

A Collective Series
Devotional

A black and white photograph of a vast desert landscape with rolling sand dunes. A person is walking on a dune in the distance. A vertical white bar runs through the center of the image, partially obscuring the person and the dunes. The word "wandering" is written in a large, stylized, gothic font across the middle of the image, overlapping the white bar and the dunes.

wandering

Jacob's Story of Un/Fortunate Events

Gracecity, LifeChurch,
& Shore Community Church

Jacobs story of Un/Fortunate Events

We all experience moments of restlessness, the pursuit of purpose, and questions about our identity. This series of devotions, rooted in the life of Jacob, invites us to journey with a man who, like us, wrestled with uncertainty, longing, and the desire for blessing. Jacob's path, filled with unexpected twists and turns, reveals how God's grace meets us in the midst of our wanderings. As we reflect on his story, may we discover insights for our own search for meaning and see how, even when the way is unclear, God continually draws us closer to His heart.

A Collective Series

Wandering is a series collaboration between three church whānau, Gracecity Church, LifeChurch and Shore Community Church. We share a love for God's word, and a genuine heart to creatively apply it to our lives and communities.

We are better together, and it's our hope that this would reflect what it means to experience unity in diversity in the body of Christ across Auckland / Tāmaki Makaurau.

We encourage you to engage in this series with a group. You can do that through one of our websites:

- gracecity.nz/groups
- lifechurch.co.nz/lifegroups
- shorecommunity.church/lifegroups

The devotionals found within this PDF were authored by Janelle Breckell.

Scripture

Genesis 25:19–22 (NLT)

This is the account of the family of Isaac, the son of Abraham. When Isaac was forty years old, he married Rebekah, the daughter of Bethuel the Aramean from Paddan-aram and the sister of Laban the Aramean. Isaac pleaded with the Lord on behalf of his wife, because she was unable to have children. The Lord answered Isaac's prayer, and Rebekah became pregnant with twins. But the two children struggled with each other in her womb. So she went to ask the Lord about it. "Why is this happening to me?" she asked.

Reflection

When a child really wants something from their parents, they don't hold back in expressing their desperation for that thing, often bargaining with the offer of behaving extremely well. Pleading is our way of communicating our desire to get the outcome we want. We don't know the exact words Isaac used to plead with God, but we can sense just how much he wanted this child for himself and his wife.

Experience tells us that God doesn't always respond with a yes, but He did answer Isaac's pleading with a double yes: twins! What we know from the rest of the story, however, is that God's yes wasn't just about Isaac; it was about something much greater – the whole nation of Israel and the lineage of Christ.

Sometimes, God's answers can lead us to more questions. Rebekah had received exactly what she had most wanted and yet she became frustrated with the struggles within her, asking, "why is this happening to me?" Does that question sound at all familiar to you? Life is full of great answers to prayer and yet hard times still come our way and we return to questioning; we want to know why.

Be patient – God has answers for you – but remember that His answers are not only about what is right for you. They could also be part of a much bigger picture.

Consider and pray

Are there things you are pleading with God for right now? Do you have more questions than answers? Bring those to God in prayer and trust Him to work out what is best for you and those around you.

Scripture

Genesis 25:23–26 (NLT)

And the Lord told her, “The sons in your womb will become two nations. From the very beginning, the two nations will be rivals. One nation will be stronger than the other; and your older son will serve your younger son.” And when the time came to give birth, Rebekah discovered that she did indeed have twins! The first one was very red at birth and covered with thick hair like a fur coat. So they named him Esau. Then the other twin was born with his hand grasping Esau’s heel. So they named him Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when the twins were born.

Reflection

You only have to have watched the most recent Olympics to understand a thing or two about competition. People are proud to represent their countries and will do everything they can to win. It takes training, determination and a fighting-to-the-end kind of mindset. After all, there is room for only one at the top of the podium, and the prize is not only gold, but glory. It’s no wonder we strive for that position.

The problem with striving to be the best is that we make it too much about ourselves. We do what we can to control the outcome, and we can begin to see others as competitors or, worse yet, enemies. When we begin to lose sight of what might be best for others, we can start to lean into the same kind of mentality that causes wars between nations.

Jacob’s struggle in the womb was a very natural instinct – his grasping of Esau’s heel was a representation of his fight to be the strongest and to prevent his brother from getting the best. Unfortunately, as the scripture says, this ultimately led to ongoing rivalry between those two nations.

The difference between being the best and doing your best is all about our motivation, and the ways in which we treat others. When your heart is towards the greater good, you will win far more than you stand to lose.

Consider and pray

What are you trying to be the best at? Reflect on your motivation and ask Jesus to help you keep your heart turned towards a prize far beyond earthly gold.

Scripture

Genesis 25:27–31 (NLT)

As the boys grew up, Esau became a skilful hunter. He was an outdoorsman, but Jacob had a quiet temperament, preferring to stay at home. Isaac loved Esau because he enjoyed eating the wild game Esau brought home, but Rebekah loved Jacob. One day when Jacob was cooking some stew, Esau arrived home from the wilderness exhausted and hungry. Esau said to Jacob, "I'm starved! Give me some of that red stew!" (This is how Esau got his other name, Edom, which means "red.") "All right," Jacob replied, "but trade me your rights as the firstborn son."

Reflection

This scripture sets the scene for the two quite different personalities of the twins: one bold, active and spontaneous, the other quiet, constructive and strategic. Esau used his skill and drive to bring home food for his family, but the same traits that made him a successful hunter may also have made him impulsive with his decisions. It seems that Jacob, on the other hand, applied his thoughtfulness to working around the home but it is also likely that he used this same deep thinking to craft up a plan to steal his brother's birthright. Sometimes, the very thing that makes us succeed can also make us fail.

Perhaps you identify with one of these twins more than the other. Ephesians 2:10 tells us that we are God's handiwork. Anything that is handmade is never exactly the same as anything else – you were supposed to be different from anybody else. God created you with a unique character and it's up to you to choose how you use that combination of traits and skills. This scripture goes on to say that you were created in Christ Jesus to do good works. There's the part to remember.

Use the character, personality traits and skills you have been created with, but recognise when these could be leading you astray and allow Jesus to help you channel them into good works for others.

Consider and pray

What unique traits define you as a person? Are you using them for good works or for your own gain? Pray for the wisdom of Christ to shape your individual skills towards things that God has prepared for you to do.

Scripture

Genesis 25:32–34 (NLT)

“Look, I’m dying of starvation!” said Esau. “What good is my birthright to me now?” But Jacob said, “First you must swear that your birthright is mine.” So Esau swore an oath, thereby selling all his rights as the firstborn to his brother, Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau some bread and lentil stew. Esau ate the meal, then got up and left. He showed contempt for his rights as the firstborn.

Reflection

When confronted with strong desires, we often choose what will give us what we want in the quickest way. We will break open the snack bag when hunger strikes, or hit the ‘add to cart’ button when the offer looks too good to pass up. These decisions are usually made when we lose sight of the importance of the longer-term goal. Things like a healthier body, mind or bank balance lose out to the thing we want right now.

