

GOD'S MESSY FAMILY

FINDING YOUR PLACE WHEN LIFE ISN'T PERFECT

THE
CONNECTED
LIFE



JACOB ARMSTRONG



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THE MYTH OF THE PERFECT FAMILY

My wife and I have a group of people with whom we “do life.” We sort of do everything together. I think that is what “doing life” means. We have been part of a small group at our church with these people for nearly ten years. Our kids have grown up together; actually we have all grown up together. Most of us are married, some are single. We have seemingly gone through it all: illnesses, graduations, promotions, demotions. We have experienced life together and, sadly, death together. Just last year we lost one of our beloved group members to cancer. I don’t even like to say that we are “like” family. We are family.

Several years ago, when my wife Rachel was pregnant with our third daughter, a couple from our group, Brian and Hollie,

told us they were adopting a child. They had just been approved to adopt a son from Ethiopia. We followed their plans closely. We prayed for them and bought them baby gifts. We ate with them at our local Ethiopian restaurant as we dreamed about life with their new son and tried to learn more about his culture.

I remember when they were told his name: Tamirat Yishak. One night at the Ethiopian restaurant they asked the waitress the meaning of Tamirat. She said, "America." Brian and Hollie thought that was strange, a son named America. As they discussed it with the waitress, the restaurant owner came from the kitchen and cleared up the confusion. He said, "No, no, no, you misheard her. His name does not mean 'America'; it means 'a miracle.'" Brian and Hollie decided to keep the name his birth parents had given him: Tamirat Yishak. We call him Ty for short. He is our miracle.

Ty and my daughter Phoebe have grown up together since they were babies. They are both spirited, and they've had many disagreements and more than one argument over a toy. They laugh together. They cry together. They get on each other's nerves. Sometimes they play for hours without even noticing the passage of time.

Ty and Phoebe are family. But when our two families are together—five girls and one boy (sorry, Ty!)—it is . . . well, a mess. We clutter up the kitchen. We spread out toys. We track mud onto the floor. And it's loud, trust me. But it's our messy family, and we love it.

Meet God's Family

Most likely there are parts of your family that are a mess—either your biological family or a family of friends. That's what this book is about, a really messy family. It's about what I would call *the* family in the Bible. A family known as God's family. They are a big, beautiful mess, and the best part is that we've all been adopted into it. It's important you know that. You have been included not in a perfect family, but in a family where your imperfections are known and you are loved anyway. Understanding your place in this family may be the most important thing you ever do.

But before I can tell you about this family—your family—we need to discuss the myth of the perfect family. Somewhere along the way we came up with this idea of a perfect family. They dress just right, they get along fine, and they look nothing like our real family. Maybe the myth took shape for you when, as a child, you visited a friend's family who appeared to have it all together. Maybe they ate around a table every night. Maybe the parents seemed happily married, while your parents fought every night. Maybe you watched a TV show such as *Leave It to Beaver* that seemed to present a family without flaws. But the perfect family is a myth. In fact, the goal of family isn't perfection. It's knowing and being known. It's connection. It's finding your place in a world where often we feel out of place.

Abraham's family (maybe you've heard of them) is pretty much the family in the Bible. Abraham, the father of the family,

eventually becomes known as the father of all God's people, Father Abraham. Abraham has a son named Isaac, and Isaac has a son named Jacob. These two sons become so important that in the Bible, God is often referred to as "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." Imagine that! Your family becomes known as God's family. They are the most highly revered fathers, and their wives—Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel—are the most highly revered mothers. In biblical times, every Hebrew family knew those names. When the stories of Abraham's family were told around glowing campfires, it was not unlike our family gatherings around glowing TV sets. Those families, like our families, said, "This is us."

The people of God (the Jews) and the followers of Jesus (the Christians) all say they are part of Father Abraham's family. Muslims, too, trace their lineage to this ancient patriarch. Today almost four billion people are connected to the spiritual family of Abraham. Are they the perfect family? Only if you overlook the first story about Abraham and Sarah, when Abraham lied. Perfect family? Only if you forget that Abraham moved away from his closest family members because they argued too much. You also have to forget that Isaac actually wasn't Abraham's first son; Abraham had a son with another woman while he was still married to Sarah. And Jacob wasn't Isaac's first son either. That was Esau, and Jacob tricked Esau into selling his birthright. Jacob took the birthright from Esau and lied to his father. Jacob's sons, enraged, ended up selling Joseph into slavery. Lying, cheating, arguing—this is us? Of course it is.

