagar and Ishmael away, and God provided for their needs (Genesis 21:8–21). It was after this that God tested Abraham by asking him to sacrifice Isaac. Abraham was willing to give up his son, trusting that God would somehow still remain true to His promise (Genesis 22; Hebrews 11:17–19). Sarah was a simple, beautiful (Genesis 12:11), and very human woman; she made mistakes, just like we all do.

Hebrews 11:11 uses Sarah as an example of faith: "And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise." First Peter 3:5–6 uses Sarah as an example of a holy woman who hoped in God and who adorned herself by submitting to her husband. Sarah willingly left her home and stepped out into the unknown to follow Abraham, as he followed the directions of a God with whom she was unfamiliar at the time. She endured much to try to provide an heir for her husband and to keep her husband safe in dangerous lands. In the end, she had faith enough to believe that she and her husband, at the ages of 90 and 100, would produce the promised heir, Isaac. Although she lived in a world of danger and confusion, Sarah stood firm in her commitment to her husband and to God, and her commitment was rewarded with blessing.

**Issac:** The name Isaac, which means "he laughs," was derived from his parents' reaction when God told Abraham and Sarah would have a son in their old age (Genesis 17:17; 18:12). Isaac was Abraham's second son; his first, Ishmael, was by Sarah's maidservant, Hagar (Genesis 16:1-2). As soon as Isaac was weaned, Sarah insisted that Abraham send Hagar and her son away, ensuring the family inheritance would go to Isaac (Genesis 21:3-12).

Many years later, Isaac was taken by his father up a mountain where Abraham, in obedience to God, prepared to sacrifice him (Genesis 22:1-14). Abraham, Isaac, and two of Abraham's servants loaded up donkeys and made a three-day journey to Mount Moriah. Leaving his servants behind, Abraham and Isaac carried up the wood, knife, and materials for the fire, saying they would worship and then return. Curious, Isaac asked about the location of the lamb for the offering. Abraham told Isaac that God Himself would provide the lamb. Abraham proceeded to build the altar and tie up Isaac to lay atop it. The Bible gives no indication that Isaac resisted. As Abraham prepared to kill Isaac, an angel stopped him. Abraham then saw a ram in a thicket and offered it instead. There is an interesting analogy in this account that mirrors God giving up His only Son, Jesus, to be sacrificed. God did indeed provide the Lamb—literally for Abraham and Isaac then and figuratively for all of humanity willing to accept the sacrifice of Jesus (John 1:29; Hebrews 10).

Sarah died when Isaac was in his late thirties. After her death, Abraham sent one of his servants to find a wife for Isaac from their clan, as Abraham was determined his son should not have a Canaanite for a wife (Genesis 24:1-51). Abraham's servant prayed to have success in finding a suitable wife, and God directed his quest. When he was forty, Isaac married his cousin Rebekah (Genesis 25:20). The Bible tells us that "he loved her; and Isaac was comforted after his mother's death" (Genesis 24:67).

At age sixty, Isaac became the father of twins—Jacob and Esau. While Isaac favored his elder son, Esau, Rebekah's favorite was Jacob. This caused great rivalry within the family and led to Jacob, the younger son, receiving the inheritance and his father's blessing that should have gone to Esau, the older son, after Isaac and Esau were deceived by Rebekah and Jacob. Isaac became aware of the deceit but could not revoke his blessing on Jacob (Genesis 27). Rebekah learned of Esau's plan to kill Jacob after Isaac's death and convinced Isaac to send Jacob to her brother Laban to find a wife among her relatives. Isaac again blessed Jacob before sending him on his way, praying that God would give Jacob the blessing given to Abraham.

Abraham died when Isaac was about seventy-five and left everything to him (Genesis 25:5). Though Ishmael had been sent away when Isaac was weaned, both Isaac and Ishmael buried Abraham (Genesis 25:9). The Bible does not talk specifically about their relationship, and the descendants of Ishmael and those of Isaac have historically been enemies; animosity remains to this day. But it is interesting to note that the two men apparently united in mourning their father.

When there was a famine in the land, God appeared to Isaac and told him not to go to Egypt but to remain in the land. God promised to be with Isaac and bless him and give the land to Isaac's descendants. God reaffirmed the covenant He had made with Abraham, saying that He would make his descendants as numerous as the stars and bless all the nations of the earth through them (Genesis 26:1–6).