Esau seemed to fall easily into that trap. He was extremely hungry, and we can certainly appreciate that, but, in light of his firstborn rights – the lion’s share of the family inheritance – it seems like a very hasty and careless decision. Jacob was very quick to take advantage of his brother’s hunger and impulsiveness, and Esau blew it all for a bit of that red stew.

We will make hasty decisions in life but we can ask God to guide our decision-making. Good advice is given in scripture to “pause a moment... and listen; consider the wonderful things God has done”, Job 37:14 (GNT). Pausing might give us a moment to consider whether or not this short-term gain is really worth it. Don’t let a hasty decision rob you of future blessings. God is always after the best for you.

Consider and pray

What blessings have been promised to you by God? Take some time to thank God for the blessings you have already received and the blessings that are yet to come, and ask Him for the patience to wait for those instead of giving in to unhealthy desires.

Scripture

Genesis 48:1–4 (NLT)

One day not long after this, word came to Joseph, "Your father is failing rapidly." So Joseph went to visit his father, and he took with him his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. When Joseph arrived, Jacob was told, "Your son Joseph has come to see you." So Jacob gathered his strength and sat up in his bed. Jacob said to Joseph, "God Almighty appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan and blessed me. He said to me, 'I will make you fruitful, and I will multiply your descendants. I will make you a multitude of nations. And I will give this land of Canaan to your descendants after you as an everlasting possession.'

Reflection

It took Jacob many years to understand that his grasping and striving for blessing wasn't about anything that he could do in his own strength. We might imagine that he looked back at his youth with some regret over fighting to have everything, instead of just trusting in the giver of all blessings. He must have felt this was an important lesson to pass on to his son, Joseph, emphasising, before he passed away, that it is God who makes us fruitful and determines what comes after us.

There seems to be something in our human brokenness that makes us feel as though we have to keep grasping and striving to achieve blessings from God. We think that being a better person will equate to attaining better things. In

an earthly sense, this can be true. If we train hard for a sport, we could be chosen for the top team. If we gain a qualification, we might get a well-paid job. If we are really nice to people, we might have a lot more friends. While not wrong, this is how we succeed from an earthly perspective, with earthly blessings in mind.

God's blessings are so much more than having a lot of good things in the here and now. They are about being a part of God's family and receiving eternal life. And it is exactly this that we cannot earn; we rely entirely on the grace of Christ. As we are reminded in scripture "... it is by grace you have been saved, through faith and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast", Ephesians 2:8–9 (NIV). What a relief it is to know that we don't need to grasp for the blessing; we just need to reach out to the one who has already given it to us.

Consider and pray

What blessings have you been aiming for, lately? Reflect on whether these are about the present life or about the life to come. Thank Jesus for the blessing of eternal life, and pray that you would continue to rely on His grace rather than on your own efforts.

Scripture

Genesis 27:1-4 (NLT)

One day when Isaac was old and turning blind, he called for Esau, his older son, and said, "My son." "Yes, Father?" Esau replied. "I am an old man now," Isaac said, "and I don't know when I may die. Take your bow and a quiver full of arrows, and go out into the open country to hunt some wild game for me. Prepare my favourite dish, and bring it here for me to eat. Then I will pronounce the blessing that belongs to you, my firstborn son, before I die."

Reflection

In these earlier times, before Christ, they didn't have as much detail as we do about life beyond the grave. So, it was particularly important to Isaac to pass on a blessing that would last through the generations. This was his way of keeping God at the centre of their nation. Isaac knew his time was coming to an end, and he was ensuring that everything was in order and in its 'rightful' place. It is also possible that Isaac was aware of Jacob's deceit and was trying to stay one step ahead!

We don't like to think about the end of our lives on earth and yet it is a certainty that we all share. When confronted with this reality, either personally or with someone close to us, we can start to see life with a different lens. We realise the futility of some of our pursuits, and start considering what is really important. Like Isaac, we might think about what we want to get right, sort out and leave behind as a legacy. Unlike

Isaac, we don't need to wait for a significant moment to right any wrongs. Thankfully, we have Christ, who gives us the grace to do what's right on a daily basis.

With Christ, we have a certainty that is well beyond the grave. We can look forward to, and prepare for, a new life, an eternal life, where everything will be made right.

Consider and pray

What are some things you might need to make right in the here and now? Ask God to open your heart to what might need to be dealt with, and pray for His grace to cover you as you prepare to make those things right.

Scripture

Genesis 27:5–10 (NLT)

But Rebekah overheard what Isaac had said to his son Esau. So when Esau left to hunt for the wild game, she said to her son Jacob, "Listen. I overheard your father say to Esau, 'Bring me some wild game and prepare me a delicious meal. Then I will bless you in the Lord's presence before I die.' Now, my son, listen to me. Do exactly as I tell you. Go out to the flocks, and bring me two fine young goats. I'll use them to prepare your father's favourite dish. Then take the food to your father so he can eat it and bless you before he dies."

Reflection

Jacob had wanted his brother's birthright from the very beginning and, while Esau had sworn it over, it needed the seal of approval from Isaac. Both parents were trying to pass the birthright blessing to the son they thought most deserved it. But, ultimately, this was Esau's birthright. Rebekah had dishonest intentions and Jacob was eager to join in the deceit.

It's important to remember how much influence people can have over you or, equally, how much influence you can have over someone else. The Bible has a lot to say about keeping good company and staying close to the wise. The alternative is that we start to justify ourselves through the actions of others. It's easier to do the wrong thing when you have the support of someone else. Just like Jacob, if our hearts are set on the wrong desires, it doesn't take much

to be influenced in that direction.

Deceit doesn't happen overnight. It takes time and a gradual turning away from truth. You don't need to fear this; just be aware of who you are listening to in your life. You have been given a helper, the Holy Spirit, to discern what is right and wrong, and to give you grace to stay close to the truth – let His voice be the loudest.

Consider and pray

Who are you being influenced by? Are you keeping close to the wise? Pray for wisdom to discern where you might be following others down the wrong path, and ask the Holy Spirit to bring your heart back to His truth.

Scripture

Genesis 27:18–24 (NLT)

So Jacob took the food to his father. "My father?" he said. "Yes, my son," Isaac answered. "Who are you—Esau or Jacob?" Jacob replied, "It's Esau, your firstborn son. I've done as you told me. Here is the wild game. Now sit up and eat it so you can give me your blessing." Isaac asked, "How did you find it so quickly, my son?" "The Lord your God put it in my path!" Jacob replied. Then Isaac said to Jacob, "Come closer so I can touch you and make sure that you really are Esau." So Jacob went closer to his father, and Isaac touched him. "The voice is Jacob's, but the hands are Esau's," Isaac said. But he did not recognize Jacob, because Jacob's hands felt hairy just like Esau's. So Isaac prepared to bless Jacob. "But are you really my son Esau?" he asked. "Yes, I am," Jacob replied.

Reflection

It was one thing for Jacob to take advantage of his brother's disregard and impulsiveness but, here, we see him take the deceit to the next level. Jacob is so caught up in his pursuit for the blessing, that he sets up a whole act, including dress-ups, to trick his father into believing he is his hairy brother.