God's family, it turns out, is a mess—a big, beautiful mess, but a mess nonetheless. God uses the story of Abraham's family to call us into the family. Sometimes we live in such a way that we think, "I can't be part of the story. I can't keep those promises. I lie. I cheat. I argue. Doesn't God know me?"

God says, "I do know you. My family is your family. And that means that all the promises, all the miracles, all the healing—those are for you too." God has a big, messy family, and you are a part of it.

A Family Trip

Abraham's story started a long time ago. Abraham's dad, Terah, first named his son Abram (not Abraham yet). The name Abram meant "exalted father." We don't know if Terah just liked the sound of the name or if he had a hope that Abram would become a great father. But, as we will see, that name would be important.

Terah had three sons; some even think the sons could have been triplets because of the way their birth is described. The Scripture says, "After Terah had lived 70 years, he became the father of Abram, Nahor and Haran" (Genesis 11:26). There is no way to know if they were triplets, and it isn't important, except that it's fun to imagine they might have had the same family dynamics as Kate, Kevin, and Randall in *This Is Us*. Anyway, Abram, Nahor, and Haran were born to Terah, and later, Haran had a son named Lot. Then Haran died. So Lot tagged along with Terah and Abram and the family. Abram married Sarai (not

yet Sarah), whose name meant “my princess.” It’s not hard for us to imagine a dad naming his daughter “my princess,” but all we are told about Sarai is that she was unable to have any kids.

Yeah, I know it’s complicated. Hang with me.

Terah (dad/granddad) took Abram (son/husband/uncle) and Sarai (daughter/wife/aunt) and Lot (grandson/nephew) and moved them from Ur, where they had been living, to Canaan. Ur was in present-day Iraq. Canaan was in present-day Israel. The journey would have been about eleven hundred miles on foot. However, about halfway between Ur and Canaan they gave up. They stopped at a place called Harran (not to be confused with Haran, Abraham’s brother who died), near what is now the border of Syria and Turkey.

At that point Terah died. And so *the* family, the great family of God’s people, stalled out in Harran, where they stayed for years. The group consisted of an older Abram, whose name was “father” but who had no kids; his wife Sarai, a “princess” who was known only for her inability to conceive; and Lot, an orphan who was effectively now their child.

It was in that situation, with those family dynamics, in a place that was not their home, that God came back to Abram and said:

“Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you.

*“I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;*

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*I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.”
(Genesis 12:1-2)*

And there's more:

*“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 12:3)*

In case you aren't catching on, this is crazy! Some random dude who was traveling with his dad to a foreign land, who gave up on the trip years ago because it was too long, was now being told (by God!) that his family would become a great nation that would bless all the people on earth, and that one day billions of people would know his name and trace their lineage to him. God told random Abram to go . . . and he went.

Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran. He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Harran, and they set out for the land of Canaan.

(Genesis 12:4-5)

God's message to Abram had been "Go." A more literal translation might be "Walk." Abram and his messy family walked the remaining five hundred miles. Of course, that's the distance

in a straight line on a map; it's farther than that when you travel on mountain passes and desert trails. Imagine walking ten miles a day for a couple of months. Every day you search for water. You defend yourself from other travelers. You endure bad weather. Imagine doing this when you are seventy-five years old.

Keep in mind that this was Abram's second five-hundred-mile trip. The first time, he was a young man filled with hope and adventure, going because his father had asked him to. Now he was an old man who knew how tough the journey would be, who was going because God had told him to. God had called on Abram to take a family trip. And on that trip, Abram became the exalted father of our family.

Notice the way God's invitation was expressed. First came God's actions:

I will make you into a great nation.

I will bless you.

I will make your name great.

Then God described our actions:

You will be a blessing.

God said, I will make you a great nation, I will bless you, and I will make your name great. And *you* will be a blessing.

Keep that in mind.

Normal and Extraordinary

After a long journey, Abram arrived in Canaan at a place known as "the oak of Moreh" (Genesis 12:6 NRSV). In other

words, he wasn't showing up in some barren, deserted place. It was inhabited, as you might surmise, by Canaanites. Abram was coming to a place that he believed God had said was for him and his family, but most likely the Canaanites thought it was for them!

Once again, though, God promised Abram, "To your offspring I will give this land" (Genesis 12:7). Abram, whose name meant "father," was told at seventy-five years old that the foreign land he has just entered would be given to his children and grandchildren. One problem: he had no children or grandchildren.

What did Abram do? He got down on his knees and began to gather rocks to make an altar. In my imagination, he was joined by Sarai the princess and Lot the orphan. After a five-hundred-mile trek through the desert, this strange little family built an altar to the God who had spoken to them. This family that looked nothing like *Leave It to Beaver* built an altar and called upon the Lord.