Isaac remained in the land of Canaan. But, similar to what his father had done years before his birth, in fear, Isaac presented Rebekah as his sister rather than his wife (Genesis 26:7–11). But, just as God had protected Sarah, He also protected Rebekah. God blessed Isaac with bountiful crops and wealth, so much so that the Philistines became jealous and stopped up the water wells Abraham had dug. The Philistine king asked Isaac to move, and Isaac complied, moving from place to place digging new wells when his enemies quarreled with him over the water. The Philistine king soon recognized that Isaac had been blessed by God and made a treaty of peace between them (Genesis 26:26–31).

Isaac died at the age of 180 and was buried by both his sons. God affirmed His covenant with Isaac's son, Jacob, whom He renamed Israel. Though much of Isaac's story is narrative without many readily applicable lessons to our lives, we do see in Isaac a heart surrendered to God's will. For example, he was obedient to Abraham and Sarah and apparently trusting of their guidance. He obeyed when God told him to remain in the land despite the famine and the attacks of his enemies. When Isaac discovered that he had been deceived by his son Jacob, he accepted and

submitted to what he recognized as God's will, in spite of it being completely against the accepted tradition at the time. Just as Isaac discovered, we, too, must remember that God's ways are not our ways or His thoughts the same as ours (Isaiah 55:8). Isaac's story also demonstrates God's faithfulness to His promises—He had made a covenant with Abraham and would continue to uphold it with Isaac and with Isaac's son Jacob.

Though there are no great achievements to speak of concerning Isaac's life, it was Isaac whom God chose to continue the covenant line, the same line that would produce the Messiah, Jesus. And for many generations the Jewish nation described their God as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Indeed, there are several passages of Scripture where God describes Himself in the same manner (Exodus 3:6). Isaac is listed with the other patriarchs and has a place in God's kingdom (Luke 13:28).

**Jacob:** Jacob's life began with a struggle. As a twin in the womb with Esau, he jostled for position and was born grasping his brother's heel. Jacob's name is translated as "he deceives" (Genesis 25:26). When his mother, Rebekah, asked God during her pregnancy what was happening to her, God told her that there were two nations within her womb who would become divided. One would be stronger than the other, and the older would serve the younger (Genesis 25:23).

Jacob and Esau grew up together living a nomadic life. Esau became a fine hunter and loved to be out in the countryside while Jacob "was content to stay at home among the tents" (Genesis 25:27). Esau, being a hunter, was his father's favorite as Isaac loved the wild game Esau brought home, while Jacob was favored by his mother (Genesis 25:28). This destructive favoritism would follow the family into the next generation, most notably with Jacob favoring his son Joseph. Such was Jacob's favoritism for Joseph that it caused great resentment among his brothers and nearly cost Joseph his life.

When Isaac was old and his eyesight faded, he thought he was near to his death and made arrangements with Esau to pass on to him the blessings due to the firstborn son (Genesis 27:1-4). On hearing this, Rebekah devised a plan to deceive Isaac into blessing Jacob instead. Thus, Jacob received his father's blessing in Esau's place. Esau vowed he would kill Jacob for this as soon as the period of mourning for his father's death ended (Genesis 27:41). As it turned out, his father did not die for about another twenty years (Genesis 35:27-29).

However, Rebekah became aware of Esau's plan and warned Jacob. Rebekah also told Isaac that Jacob should find himself a wife from among his own people, so Isaac sent Jacob to his uncle Laban who lived in their ancestral home of Haran (Genesis 27:43). During Jacob's journey, he had a dream of a ladder to heaven with God at the top and angels ascending and descending. This imagery is mirrored in Jesus' words to His disciple Nathanael (John 1:51). God gave Jacob the assurance of His presence and reiterated His promise to Abraham (Genesis 28:13-15). As a result of this experience, Jacob renamed the place "Bethel," meaning "house of God," and he vowed to serve God.

After Jacob settled in Haran, Laban offered him payment for the work he had been doing as a shepherd looking after his flocks. Jacob offered to work for Laban for seven years in return for Laban's daughter Rachel, whom he loved deeply. However, Jacob was to discover that his uncle Laban could be just as much a deceiver as he had been. On Jacob's wedding night, Laban substituted his older daughter, Leah, for Rachel (Genesis 29:23-25). However, Laban agreed to give Jacob Rachel as well, provided Jacob finish the wedding week with Leah before taking Rachel as a wife, and then work another seven years for him. Jacob agreed to this plan. While both women remained Jacob's wives, Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah (Genesis 29:30), a source of continued family strife.