These days, a psychologist might label a person who does something like this a pathological liar. This condition is typically associated with someone that is so caught up in their own deceit that they begin to believe the lie themselves. The story they tell grows and they can't seem

to stop it from snowballing – it becomes one lie after another. Jacob had a number of times to come clean. His father asked him enough questions to expose him, but Jacob still refused to tell the truth.

At the heart of lying is an inability to accept who we are, and be vulnerable enough to expose our sins. We choose to hide our 'ugly side' with a few twisted words or a carefully manipulated situation.

You might remember a time you have been caught up in a lie and, perhaps, you also remember that it didn't feel great. That's because truth is the only way to feel free from our sin. Don't let a lie lead you to more sin. Instead, look to your Redeemer, the one who already took those sins to the cross and made you right before God.

Consider and pray

Are there parts of yourself that you are hiding from others because you know they are not quite right? Pray now for the forgiveness of Christ, knowing that He has already made you a new creation and can help you live in truth.

Scripture

Genesis 27:25–29 (NLT)

Then Isaac said, "Now, my son, bring me the wild game. Let me eat it, and then I will give you my blessing." So Jacob took the food to his father, and Isaac ate it. He also drank the wine that Jacob served him. Then Isaac said to Jacob, "Please come a little closer and kiss me, my son." So Jacob went over and kissed him. And when Isaac caught the smell of his clothes, he was finally convinced, and he blessed his son. He said, "Ah! The smell of my son is like the smell of the outdoors, which the Lord has blessed!

"From the dew of heaven and the richness of the earth, may God always give you abundant harvests of grain and bountiful new wine. May many nations become your servants, and may they bow down to you. May you be the master over your brothers, and may your mother's sons bow down to you. All who curse you will be cursed, and all who bless you will be blessed."

Reflection

If you've ever watched or read the children's story Aladdin, you will most certainly know the larger-than-life character, Genie. Genie is a magical power that is trapped inside a lamp and, once released by Aladdin, is said to grant the person who freed him anything that person wishes for.

What would you wish for? Would it sound a bit like the blessing that Isaac gave to Jacob? After all, who wouldn't want riches on earth, power over nations and protection from all your enemies? You might finally realise why Jacob went as far as he did to get this blessing.

When you reflect on the things that you enjoy the most, you might be surprised by how little they have to do with wealth and power. Having your best surf in perfect conditions, figuring out how to play your favourite song on the guitar, or talking and laughing over a meal with friends and family – those are the moments that bring a deeper kind of joy and achievement – things that are not bought or forced. Isaac's blessing was incredible, but it wouldn't give Jacob or Esau the ultimate fulfilment they were pursuing.

The next time you start to wish for a better life, stop and consider the things that are already so good in the present. God blesses us in the big and small. Take time to appreciate it all.

Consider and pray

What things are you jealous of right now? What can you be grateful for in the here and now? Pray that God would release you of any envy and be grateful for what you have already been given to enjoy.

Scripture

Genesis 27:37–40 (NLT)

Isaac said to Esau, “I have made Jacob your master and have declared that all his brothers will be his servants. I have guaranteed him an abundance of grain and wine—what is left for me to give you, my son?” Esau pleaded, “But do you have only one blessing? Oh my father, bless me, too!” Then Esau broke down and wept. Finally, his father, Isaac, said to him, “You will live away from the richness of the earth, and away from the dew of the heaven above. You will live by your sword, and you will serve your brother. But when you decide to break free, you will shake his yoke from your neck.”

Reflection

The harsh reality about deceit is that it has consequences and will ultimately lead to hurt and a breakdown of relationships. You can read the anguish of both Isaac and Esau, knowing that what they had both most wanted had been taken away. To make it worse, it was taken away by someone they loved – a son and a brother.

Families can be hard to navigate. At times, they are the best and, at times, they are the worst. Unfortunately, our stories are not always very far removed from those of Jacob and Esau. Disputes often arise on account of family inheritance and what belongs to one member of the family rather than to another. Lawyers will often tell you that families can fight over the smallest of things – a significant ring, a piece of furniture or even a pet. Sometimes these things

can result in people not talking to one another for years, or even for the rest of their lives.

Our relationships are far too important for us to fight so hard over earthly possessions. If you are going through a difficult time with your family or a friend, try to think about the consequences of your actions. Are your decisions for the good of everyone? Scripture reminds us what is the most important thing: “Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins”, 1 Peter 4:8 (NIV).

Consider and pray

Have you been hurt by the deceit of others? Are there people you need to ask for forgiveness for the same reason? Ask Jesus to guide your heart and words towards restoration of relationships that might be suffering from the consequence of wrongdoing.

Scripture

Genesis 27:41–45 (NLT)

From that time on, Esau hated Jacob because their father had given Jacob the blessing. And Esau began to scheme: “I will soon be mourning my father’s death. Then I will kill my brother, Jacob.” But Rebekah heard about Esau’s plans. So she sent for Jacob and told him, “Listen, Esau is consoling himself by plotting to kill you. So listen carefully, my son. Get ready and flee to my brother, Laban, in Haran. Stay there with him until your brother cools off. When he calms down and forgets what you have done to him, I will send for you to come back. Why should I lose both of you in one day?”

Reflection

The ‘fight or flight’ response is the body’s natural reaction to stressful situations. When we are confronted with something that is threatening – physically or emotionally – we usually do one of two things. We keep fighting in order to win or we walk away to ensure we don’t lose.

Jacob’s mother, Rebekah, knew that what they had done had made Esau extremely angry, and her worst fears started to look as though they could come true when she heard that Esau was scheming to kill Jacob. It might have been Jacob’s natural instinct to stay and fight, but Rebekah knew better and asked him to leave. She knew her sons well enough to know that time is sometimes the best thing to calm heightened feelings.

While our natural instinct is about survival and the need to win, God shows us a different response: one that is all about timing. Scripture says that God is slow to anger and that we should be, too. James 1:19–20 advises us to be quick to listen and slow to speak, knowing that hasty words can only add fuel to the fire. Giving yourself, and the other person, the space to process emotions, is ultimately the safest path for you both.

Consider and pray

When was the last time you got angry? Did you stay and fight, or did you walk away? Ask the Holy Spirit for help to remind you to take some time out the next time you, or someone you love, is angry. Ask for the grace to be quick to listen and slow to speak.

Scripture

Genesis 28:1–4 (NLT)

So Isaac called for Jacob, blessed him, and said, “You must not marry any of these Canaanite women. Instead, go at once to Paddan-aram, to the house of your grandfather Bethuel, and marry one of your uncle Laban’s daughters. May God Almighty bless you and give you many children. And may your descendants multiply and become many nations! May God pass on to you and your descendants the blessings He promised to Abraham. May you own this land where you are now living as a foreigner, for God gave this land to Abraham.”

Reflection

It seems like most families and many circles of friends contain at least two people who aren’t speaking to one another – and haven’t done so for years. Perhaps you know someone. Perhaps you are someone in this situation. Occasionally, the offence itself is truly heinous: abuse, betrayal or complete disregard. Other times, and considerably more often, even the people involved admit the silliness of the quarrel and are no longer angry about it. But they’re still angry with the person.

It is surprising that Isaac took the time to confirm Jacob’s blessing, despite the disappointment he must have felt about Jacob’s deceit. Isaac’s blessing shows an acceptance from him, a forgiveness for his son, and an understanding that God’s plan for the Israelites would still be fulfilled.