I learn about this family that goes where God wants, that sticks together, that travels through the desert, and I think, "This is us." I read about this family that gathers rocks, that builds an altar to God, that uses the altar to remind each other they are still walking because of their Lord, and I think, "This is us."

The very next episode in the family story has Abram lying to a king, saying that Sarai is his sister and not his wife. He lies to protect his own skin and to get a few cows. In the next episode, Abram and Lot part ways, because there is too much arguing among their respective parties. The people who work for Abram

and the people who work for Lot can't get along, and instead of Abram and Lot working it out, they walk away.

I read about this family that lies and cheats, that is afraid, that is made up of individuals looking out for their own gain, and I think that sounds familiar. I hear of this family that argues, that is unwilling to work it out and work it through, that is frail and fragile and not as strong as we would like, and I think, "This is us."

So which is it? Was Abram's family ordinary—prone to wander, to fight and flee, to be given a good name but be unable to live up to it? Or were they extraordinary—chosen, living into their calling, giving God glory? Was Abram a normal dad, or was he the exalted father?

The answer is the same answer that applies to your family and family members. They were normal; they were great. They were ordinary; they were extraordinary. Abram was like your dad; Abram walked with God.

And the whole world was blessed through Abram and Sarai and their family.

Becoming a Blessing

How does God's family become a blessing?

We build altars.

We call upon the name of the Lord.

We live into our names over time.

The Myth of the Perfect Family

I walked two miles with my family of five the other day. When we were done I felt like building an altar and praising God! We stopped fifty times. We had to carry some people. We had to coax and encourage.

Abram walked five hundred miles with his family, and when he was done he built an altar of praise. It was an altar of “Thank you, God,” of “God, you did what you said you would do.” That was Abram’s first altar, an altar of praise.

When they arrived, they pitched their tent. This would be their home. And there, where he would see it every day coming out of the tent, Abram built a second altar. This was an altar of prayer, a place where the family would talk to God day after day after day, not just when God did big stuff. This imperfect family called upon the name of the Lord every day.

I don’t want to simplify this too much, but if you’re looking for meaning and for a place in God’s family, then build an altar of praise and an altar of prayer. Find a place where you remember and thank God for who God is and also a place where you call out to God. Build an altar of praise and an altar of prayer. Call upon the name of the Lord in your messy, broken life. Abram called out to God after he lied and before he parted ways with Lot. Abram wasn’t perfect, but he had an altar. We must call upon the Lord in the big times and the normal times.

It was then, on arriving at their destination, that Abram and Sarai began to live into the names God would give them: “father” and “princess.” God kept telling them he was going to bless them and use them to bless others. They lived into that promise; they literally walked into that promise over time.

A Bible Study on the Book of Genesis

"When I am looking for new ideas for preaching or fresh perspectives on scripture, I read Jacob Armstrong. In God's Messy Family, he takes the reality of our imperfect families and shows us that God specializes in messy relationships. Anyone looking for hope, healing, or encouragement for their own complicated family will want to read this book."

—**Matt Miofsky**, Lead Pastor of The Gathering, author of *Happy? What It Is and How to Find It* and *Fail: What to Do When Things Go Wrong*

"Jacob is that pastor-friend I'd introduce to my friends who don't go to church. That's saying a lot. He's authentic, and his life and ministry are compelling."

—**Lisa Yebuah**, Campus Pastor, Southeast Raleigh Table, a site of Edenton St. UMC

Is your family picture-perfect? Does it look like the happy families we see on television or advertisements? If you are like most people, your family is probably more than a little messy. Emotions run strong and there might be jealousy, anger, or sadness.

What if you were to learn that the family of Genesis, God's chosen family of Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob and Esau, was anything but perfect? What if you were to find that their family was just as messy as ours can be? What if, like them, we could still be called and redeemed by God, even in the midst of our messes?

Join Jacob Armstrong as he explores the patterns in the families from Genesis and how they often mirror our own lives. Learn how God has a plan for us that is greater than our mistakes, and how each of us has a place at the table as part of the family of God.



JACOB ARMSTRONG is the founding pastor of Providence Church in Mt. Juliet, Tennessee. Providence's vision is to help those who are disconnected from God and the church to find hope, healing, and wholeness in Jesus Christ. Jacob is the author of *A New Playlist*, *Renovate*, *Treasure*, *The God Story*, *Upside Down*, *Loving Large*, *Interruptions*, *The New Adapters*, and *The Connected Life: Small Groups That Create Community*.

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