While Rachel remained barren, Leah gave birth to Jacob's firstborn son, Reuben. Then followed the birth of eleven more sons from Leah, Rachel, and their two handmaidens. These sons would be the progenitors of the twelve tribes of Israel. After the birth of Joseph, Rachel's first child and Jacob's eleventh, Jacob asked Laban to send him back to his homeland. Laban asked Jacob to remain, telling him to name his wages. Jacob requested only the specked and spotted sheep and goats from all Laban's flocks that he tended, to make flocks of his own. It is unclear how or why it worked, but Jacob put striped branches in front of the flocks when they mated, and it resulted in specked and spotted offspring that he could claim for himself. Jacob did this only with the strong animals so that his flocks grew strong while Laban had weak flocks (Genesis 30:31-43). Jacob recognized that Laban and Laban's sons' attitude toward him had changed. It was then that God commanded Jacob to return to the land of his fathers accompanied by His promise, "And I will be with you" (Genesis 31:3). Jacob left Haran, taking with him his wives and children and all the vast flocks he had accumulated. When Laban learned that Jacob left, he pursued him. But God told Laban in a dream to "be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad" (Genesis 31:24). Laban did ask Jacob why he'd left secretly and spoke of his power to harm Jacob were it not for God's warning. He also accused Jacob of stealing his household idols. Continuing the legacy of deception, Rachel who had taken the idols unbeknownst to Jacob, concealed them from her father during his search. Laban and Jacob eventually parted company after swearing an oath not to invade one another's lands.

Next Jacob had to face his brother, Esau. Though twenty years had passed since they had last seen each other, the memory of Esau's threat to kill Jacob had never left him (Genesis 32:11). Jacob sent messengers ahead of him with gifts, instructing them to tell Esau that he was following after. The messengers returned to Jacob, telling him that Esau was coming to meet him along with four hundred men. Afraid that Esau was coming to destroy him, Jacob divided his family into two groups, hoping at least one group could escape attack. Jacob prayed for God to save him, reminding God that He had sent Jacob back to the land of Abraham and had promised to make him prosper and his descendants numerous (Genesis 32:9-12). Jacob selected more gifts for Esau, which he sent ahead with servants in waves, hoping to pacify Esau. That night he sent his wives and sons away from him as well. While alone, in the middle of the night and afraid for his life, Jacob wrestled with a man who he later learned was God (Genesis 32:22-31). The man touched Jacob's hip, putting it out of socket, but at daybreak Jacob still refused to let the man go.

He asked for a blessing and was told, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome" (Genesis 32:28). Jacob asked the man his name and then understood that He was God. Jacob named the place Peniel, recognizing that He had seen God and yet God had spared his life. This wrestling match and name change marked a new beginning for Jacob.

The reunion with Esau was not the attack he had feared: "Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. And they wept" (Genesis 33:4). Esau offered to accompany Jacob the rest of the way. Jacob refused, citing the size of his family. Jacob also refused Esau's offer to leave some of his men with the group. It seems that Jacob did not fully trust his brother Esau, and so, instead of meeting Esau in Seir, Jacob took his family another route where they finally purchased a plot of land and settled in El Elohe Israel or "Mighty is the God of Israel." Though he had been given a new name, Jacob the deceiver was still wary of others who might be trying to deceive him. Here we see that the mind of those who plot to deceive is always suspicious of the motives of others and can never fully be at rest.

Genesis 34 records the rape of Jacob's only daughter, Dinah, and the revenge her brothers Simeon and Levi carried out on the rapist's entire community. Once again, we see how the deviousness of the parents is passed on to the children in the deceitful way they overcame their enemy. Jacob was angry with his sons and, in obedience to God's guidance, moved his family back to Bethel (Genesis 35:1) where God reappeared to Jacob and confirmed His blessing (Genesis 35:9-13). In Jacob's meeting with God, he received the promise that kings and many nations would come from him and that the land God had promised his forefathers would be his inheritance (Genesis 35:11-12).

Jacob and his family later moved from Bethel to Eder. On the way, Rachel gave birth to her second son, Jacob's twelfth—Benjamin. Rachel died in childbirth. Jacob was reunited with his father, Isaac, in Mamre. When his father died, both Jacob and Esau buried him. Similar to his mother, Jacob also had favorites. Rachel was his favorite wife, and her children—Joseph and Benjamin—were his favorite sons. In fact, Joseph was so favored that his brothers became jealous and sold him into slavery. But God was with Joseph, and he eventually fared well in Egypt and rescued his family, Jacob included, from famine. Jacob died in Egypt and was embalmed at Joseph's request (Genesis 49:29—50:3). Joseph and his brothers took Jacob's body back to Canaan to be buried alongside Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah, and Leah. Prior to his death, Jacob had blessed his twelve sons and requested to be buried in the cave that Abraham had bought for burial. Jacob had also blessed Joseph's two sons, giving the blessing of the firstborn to the younger son. Unlike his father who had been deceived into giving the blessing of the firstborn to Jacob, Jacob crossed his hands to purposefully give the unc customary blessing.