What do you gain when you hold onto anger and disappointment? While an offence may be unforgivable, no person is. Jesus proved that when He died for all of us. Live out what the scriptures tell us: forgive others, as the Lord has forgiven you (Colossians 3:13). Remember that all situations are redeemable and, like Isaac, learn to trust that God’s good plans will still succeed.

Consider and pray

Who needs your forgiveness and what will you resolve to do about this? Thank Jesus for His forgiveness towards you and ask for His help in forgiving those that have hurt you.

Scripture

Genesis 28:10–15 (NLT)

Meanwhile, Jacob left Beersheba and travelled toward Haran. At sundown he arrived at a good place to set up camp and stopped there for the night. Jacob found a stone to rest his head against and lay down to sleep. As he slept, he dreamed of a stairway that reached from the earth up to heaven. And he saw the angels of God going up and down the stairway. At the top of the stairway stood the Lord, and He said, "I am the Lord, the God of your grandfather Abraham, and the God of your father, Isaac. The ground you are lying on belongs to you. I am giving it to you and your descendants. Your descendants will be as numerous as the dust of the earth! They will spread out in all directions – to the west and the east, to the north and the south. And all the families of the earth will be blessed through you and your descendants. What's more, I am with you, and I will protect you wherever you go. One day I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have finished giving you everything I have promised you."

Reflection

Jacob's dream starts like many of our imaginations about where God is and how we could possibly get to Him. We imagine that He is high up in the sky, in a universe beyond us, unable to be reached without some way of getting there – a ladder, some stairs or, maybe, even a tower built tall enough. This is how many people view God, if they have any belief in

Him. They see Him as distant and unable to be communicated with. Surely, if God was real, we could see Him, touch Him, find Him somewhere.

We have the benefit of knowing that God did exactly this, through His son, Jesus. He made Himself real, relational and able to be known. We can see a glimpse of this in God making Himself known in Jacob's dream. God appears to Jacob and speaks directly to him. He makes Himself known and shares His heart and promises with Jacob.

You might wonder how a deceiver like Jacob can find himself in such good standing with God. There is much to the story we don't know about Jacob and the journey of his heart, but what is plain to see is that God's promises for us are much less about how good we are, and much more about how good He is.

Hold onto the promise in this verse that God is with you and will never leave you. He is much closer to you than you might believe.

Consider and pray

Do you feel near to God or distant from Him at this moment? Pray that He will open your eyes to see that there is no distance between you and Him. "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you", James 4:8 (ESV).

Scripture

Genesis 28:16–19 (NLT)

Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I wasn't even aware of it!" But he was also afraid and said, "What an awesome place this is! It is none other than the house of God, the very gateway to heaven!" The next morning Jacob got up very early. He took the stone he had rested his head against, and he set it upright as a memorial pillar. Then he poured olive oil over it. He named that place Bethel (which means "house of God"), although it was previously called Luz.

Reflection

Jacob had been on the run, uncertain and insecure about what to do next. God speaking to him in a dream was a way of showing Jacob that he had been forgiven, that God was protecting him, with a promise for his future. This was a defining moment and a defining place for Jacob, at which God became real and personal to him.

We have markers in our lives to remind us of special times and events. We have photos and landmarks, and even special dates or smells, that trigger our memories. It is important to have ways to remember significant things in your life so that you can share the stories with others. For Jacob, setting up the stone as a pillar was his way to mark out this important event that would be told over and over again.

Perhaps you have had times when God has spoken clearly to you and given you a hope for your future. Every time you reflect on one of these moments, you set up your own stone to mark the event, and provide another opportunity to be grateful for God's hand in your life's journey.

Consider and pray

Can you think of a time when God has done something significant in your life? Pray that God would give you an opportunity to share that with someone to encourage them.

Scripture

Genesis 28:20–22 (NLT)

Then Jacob made this vow: “If God will indeed be with me and protect me on this journey, and if He will provide me with food and clothing, and if I return safely to my father’s home, then the Lord will certainly be my God. And this memorial pillar I have set up will become a place for worshipping God, and I will present to God a tenth of everything He gives me.”

Reflection

It is true that we can worship God in a number of ways and in a lot of places. That is because we know that He chose to dwell within us through Jesus and that being with Him is as easy as having a quiet prayer in your own heart.

At the same time, there are places that we go that can help us to see or experience Jesus in ways we might not find in the midst of our day-to-day routines. Like Jacob, there are places that might remind us of God’s voice, love and goodness towards us and, as we reflect on His goodness, we are inspired to give back to Him in some way.

Our present-day church isn’t perfect, but it is a place where we can be reminded of God’s presence, have our eyes opened to understand things about Jesus that we haven’t seen before and give back to Him in some way, with the resources He has blessed us with. We can contribute towards making the gathering a place where others feel drawn to worship God.

Jacob’s vow can be read as conditional – only if God helps him will he give back to God. But it can also be read as expectant – that he trusts and knows that God will provide for him and keep him safe. Allow yourself to expect that God will take care of you and be prepared to worship God, both in your heart and in a place.

Consider and pray

What places are you visiting to experience God? Pray that God would lead you to places of worship and allow the Holy Spirit to nudge you into using your time, skill or money to give back to Him.

Scripture

Genesis 29:1–6 (NIV)

Then Jacob continued on his journey and came to the land of the eastern peoples. There he saw a well in the open country, with three flocks of sheep lying near it because the flocks were watered from that well. The stone over the mouth of the well was large. When all the flocks were gathered there, the shepherds would roll the stone away from the well's mouth and water the sheep. Then they would return the stone to its place over the mouth of the well. Jacob asked the shepherds, "My brothers, where are you from?"

"We're from Harran," they replied. He said to them, "Do you know Laban, Nahor's grandson?" "Yes, we know him," they answered. Then Jacob asked them, "Is he well?" "Yes, he is," they said, "and here comes his daughter Rachel with the sheep."

Reflection

Navigation is pretty easy these days. All you need is a phone and your destination and you can be told how long it is going to take, how to avoid the traffic, and the places where you can eat along the way. While technology can help us plan our route, there are still many unknowns along the way. We don't know who will be passing in the car next to us, which barista will serve our coffee, or what handmade sign on the side of the road might cause us to stop spontaneously for some fresh fruit.

Jacob knew his destination and his general direction of travel. He didn't have the exact knowledge of who he would see, when, or how he would find his family – that was up to God's timing and Jacob's mindset to stay the course. He didn't know that this particular water well was going to lead him directly to his family – but God did.

We can take some courage from Jacob's journey. We might feel as though we are wandering and have no idea how our lives are going to play out. However, we do have a direction of travel. In John 10:27 (ESV), Jesus says, "my sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me." Go where Jesus goes so that, like Jacob, you can find exactly what you are looking for.

Consider and pray

What situations are you navigating right now? Are you feeling a bit lost with the various unknowns along the way? Pray for your helper, the Holy Spirit, to come beside you and guide your next step.

