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Flawed: Heroes of the Faith / Jacob (son of Isaac); Faith / Hebrews 11:21  
Hebrews 11:21 teaches us what it means to look at all of life through the lens of God's grace.

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## Introduction

We are currently in a sermon series that I am calling, “Flawed: Heroes of the Faith.”

This five-week series explores the lives and flaws of some of the believers listed in [Hebrews 11](#).

In the first week, we looked at [Hebrews 11](#) as a whole. The next week we studied Sarah. Last week, we studied Moses.

And today, we are going to study Jacob, a flawed hero of the faith.

## Scripture

In preparation for today’s message, I would like to read two passages of Scripture. The first is our text for today: [Hebrews 11:21](#). And the second text is the background upon which today’s text is based: [Genesis 48:8-20](#).

So, first, let us read [Hebrews 11:21](#):

<sup>21</sup> By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff.

And, second, let us also read [Genesis 48:8-20](#):

<sup>8</sup> When Israel saw Joseph’s sons, he said, “Who are these?” <sup>9</sup> Joseph said to his father, “They are my sons, whom God has given me here.” And he said, “Bring them to me, please, that I may bless them.” <sup>10</sup> Now the eyes of Israel were dim with age, so that he could not see. So Joseph brought them near him, and he kissed them and embraced them. <sup>11</sup> And Israel said to Joseph, “I never expected to see your face; and behold, God has let me see your

offspring also.”<sup>12</sup> Then Joseph removed them from his knees, and he bowed himself with his face to the earth.<sup>13</sup> And Joseph took them both, Ephraim in his right hand toward Israel’s left hand, and Manasseh in his left hand toward Israel’s right hand, and brought them near him.<sup>14</sup> And Israel stretched out his right hand and laid it on the head of Ephraim, who was the younger, and his left hand on the head of Manasseh, crossing his hands (for Manasseh was the firstborn).<sup>15</sup> And he blessed Joseph and said, “The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life long to this day,<sup>16</sup> the angel who has redeemed me from all evil, bless the boys; and in them let my name be carried on, and the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac; and let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth.”

<sup>17</sup> When Joseph saw that his father laid his right hand on the head of Ephraim, it displeased him, and he took his father’s hand to move it from Ephraim’s head to Manasseh’s head.<sup>18</sup> And Joseph said to his father, “Not this way, my father; since this one is the firstborn, put your right hand on his head.”<sup>19</sup> But his father refused and said, “I know, my son, I know. He also shall become a people, and he also shall be great. Nevertheless, his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his offspring shall become a multitude of nations.”<sup>20</sup> So he blessed them that day, saying, “By you Israel will pronounce blessings, saying, ‘God make you as Ephraim and as Manasseh.’” Thus he put Ephraim before Manasseh.

## Lesson

[Hebrews 11](#) is often called “The Bible’s Hall of Faith.” There are 16 people named in [Hebrews 11](#). And there are many other acts of faith mentioned but no names are attached to those acts.

The Bible recognizes that all of the people in [Hebrews 11](#) not only exemplified great faith but that they were also all flawed people. They are listed in [Hebrews 11](#) not because they had no flaws but because of their faith—even with their flaws.

For most of those people who are named in [Hebrews 11](#), the author noted a key incident in the person’s life that exemplified and demonstrated faith. But what is so interesting is what the author noted about a key event in Jacob’s life to

demonstrate his faith. Listen again to [Hebrews 11:21](#), “By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff.” The author of Hebrews chose this moment as the preeminent demonstration of faith in the life of Jacob. Of all the things that took place in Jacob’s life, why this event?

It seems to me that [Hebrews 11:21](#) teaches us what it means to look at all of life through the lens of God's grace.

Of all the characters listed in “The Bible’s Hall of Faith,” Jacob vacillated a lot.

He stole his brother’s birthright.

He fled for his life to his uncle in a country far away.

The only person who loved him at that time—his mother—he never saw again.

He was deceived into marrying a woman he did not love.

After 20 years in a foreign country, he wanted to return home but he had to encounter his brother, the one whose birthright he had stolen.

Eventually, his sons deceived him and said that his favorite son had been killed by an animal.

Meanwhile, Jacob’s sons had sold their brother into slavery in Egypt.

After about fifteen years, Jacob was reunited with his son Joseph whom he thought had been dead all these years.

But he had to relocate to Egypt, where he lived until he died.

Just before Jacob died, he blessed all his sons, including his favorite son Joseph’s two sons.

It is in this blessing of his grandsons that Jacob teaches us what it means to look at all of life through the lens of God’s grace.

## I. A Need for God’s Grace

First, let’s look at a need for God’s grace.

Jacob said in [Genesis 48:15](#), “The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life long to this day...” Interestingly, this is the first time in the Bible that God is called a “shepherd.”

Let’s back up a bit. Very early in the history of mankind, God looked at the world and saw sin and wickedness and corruption. He called Abram to himself and said to him, “Abram, I want you to leave your country and go to the land that I will show you. I want to bless all the families of the world through you.”