The similarities in the lives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are striking. In their stories we see the importance of family and the influence of example. Themes like deceit, favoritism, family strife, unexpected blessing, reconciliation, and faith flow through the narratives. Mostly, we see that God is faithful to His promises. He chooses to accomplish His kingdom purposes through sinful

people who are willing to believe Him. He can make those sinful people new—giving Abram the name Abraham, Jacob the name Israel, and making those who believe in Jesus Christ new creations (2 Corinthians 5:17). Though our sinful patterns might still plague us, in Christ we find forgiveness for our sins as well as power to overcome. We are invited to participate in God's work in the world. We have new names and can trust the promises of the God who proves Himself faithful time and time again.

Jacob's name, "deceiver," does seem to characterize much of Jacob's life. But he was also Israel, one to whom God made promises to which He remained faithful. God appeared to Jacob, and Jacob believed God's promises. Despite Jacob's faults, God chose him to be the leader of a great nation that still bears his name today.

**Joseph:** Joseph was the eleventh son of Jacob, his first son through his favored wife, Rachel. Joseph's story is found in Genesis 37—50. We are also told that Jacob "loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age; and he made an ornate robe for him" (Genesis 37:3). Joseph's brothers knew their father loved Joseph more than them, which caused them to hate him (Genesis 37:4). To make matters worse, Joseph began relating his dreams to the family—prophetic visions showing Joseph one day ruling over his family (Genesis 37:5–11).

The animosity toward Joseph peaked when his brothers plotted to kill him in the wilderness. Reuben, the eldest, objected to outright murder and suggested they throw Joseph into a cistern, as he planned to come back and rescue the boy. But, in Reuben's absence, some merchants passed by, and Judah suggested selling Joseph into slavery; the brothers accomplished the task before Reuben could rescue him. The boys took Joseph's robe and, after dipping the robe in goat's blood, deceived their father into thinking his favorite son had been slain by wild beasts (Genesis 37:18–35).

Joseph was sold by the merchants to a high-ranking Egyptian named Potiphar and eventually became the supervisor of Potiphar's household. In Genesis 39 we read of how Joseph excelled at his duties, became one of Potiphar's most trusted servants, and was put in charge of his household. Potiphar could see that, whatever Joseph did, God looked favorably on him and he prospered in all that he did. Unfortunately, Potiphar's wife attempted to seduce Joseph. Joseph consistently refused her advances, showing honor for the master who had entrusted him with so much and saying that it would be "a wicked thing and a sin against God" for him to go to bed with Potiphar's wife (Genesis 39:9). One day Potiphar's wife caught Joseph by the cloak and again made sexual advances. Joseph fled, leaving his cloak in her hand. In anger, she falsely accused Joseph of attempted rape, and Potiphar put him in prison (Genesis 39:7–20).

In jail, Joseph was again blessed by God (Genesis 39:21–23). Joseph interpreted the dreams of two of his fellow prisoners. Both interpretations proved to be true, and one of the men was later released from jail and restored to his position as the king's cupbearer (Genesis 40:1–23). But the cupbearer forgot about Joseph and failed to speak to Pharaoh about him. Two years later, the

king himself had some troubling dreams, and the cupbearer remembered Joseph's gift of interpretation. The king summoned Joseph and related his dreams. Based on Pharaoh's dreams, Joseph predicted seven years of bountiful harvests followed by seven years of severe famine in Egypt and advised the king to begin storing grain in preparation for the coming dearth (Genesis 41:1–37). For his wisdom, Joseph was made a ruler in Egypt, second only to the king. Joseph was in charge of storing up food during the years of plenty and selling it to Egyptians and foreigners during the years of famine (Genesis 41:38–57). During these years of plenty Joseph had two sons—Manasseh and Ephraim (Genesis 41:50–52).

When the famine struck, even Canaan was affected. Jacob sent ten of his sons to Egypt to buy grain (Genesis 42:1–3). He kept Benjamin, his youngest and the only other son of Rachel, behind (Genesis 42:4). While in Egypt, the men met their long-lost brother, whom they did not recognize. Joseph, however, did recognize his brothers. He tested them by accusing them of being spies. He confined them for three days then released all but one, sending with them grain for their households and requiring them to come back with their youngest brother (Genesis 42:6–20). Still unaware of Joseph's identity, the brothers were afflicted with guilt for having sold their brother years before (Genesis 42:21–22). Joseph overheard their discussion and turned aside to weep (Genesis 42:23–24). He retained Simeon and sent the others on their way, secretly returning their money to their grain sacks (Genesis 42:25). When the brothers later realized the money had been returned, they feared even more (Genesis 42:26–28, 35). Once home, they told Jacob all that had transpired. Jacob mourned again the loss of Joseph and the added loss of Simeon. He refused to send Benjamin, despite Reuben's promise that, if he did not return with Benjamin, Jacob could kill Reuben's two sons (Genesis 42:35–38).