Scripture

Genesis 29:9–14 (NIV)

While he was still talking with them, Rachel came with her father's sheep, for she was a shepherd. When Jacob saw Rachel daughter of his uncle Laban, and Laban's sheep, he went over and rolled the stone away from the mouth of the well and watered his uncle's sheep. Then Jacob kissed Rachel and began to weep aloud. He had told Rachel that he was a relative of her father and a son of Rebekah. So she ran and told her father. As soon as Laban heard the news about Jacob, his sister's son, he hurried to meet him. He embraced him and kissed him and brought him to his home, and there Jacob told him all these things. Then Laban said to him, "You are my own flesh and blood."

Reflection

Have you ever lost something really important? Perhaps a wedding ring, a legal document or an expensive tool? Losing even smaller things, like your keys or credit card, can heighten your anxiety. Equally, when we find that lost thing, particularly if it is important or irreplaceable, we feel an overwhelming sense of relief and all the worry and stress melt away.

It's easy to see Jacob's relief when he finds his family; weeping is often an expression of deep joy. This family clearly wanted to be found, so much so that Rachel ran to go and find her father, and Laban hurried as fast as he could to meet Jacob. They were all clearly very emotional and eager to welcome Jacob into their home.

You might feel as though you are on a journey to find where you belong. We all feel this from time to time. You might be trying to find a job, a community or a place to call home. You might be lost in your faith and just can't find the way forward.

Think of this story – but, instead of being about Jacob, it is about you. And instead of Laban, it is about Jesus. In the parable of the lost sheep in Luke 15, a shepherd goes looking and, when he finds the sheep, he is overwhelmed with joy. Just like this shepherd (and Laban), Jesus is ready to run and meet you, and welcome you back to the family. You are part of His family. You are home.

Consider and pray

Are you feeling a bit lost or unsure of your place in life at the moment? Pray that you see Jesus running towards you, inviting you to come with Him to find a place in His home.

Scripture

Genesis 29:14–20 (NIV)

After Jacob had stayed with him for a whole month, Laban said to him, “Just because you are a relative of mine, should you work for me for nothing? Tell me what your wages should be.” Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the older was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah had weak eyes, but Rachel had a lovely figure and was beautiful. Jacob was in love with Rachel and said, “I’ll work for you seven years in return for your younger daughter Rachel.” Laban said, “It’s better that I give her to you than to some other man. Stay here with me.” So Jacob served seven years to get Rachel, but they seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her.

Reflection

Many of our greatest plays or movies are centred around love that is just out of reach. Romeo and Juliet, for example, just can’t seem to overcome the family feud and, in the end, tragically die because their love is too great for them to be able to live without each other. The point, we presume, is that love is all consuming and we would do anything for it.

Our human nature compels us to go after the thing we love the most, especially if it is beautiful and makes us feel good about ourselves. We don’t know whether or not Jacob’s love was all about Rachel’s beauty but we do know that she was beautiful. Rachel was the object of Jacob’s affection and he would do anything to have

her; he worked and waited for seven years!

If we stop to consider Leah in this story, it holds its own sadness. Imagine how she might have felt about the fact that she, the older sister, was not being considered for marriage. This may have been a story repeated over time, that fed her insecurity about the way she looked, and about whether or not she felt worthy of being loved.

Our present life is not that different, really. You might feel like Leah at times. You might be insecure about your imperfections and feel that you are not worth being fought for. The problem is that we look to other humans to make us feel worthy, when, in reality, you have a lover of your soul, Jesus, who would work so hard to win your love, that He died on a cross. For you. To Him, you are worth it. You are loved.

Consider and pray

What insecurities have been plaguing you lately? Consider how much Christ showed His love for you on the cross and pray that He would show you how loved you are in His eyes.

Scripture

Genesis 29:22–30 (NIV)

So Laban brought together all the people of the place and gave a feast. But when evening came, he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob, and Jacob made love to her. And Laban gave his servant Zilpah to his daughter as her attendant. When morning came, there was Leah! So Jacob said to Laban, "What is this you have done to me? I served you for Rachel, didn't I? Why have you deceived me?" Laban replied, "It is not our custom here to give the younger daughter in marriage before the older one. Finish this daughter's bridal week; then we will give you the younger one also, in return for another seven years of work." And Jacob did so. He finished the week with Leah, and then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel to be his wife. Laban gave his servant Bilhah to his daughter Rachel as her attendant. Jacob made love to Rachel also, and his love for Rachel was greater than his love for Leah. And he worked for Laban another seven years.

Reflection

You might be thinking about how unfair Uncle Laban has been to Jacob, tricking him into working for seven years only to give him the wrong daughter. However, you only have to look back a few pages in scripture to see the same deceit being played out through Jacob's own doing. It seems we can't always get away from things coming back around to us.

It's not that Jacob deserved to be tricked. He had been forgiven and been given the blessing. Remember, however, that God is always working His story of salvation through Israel, and He can use all situations to ensure His truth prevails. In this somewhat twisted situation, Laban shows compassion for Leah – giving her a chance to be loved and to be part of a family. Even better than this, Leah becomes the mother of Judah, the tribe and bloodline of Jesus. It's a big story, it's a good story, and it's well worth understanding that God works in the best – and the worst – of situations.

Things happen in our lives that are unfair. We are deceived, we are trampled on, we get hurt. This was never part of God's plan, and it is never okay to be treated unfairly. We can, however, trust in His Word that says that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love Him (Romans 8:28). Trust Him to work it out for you and turn the ugly into something for His glory.

Consider and pray

What injustice have you witnessed or experienced yourself? Pray for God's mercy and power to heal, and trust in His restorative work on earth and in heaven.

Scripture

Genesis 29:31–35 (NIV)

When the Lord saw that Leah was not loved, He enabled her to conceive, but Rachel remained childless. Leah became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She named him Reuben, for she said, "It is because the Lord has seen my misery. Surely my husband will love me now." She conceived again, and when she gave birth to a son she said, "Because the Lord heard that I am not loved, He gave me this one too." So she named him Simeon. Again she conceived, and when she gave birth to a son she said, "Now at last my husband will become attached to me, because I have borne him three sons." So he was named Levi. She conceived again, and when she gave birth to a son she said, "This time I will praise the Lord." So she named him Judah. Then she stopped having children.

Reflection

The compassion of God is seen profoundly in scripture. Leah is not loved by Jacob but she is completely loved by her Creator. God finds another way to give her joy, through bearing children, and, by the time she has Judah, she is able to let go of seeking Jacob's love and become content in being loved by God.

Insecurities and disappointment come in many forms in life. Jacob wanted to have the family inheritance and blessing, but he wasn't the firstborn. Leah wanted to be loved, but wasn't beautiful. Rachel wanted to have children, but couldn't conceive. You might be able to think

of something you want, but can't have because that is not the hand you have been dealt. Some people may look as though they have it all, but that is very unlikely. We don't know what people are struggling with underneath.

Leah's journey is a relatable one. She spent many years still hoping for that thing she wanted but, instead of becoming increasingly consumed, she came to a place of acceptance. She learned to praise God for the good things she had been given. She may have never known the full extent of God's blessing to the world through her family line, but we do. Acceptance can be hard, but it will be rewarding.

Consider and pray

What are some of your greatest disappointments? Consider how your pain can become God's glory. Pray for healing and restoration and for His story to continue through your witness of His love.