Abram followed God. And over many years God showed Abram that he was going to bless the world through one of Abram’s descendants.

One of the things to note is that it is God who chooses the descendant through whom the Promised One would come. So, the descendant was not Ishmael but Isaac. Isaac then had twin sons: Esau and Jacob. And God told Isaac’s wife Rebekah that the Promised One would not come through the older son but through the younger son, Jacob.

Now, I am sure that as Isaac and Rebekah raised their boys they would have shared with them what God had said.

Isaac, however, liked Esau who grew up to be a man of the outdoors. He was rugged and strong. Sarah, on the other hand, liked Jacob who grew up to be a quiet man, dwelling in tents.

One day, when Esau came back from the field, he was exhausted. Jacob was cooking a stew, and Esau asked him for some stew. Jacob said, “Sell me your birthright now.”

Esau said, “I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?”

Jacob said, “Swear to me now.”

So he swore to him and sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright ([Genesis 25:31-34](#)).

Years later, when Isaac was preparing for his death, he decided to bless Esau and pass on to him the blessing that was to be given to the descendant from whom the Promised One would descend.

Now, Isaac was going to do something contrary to God's will. But, he loved Esau and in the economy of that day, the blessing always went to the firstborn son.

So, Isaac called Esau and asked him to go and hunt for some game and come back and prepare his favorite dish for him so that he could bless Esau.

Rebekah overheard this conversation and told Jacob about it. She decided to help Jacob deceive his father Isaac into giving him the blessing instead of Esau. So, Rebekah prepared a meal for Isaac. She got Esau's clothes and had Jacob dressed in them. She even got some goat skins and put them on Jacob's hands and the smooth part of his neck, because Esau was a hairy man.

Jacob then went to his father with the delicious meal. Isaac, whose eyesight was extremely poor was deceived. He blessed Jacob and gave him the blessing of the firstborn.

When Esau came back from hunting he prepared a meal for his dad. Then Esau and Isaac learned about Jacob's deception. Esau was so furious that he wanted to kill Jacob. But he decided to wait until after Isaac died.

Now, I don't know why Jacob and Rebekah resorted to the deception. I also don't know why Isaac wanted to pass the blessing on to Esau when God had made it clear that he was going to bring the Promised One through the descendant of Jacob.

Now, back to [Genesis 48:15](#) where Jacob talked about "the God who has been my shepherd all my life long to this day..." As Jacob looked back on his life, he recognized that he was as dumb as a sheep. He did some really stupid things in his life. He stole his brother's birthright. He deceived his father into giving him the blessing.

But even through his sheeplike stupidity, God was a shepherd to him.

You see, Jacob needed God's grace in his life. He had the promise of God. And yet he still acted to manipulate God instead of submitting to God and his word.

Jacob would experience many more trials and difficulties in his life before God's grace became a reality for him.

All people need God's grace. Without God's grace, we are destined to misery and, ultimately, to hell. Sometimes God allows us to go through all kinds of difficulties to show us our need for his grace.

And that brings us to our second point.

## II. An Experience of God's Grace

Second, let's look at an experience of God's grace.

Now, most of you may affirm your need for God's grace. But not all of you have an experience of God's grace. I can say that because that is true in any gathering of professing believers.

People get connected to a church for all kinds of reasons. They want fellowship. They want a sense of meaning in their lives. They want to deal with the guilt in their lives.

But not everyone who is connected to a church—or even who is a member of a church—has a genuine experience of God's grace.

Jacob alluded to his personal experience of God's grace when he went on to say in [Genesis 48:16a](#), “the angel who has redeemed me from all evil, bless the boys.” What was Jacob talking about when he mentioned “the angel”?

When Rebekah heard that Esau wanted to kill Jacob, she had him run away to her brother Laban in Haran. Jacob left his family, and he never saw his mother alive again.

Along the way to Haran, Jacob slept one night and had a dream in which the Lord met Jacob. Again the Lord promised Jacob that he would be with him and that he would return Jacob to that land that he had promised to give Abraham and Isaac and all their descendants.

Jacob arrived in Haran and met Laban and his two daughters, Leah and Rachel. The Bible says in [Genesis 29:17](#), “Leah's eyes were weak, but Rachel was beautiful in form and appearance.” Bible translators don't know what to do with the description of Leah and her eyes. But surely the context tells us. Rachel was stunningly beautiful. She was drop-dead gorgeous. Leah, on the other hand, was

pretty plain and probably ugly. Her eyes were protruding or she was cross-eyed or something like that.

So Jacob fell in love with beautiful Rachel.

But Jacob got a taste of his own medicine when Laban deceived him into marrying Leah rather than Rachel. We don't have time to go into that but it is a fascinating story.

Jacob worked for Laban for twenty years: seven years for Rachel (but he got Leah instead). Another seven years for Rachel. And a further six years for a large number of different animals.