The famine became so severe that Jacob had to face it. Judah persuaded Jacob to send Benjamin with him, giving his own life as a pledge (Genesis 43:1–10). Jacob agreed, sending also choice fruits and double the money for the grain (Genesis 43:11–14). When Joseph saw the men, he instructed his servants to slaughter an animal and prepare a meal for the brothers to dine with him (Genesis 43:15–17). Afraid at the invitation to Joseph's house, the brothers made apologies to Joseph's steward for the money that had been replaced the first time. Joseph's steward reassured them and brought Simeon out (Genesis 43:18–25). When Joseph returned, the brothers bowed to him, fulfilling his earlier prophecy (Genesis 43:26). He asked about their family's welfare and again wept, this time removing himself to his chamber (Genesis 43:27–30). When the men sat down for the meal, at a separate table from Joseph, they were amazed to be arranged by birth order. Benjamin was given five times the portion the other brothers received (Genesis 43:31–34). Before sending them back to their father, Joseph again tested his brothers by returning their money to their grain sacks and placing his silver cup in Benjamin's sack. He let the brothers start on their journey and then sent his steward after them to feign anger and threaten to kill Benjamin. Back in Joseph's presence, Judah pleaded for Benjamin's life, saying that, if Benjamin were to die, so would Jacob. Judah told of Jacob's grief over the loss of Joseph and his belief that he could not bear to lose Joseph's brother. Judah also spoke of his pledge to Jacob and offered his life for Benjamin's (Genesis 44).

Upon seeing this proof of his brothers' change of heart, Joseph sent all his servants away and wept openly and loudly enough to be heard by Pharaoh's household. He then revealed himself to his brothers (Genesis 45:1–3). Joseph immediately reassured them, telling them not to be angry with themselves for what they'd done to him and saying that God had sent him to Egypt in order to preserve them (Genesis 45:4–8). Joseph reaffirmed his forgiveness years later, after the death of his father, saying that, although his brothers intended evil to him, God had intended it for good (Genesis 50:15–21). Joseph sent his brothers back to Jacob to retrieve the remainder of his household to come live in Goshen, where they would be near to Joseph and he could provide for them (Genesis 45:9—47:12).

Jacob did come to live in Egypt with all of his family. Before he died, Jacob blessed Joseph's two sons and gave thanks to God for His goodness: "I never expected to see your face again, and now God has allowed me to see your children too" (Genesis 48:11). Jacob gave the greater blessing to the younger of the two sons (verses 12–20). Later in the history of Israel, Ephraim and Manasseh, the tribes of Joseph, were often considered two distinct tribes. Jacob's descendants lived in Egypt for 400 years, until the time of Moses. When Moses led the Hebrews out of Egypt, he took the remains of Joseph with him, as Joseph had requested (Genesis 50:24–25; cf. Exodus 13:19). In asking that he be buried in Canaan, Joseph showed great faith that God would bring His people back to the Promised Land (Hebrews 11:22).

There is much to learn from Joseph's story. As parents, we have warnings concerning Jacob's favoritism and the effects that can have on other children as seen in Joseph's youthful pride and his brothers' envy and hatred. We have a good example of how to handle sexual temptation—run (Genesis 39:12; 2 Timothy 2:22), and we have a clear picture of God's faithfulness. He does not forsake His children, even in the midst of suffering: "The Lord was with Joseph" (Genesis 39:3, 5, 21, 23).

There may be many distressing circumstances we find ourselves in, and some of them may even be unjust, as were those in Joseph's life. However, as we learn from the account of Joseph's life, by remaining faithful and accepting that God is ultimately in charge, we can be confident that God will reward our faithfulness in the fullness of time. Who would blame Joseph if he had turned his brothers away in their need? Yet Joseph showed them mercy, and God desires that we exercise mercy above all other sacrifices (Hosea 6:6; Matthew 9:13).

Joseph's story also presents amazing insight into how God sovereignly works to overcome evil and bring about His plan. After all his ordeals, Joseph was able to see God's hand at work. As he revealed his identity to his brothers, Joseph spoke of their sin this way: "Do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. . . . It was not you who sent me here, but God" (Genesis 45:5, 8). Later, Joseph again reassured his brothers, offering forgiveness and saying, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good" (Genesis 50:20). Man's most wicked intentions can never thwart the perfect plan of God.