Scripture

Genesis 30:1–8 (NLT)

When Rachel saw that she wasn't having any children for Jacob, she became jealous of her sister. She pleaded with Jacob, "Give me children, or I'll die!" Then Jacob became furious with Rachel. "Am I God?" he asked. "He's the one who has kept you from having children!" Then Rachel told him, "Take my maid, Bilhah, and sleep with her. She will bear children for me, and through her I can have a family, too." So Rachel gave her servant, Bilhah, to Jacob as a wife, and he slept with her. Bilhah became pregnant and presented him with a son. Rachel named him Dan, for she said, "God has vindicated me! He has heard my request and given me a son." Then Bilhah became pregnant again and gave Jacob a second son. Rachel named him Naphtali, for she said, "I have struggled hard with my sister, and I'm winning!"

Reflection

We are all driven in some way to be noticed, feel important, and have people's love and respect. When we see others get more attention, or appear to be more important, we can feel insecure about our own significance. The root of jealousy starts with wanting something very much and, then, seeing someone else have it and envying them for it.

Rachel wanted children, desperately. And Leah wanted Jacob's love, desperately. Instead of focusing on what they did have, they were jealous of the thing they didn't have. This mentality can lead to all kinds of chaos. Rachel's

jealousy made her blame Jacob, and introduce more wives into the picture, just to 'win'. She had children through her servants and, while her joy should have centred on the children, it was twisted towards being happy about being better than her sister.

This isn't the heart of Christ. Jesus had everything in heaven: a seat at the right hand of the Father, power, glory and adoration. And yet, He humbled Himself to become a human – and not an important one, by earthly standards. Everything Jesus did, from being born as a human to dying as one, was an act of humility – one that was entirely about the other. He didn't concern Himself with looking better than everyone else. He concerned Himself with loving humanity and glorifying God.

If you want the secret to keeping yourself from being jealous of others and creating all kinds of unnecessary mess, look to Jesus. Make it about loving others and loving God. Good relationships with people and Christ will give you the security of being fully and forever loved, and there cannot be anything better than that.

Consider and pray

What and who are you most jealous of right now? Can you be honest enough with yourself to identify why you want that thing so much? Take some time to be grateful for the things God has blessed you with – things that others might even be jealous of – and pray that Jesus would help you let go of the rest as you focus on the certainty of your significance to Him.

Scripture

Genesis 30:9–13 (NLT)

Meanwhile, Leah realised that she wasn't getting pregnant anymore, so she took her servant, Zilpah, and gave her to Jacob as a wife. Soon Zilpah presented him with a son. Leah named him Gad, for she said, "How fortunate I am!" Then Zilpah gave Jacob a second son. And Leah named him Asher, for she said, "What joy is mine! Now the other women will celebrate with me."

Reflection

If Leah had had social media, you can bet she would have been posting about all the children she was having for Jacob. It isn't wrong to be celebrating your success or telling others how much joy you are experiencing. However, there can be some motivation for celebrating that goes beyond simple joy. This is clear with Leah, who assumed that her success would make her look better to others. Her drive to give Jacob children appeared to have become a competition to earn her favour and status with others.

Think about what you share in the workplace, on social media or during a meal with a mate. We tend to talk about our glory moments a lot more than we talk of our failures – and, even then, we choose what 'junk' we want to share. Of course, you will pursue sporting achievements, travelling, higher-status jobs and better homes or cars for your own joy. However, pride can become an undertone that is tricky to keep in

check when we have done well.

The difference between being proud of ourselves and boasting, is to whom we are ultimately giving glory. All of the good we have done has really been given to us. Be proud about what you have achieved, but be prouder about the One who gave you the means to achieve it. Keep these words of scripture close to your heart: "but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practises steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the Lord", Jeremiah 9:24 (ESV).

Consider and pray

What things have you achieved lately that you are proud of? Thank the Lord for giving you the ability to achieve those things, and ask for forgiveness where you have bragged in order to look better than others. Accept that true confidence comes from knowing the Lord and being known by Him.

Scripture

Genesis 30:14–15 (NLT)

One day during the wheat harvest, Reuben found some mandrakes growing in a field and brought them to his mother, Leah. Rachel begged Leah, "Please give me some of your son's mandrakes." But Leah angrily replied, "Wasn't it enough that you stole my husband? Now will you steal my son's mandrakes, too?" Rachel answered, "I will let Jacob sleep with you tonight if you give me some of the mandrakes."

Reflection

The saying about sweeping things under the rug is a good analogy for emotions. A mess on the floor can be hidden under a rug but we also know that the same mess could be uncovered at any time; it doesn't just disappear. The feud between Rachel and Leah continued for many years. We might have expected that, once they had both been able to give Jacob children, they would be able to move past their pain but this scripture shows just how close to the surface their jealousy and hurt really was. Clearly, they had not cleaned up the dirt they shared between them.

Mandrakes were herbs that were believed to have promoted fertility, which is really what this ongoing fight was about. They both had become so obsessed with giving Jacob children that they were willing to bargain and trade intimacy with him. Instead of choosing forgiveness and acceptance of their situation, they added to the mess by building on it through their own manipulation.

You might have experience with a similar long-standing issue in your family or with a friend that you know hasn't quite been dealt with. You might be tempted to keep it under the rug but it is likely to surface again at some point. When we fail to examine our own hearts in these situations – even arguments where we think we are right – we allow some build-up that isn't healthy for anyone. We need to search out our sin and clean it up to give God the space to speak. He will give you the wisdom and grace to move past your pain into healing.

Consider and pray

What relationship do you need God to restore to you? Ask for forgiveness and pray that Christ would give you an opportunity to work through the hard stuff.

Scripture

Genesis 30:16–21 (NLT)

So that evening, as Jacob was coming home from the fields, Leah went out to meet him. "You must come and sleep with me tonight!" she said. "I have paid for you with some mandrakes that my son found." So that night he slept with Leah. And God answered Leah's prayers. She became pregnant again and gave birth to a fifth son for Jacob. She named him Issachar, for she said, "God has rewarded me for giving my servant to my husband as a wife." Then Leah became pregnant again and gave birth to a sixth son for Jacob. She named him Zebulun, for she said, "God has given me a good reward. Now my husband will treat me with respect, for I have given him six sons." Later she gave birth to a daughter and named her Dinah.

Reflection

There is a scientific theory in the study of weather patterns called the butterfly effect. This is the notion that very small changes can have very big consequences. So, for example, the flap of a butterfly's wings can begin a chain of movements that result in a storm a few weeks later. We have adapted this thinking into our understanding of human actions and their consequences. We tend to wonder if any of our smaller actions and decisions have resulted in something else occurring that might not have otherwise happened.

While very interesting, this kind of thinking can tempt us to believe that we are the masters of

our own fate – that we can manipulate things to get the outcome we want. If it 'works', it becomes part of our narrative that we made it happen. Take our story of Leah, Rachel and Jacob. Leah and Rachel tried to control their fertility with mandrakes, bargaining and offering their servants as wives. When Leah had sons to Jacob, she assumed that God had rewarded her for all of her efforts.