Eventually, he had to flee from Laban and he headed back to the promised land.

Along the way, he heard that Esau (with four hundred men) was coming out to meet him. Remember, the last time Jacob saw Esau, Esau wanted to kill Jacob.

So, Jacob devised a scheme to appease his brother. He broke up his family and his animals. He had them go ahead of him in groups to meet Esau and they were to present him with gifts of animals. His family, servants, and animals crossed the Jabbok river, while Jacob spent the night on the other side of the river.

That night, [Genesis 32:24](#) says that “a man wrestled with [Jacob] until the breaking of the day.” Later in [Genesis 48:16](#), Jacob referred to the man as “the angel.” But it was really God with whom Jacob was wrestling.

They wrestled throughout the night. Then, as the morning was breaking, and Jacob was beginning to discern some features of the face of “the angel,” God touched Jacob's hip socket, and put it out of joint.

Then “the angel” (who was really God) said, “Let me go, for the day has broken.”

But Jacob said, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.”

It is at this point that Jacob realized that he was having a personal encounter with God. All of his life, he had been wanting stuff from God. He wanted God to do his bidding. But now he wanted God himself. He wanted to experience God's grace personally in his life.

And [God] said to him, “What is your name?”

And he said, “Jacob.”

Then he said, “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed.”

Then Jacob asked him, “Please tell me your name.”

But he said, “Why is it that you ask my name?” And there he blessed him.

So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered” ([Genesis 32:26-30](#)).

Jacob had a personal experience of God’s grace. His life was never the same after that.

Yes, he still had many struggles and difficulties in his life. But he now knew God’s grace experientially and personally.

Do you have personal experience of God’s grace in your life? Is God real to you? Or, are you just going through the motions by going to worship services and hoping that your performance will please God?

How do you have a personal experience of God’s grace? You don’t try and manufacture it. You say to God, as Jacob did, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.”

You pray and ask God to make his grace real and personal in your life.

### III. A Worldview of God’s Grace

And finally, let’s look at a worldview of God’s grace.

This brings us to the account at the end of Jacob’s life when he blessed Joseph’s sons. [Genesis 48:10](#) says that “the eyes of Israel were dim with age, so that he could not see.” He was like his own father Isaac at the end of his life, and his eyesight was gone.

Joseph brought his two sons to his father Jacob for him to bless the boys. Joseph brought his firstborn Manasseh to Jacob’s right hand and his second son Ephraim to Jacob’s left hand.

But Jacob crossed his hands so that he put his right hand on Ephraim and his left hand on Manasseh. Verse 17 says that this displeased Joseph, and he took his father’s hand to move it from Ephraim’s head to Manasseh’s head.

Joseph figured that his father's eyes were bad and he could not see properly. But Jacob refused and in verse 19, he said, "I know, my son, I know. He also shall become a people, and he also shall be great. Nevertheless, his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his offspring shall become a multitude of nations."

Jacob had finally come to look at all of life through the lens of God's grace. He knew that God's grace was moving toward Ephraim, the younger son.

Joseph was looking at things the way the world did. In that day, the older son received the double blessing.

But Jacob was now looking at the world through the lens of God's grace. And God's grace does not operate as the world thinks it should.

Over and over again in the Bible, God works in a way that is contrary to the way the world thinks. The world says that the rich are blessed but God says, "Blessed are the poor." The world says you must look out for your own interests but God says that you must look out for the interest of others. The world says that a leader gets ahead by climbing over others but God says that a leader gets ahead by serving others.

Jacob finally came to grasp that God is in sovereign control of all of life. God's economy is completely different than the way of the world. He had come to look at the world through the grace of God.

Jacob's worldview was governed by the grace of God.

## Conclusion

That is why the author of Hebrews chose this example as the supreme example of Jacob's faith in [Hebrews 11:21](#) when he wrote, "By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff." Through the ups and downs of Jacob's life, he had finally come to look at all of life through the lens of God's grace.

As we conclude today, I assume that you would affirm that need the grace of God in your life. If you did not sense a need for God's grace in your life, you probably would not be here.

But, you must do more than affirm your need for God's grace. You must also experience God's grace in your life. You can experience God's grace by doing two things. First, you must repent of your sin. You must recognize that you have violated God's law and that you no longer want to do so. So, you turn from your sin, your wrongdoing, and put it behind you. And second, you must put your faith in Jesus. You must believe that Jesus died to pay the penalty for your sin. You must submit to his Lordship over every area of your life.

And finally, as a Christian, you must look at every area of life through the lens of God's grace. Your entire worldview must be shaped by the gospel and the word of God. You can only do that if you diligently read and apply the word of God to every area of your life. That is why I encourage you to get into Bible study with others. Get your children into Sunday school. Get your teenagers to Youth Group. Get your husband to the Men's Bible Study. Get your wives to the Women's Bible Study. Soak up God's word so that you don't make the bumbling mistakes that Jacob did. Amen.