What you might notice from this story is that there seems to be very little communication with God about His control and power to influence. Perhaps you can see that in your own life. We don't know when and if God will intervene and so we do things to try and work it out ourselves. Our misplaced belief can translate to putting our hope in our own understanding, superstitions and earthly wisdom. If this is the way in which you have been handling things lately, remember the wise words in the Bible: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding. Seek His will in all you do, and He will show you which path to take", Proverbs 3:5–6 (NLT).

Consider and pray

What situation have you been trying to control lately? Are you concerned that you are going to make or break an outcome with your decisions? Read Proverbs 3:5–6 through until you are able to trust Him to guide your path.

Scripture

Genesis 30:22–24 (NLT)

Then God remembered Rachel's plight and answered her prayers by enabling her to have children. She became pregnant and gave birth to a son. "God has removed my disgrace," she said. And she named him Joseph, for she said, "May the Lord add yet another son to my family."

Reflection

It is reassuring to see that Rachel did finally get what she had been hoping for after many years. It is also important to remember what she had gone through to get to this point. Rachel had been living under a cloud of disappointment and pain for a very long time, and this had led to bitterness, unhealthy relationships with those around her, and some very twisted decision-making.

Life is hard. Sometimes we get the things we desire and sometimes we don't – or we have to wait a very long time for those things that we want. It can be difficult to hold on to any hope in what Christ has promised you. You can probably think of times when you asked for something from God but didn't receive it. You might even be living through the pain of that right now. It can take determination and strength of will to push through your discouragement.

Lean into some hope from this scripture and in the words 'God remembered'. God remembers you. He remembers what you have been asking of Him. Your hope is not futile. This life might disappoint you but you will not be disappointed in the end. Christ will return and the troubles of this life will cease to exist. Rachel did not live out her disappointment perfectly, and neither will you, but God is able to bring restoration to your situation. Keep the faith.

Consider and pray

What prayers and hopes do you feel have been forgotten by God? Remind yourself that God will restore your situation and trust in the promise of eternity where all things will be made new.

Scripture

Genesis 31:1-7 (NIV)

Jacob heard that Laban's sons were saying, "Jacob has taken everything our father owned and has gained all this wealth from what belonged to our father." And Jacob noticed that Laban's attitude toward him was not what it had been. Then the Lord said to Jacob, "Go back to the land of your fathers and to your relatives, and I will be with you." So Jacob sent word to Rachel and Leah to come out to the fields where his flocks were. He said to them, "I see that your father's attitude toward me is not what it was before, but the God of my father has been with me. You know that I've worked for your father with all my strength, yet your father has cheated me by changing my wages ten times. However, God has not allowed him to harm me.

Reflection

Work is a hard, but necessary, part of our lives. It is often our work lives that define us – we make decisions after high school about what kind of job we want and we spend time studying, training or working our way up from the bottom for a career. Throughout our lives, we might change jobs, move into full-time parenting, volunteer and, perhaps, even retrain to work in a different occupation. When we go to social events, the first question we usually answer is in relation to what we do, or did, for work.

While we are working, we also dream of not having to work! We imagine a time when we have made enough money, paid all our expenses and can just quit and experience real freedom. Let's face it, a job can feel like a trap. You can imagine how Jacob felt after 20 years of hard work, with his boss who was getting more difficult by the day. The relationship between Jacob and Laban was strained and Jacob was over it. So, when God said 'go', he was more than ready.

While you may be able to relate well to wanting to leave your job, or move on to something else in life, remember that Jacob waited for God to tell him when to leave. There are reasons that God keeps us somewhere, even if it is tough, and, just as it was with Jacob, He will not allow you to be harmed while you wait. Take it all to the Lord in prayer and wait to hear Him call you on to the next thing.

Consider and pray

Is there something that you are finding hard to stick it out with? Pray for God's protection and ask Him to speak clearly about what you should do.

Scripture

Genesis 31:11–16 (NIV)

"The angel of God said to me in the dream, 'Jacob.' I answered, 'Here I am.' And he said, 'Look up and see that all the male goats mating with the flock are streaked, speckled or spotted, for I have seen all that Laban has been doing to you. I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and where you made a vow to me. Now leave this land at once and go back to your native land.'"

Then Rachel and Leah replied, "Do we still have any share in the inheritance of our father's estate? Does he not regard us as foreigners? Not only has he sold us, but he has used up what was paid for us. Surely all the wealth that God took away from our father belongs to us and our children. So do whatever God has told you."

Reflection

People feel drawn to the place they came from, whether it is their country of birth or the town they grew up in. We are attached to the people and places that give us meaning and a sense of belonging. You might be in your home town right now, or you might be far away from it. Sometimes, we don't move out of choice and, just like Jacob, always hope to return to where we came from.

When God finally spoke to Jacob and told him to go, Jacob knew he had to set a plan in motion. He wanted to move with his family but knew this would mean taking them from their home

and moving to somewhere foreign. Surprisingly, Leah and Rachel didn't seem to have any hesitation to leave their land to follow Jacob. Just like that old saying, perhaps they felt that 'home is where the heart is'. They had noticed that their father was beginning to squander the family inheritance and their primary concern was what was best for their children. They also seemed to have turned a new leaf in their relationship by agreeing with each other and listening to what God had called them to do.

Looking out for our whānau is important. Sometimes, we just have to make decisions that are in the best interest of our siblings, parents, spouses, children and anyone else considered family. While a place can be important, our relationship and care for our family is the most important thing. God created families as a blessing – take some time to be grateful for your blessings.

Consider and pray

What sacrifices have you had to make for your family? Pray that you would continue to make choices that would lead to blessing those you are closest to.

Scripture

Genesis 31:22–28 (NIV)

On the third day Laban was told that Jacob had fled. Taking his relatives with him, he pursued Jacob for seven days and caught up with him in the hill country of Gilead. Then God came to Laban the Aramean in a dream at night and said to him, “Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad.”

Jacob had pitched his tent in the hill country of Gilead when Laban overtook him, and Laban and his relatives camped there too. Then Laban said to Jacob, “What have you done? You’ve deceived me and you’ve carried off my daughters like captives in war. Why did you run off secretly and deceive me? Why didn’t you tell me, so I could send you away with joy and singing to the music of timbrels and harps? You didn’t even let me kiss my grandchildren and my daughters goodbye. You have done a foolish thing.”

Reflection

Laban was in hot pursuit of Jacob after he left with Laban’s daughters and grandchildren without saying goodbye. While you might think Jacob was being a little unfair, Laban wasn’t only being sentimental. He was also fearing for his own wealth. Jacob had made the family business prosperous, and he was taking all of his stock with him. Laban also thought he had taken his idols, which were thought to be associated with the family inheritance.

God knew what Laban was up to. He knew that Laban was angry and would try to stop Jacob from going home. So He warned him to be careful about what he said and, essentially, to leave Jacob in peace. Unfortunately, Laban let his assumptions and anger get the better of him, trying to make Jacob feel guilty and calling his decision foolish.

Relationships have their arguments and, with them, comes a choice about how you use your words. You might be someone that is not measured about what you say and just let it all out. You might be a little more manipulative with your words to make the other person feel bad. God’s wisdom is beyond these ways of arguing. He doesn’t tell you not to be angry or upset, but He might just be whispering, as He did to Laban, to keep yourself in check and not say anything.

As it says in scripture, “Don’t repay evil for evil. Don’t retaliate with insults when people insult you. Instead, pay them back with a blessing. That is what God has called you to do, and He will grant you His blessing”, 1 Peter 3:9 (NLT).

Consider and pray

Are there opportunities in your relationships to be more careful with what you say? Pray that God helps you with self-control and ask for peace to prevail.

Scripture

Genesis 31:36–42 (NLT)

Then Jacob became very angry, and he challenged Laban. “What’s my crime?” he demanded. “What have I done wrong to make you chase after me as though I were a criminal? You have rummaged through everything I own. Now show me what you found that belongs to you! Set it out here in front of us, before our relatives, for all to see. Let them judge between us! “For twenty years I have been with you, caring for your flocks. In all that time your sheep and goats never miscarried. In all those years I never used a single ram of yours for food. If any were attacked and killed by wild animals, I never showed you the carcass and asked you to reduce the count of your flock. No, I took the loss myself! You made me pay for every stolen animal, whether it was taken in broad daylight or in the dark of night. “I worked for you through the scorching heat of the day and through cold and sleepless nights. Yes, for twenty years I slaved in your house! I worked for fourteen years earning your two daughters, and then six more years for your flock. And you changed my wages ten times! In fact, if the God of my father had not been on my side – the God of Abraham and the fearsome God of Isaac – you would have sent me away empty-handed. But God has seen your abuse and my hard work. That is why He appeared to you last night and rebuked you!”

Reflection

Jacob had worked so hard for Laban, despite all of the ways he was treated unfairly. He may have tried to work through his feelings for the sake of keeping the peace in his family but,

each time he was cheated, it would have been harder to keep the resentment from building. When, eventually, he was accused by Laban for the very thing he was trying to forgive his uncle for, Jacob let all the dirty laundry out.

When we hold on to our grievances, we risk having them coming out all at once. You might understand a bit about holding onto a list of things that someone has done to you, big or small. It could be things your flatmate hasn’t cleaned up, the names your brother or sister has called you, the unfair expectations your boss has put on you, or being lied to multiple times by a friend. These things can happen over a few weeks, or many years, and make us feel disrespected and disregarded.

While getting things off your chest might make you feel better, judgement and retaliation will not. Scripture nudges us to be like Christ who “did not retaliate when He was insulted, nor threaten revenge when He suffered. He left his case in the hands of God, who always judges fairly”, 1 Peter 2:23 (NLT). God has seen your pain and irritation, and He is the one who will intervene. God appeared to Laban and defended Jacob. Leave it in His hands to judge fairly and put your attention and focus onto healthier relationships.

Consider and pray

What grievances are you holding on to? Pray for wisdom about when to let things go and when to confront them with that person. Pray that you can leave your case in the hands of God and trust in His fair judgement.

Scripture

Genesis 31:43–45, 48–50 (NLT)

Then Laban replied to Jacob, “These women are my daughters, these children are my grandchildren, and these flocks are my flocks – in fact, everything you see is mine. But what can I do now about my daughters and their children? So come, let’s make a covenant, you and I, and it will be a witness to our commitment.” So Jacob took a stone and set it up as a monument.

Then Laban declared, “This pile of stones will stand as a witness to remind us of the covenant we have made today.” This explains why it was called Galeed – “Witness Pile.” But it was also called Mizpah (which means “watchtower”), for Laban said, “May the Lord keep watch between us to make sure that we keep this covenant when we are out of each other’s sight. If you mistreat my daughters or if you marry other wives, God will see it even if no one else does. He is a witness to this covenant between us.

Reflection

If you’ve ever been to a famous bridge, like the Golden Gate bridge in San Francisco, you might read some history or get shown some pictures to understand what it was like before the bridge was built. The separation between land masses meant that it was hard or even impossible to connect to the other side. It is quite an achievement that humans figured out a way to overcome that great big body of water.

There will be times in life, when relationships disconnect because of disagreement, differences and carelessness. We can be very close to someone, only to be pulled apart by wrongdoing, like two land masses separated by a deep body of water. Sometimes, we know that water will never go away. This is when we need to figure out how to build our bridge. Instead of wading through the impossible, we need to find a way to restore that connection.

Laban and Jacob were at a stand-off with what they wanted. They were both right at one time and both wrong at one time. This was the kind of fight where there were no winners. So, Laban built his bridge. In fact, he built a pile of stones. He found a way to get over his unhealthy emotions and commit to not hurting his nephew again. Together, he and Jacob worked on a path to restoration and acknowledged they were accountable to the Lord to keep true to their new commitment.

Consider and pray

What bridges do you need to build? Pray for help to work through your emotions enough to extend grace and forgiveness for the sake of restoring a right relationship with the people you love.

Scripture

Genesis 32:1–5 (NLT)

As Jacob started on his way again, angels of God came to meet him. When Jacob saw them, he exclaimed, "This is God's camp!" So he named the place Mahanaim. Then Jacob sent messengers ahead to his brother, Esau, who was living in the region of Seir in the land of Edom. He told them, "Give this message to my master Esau: 'Humble greetings from your servant Jacob. Until now I have been living with Uncle Laban, and now I own cattle, donkeys, flocks of sheep and goats, and many servants, both men and women. I have sent these messengers to inform my lord of my coming, hoping that you will be friendly to me.'"

Reflection

Sometimes, it is not someone else who has caused us pain and turmoil, but our own actions and attitudes. The consequences for us can be just as heartbreaking as are the consequences of things that are done deliberately to us. Jacob had lied, schemed and cheated his brother and it was his time to go back and face up to what he had done.

When was the last time you felt badly about something you had done? You might have fallen back into an addiction, lied about a situation or not shown up for something you were responsible for. There will be times when you have to confront that sin, the consequence, and the people you might have hurt as a result.

Just like Jacob, you won't always know how people will react when you seek forgiveness and reconciliation. The fear and uncertainty are very real but this is part of owning our mistakes. Humility and vulnerability are always the best approach, and you just have to hope that the response will be a favourable one. At the heart of seeking forgiveness is the hope of restoration, so invite Jesus into that situation, because this is what our Christian walk is all about.

Consider and pray

Are you feeling weighed down by something you know you need to make right? Perhaps you are waiting for an apology from someone for the way they have hurt you. Confess your sins to Jesus and pray He would guide you with the best approach in asking for forgiveness.

Scripture

Genesis 32:6-11 (NLT)

After delivering the message, the messengers returned to Jacob and reported, "We met your brother, Esau, and he is already on his way to meet you – with an army of 400 men!" Jacob was terrified at the news. He divided his household, along with the flocks and herds and camels, into two groups. He thought, "If Esau meets one group and attacks it, perhaps the other group can escape." Then Jacob prayed, "O God of my grandfather Abraham, and God of my father, Isaac – O Lord, you told me, 'Return to your own land and to your relatives.' And you promised me, 'I will treat you kindly.' I am not worthy of all the unfailing love and faithfulness you have shown to me, your servant. When I left home and crossed the Jordan River, I owned nothing except a walking stick. Now my household fills two large camps! O Lord, please rescue me from the hand of my brother, Esau. I am afraid that he is coming to attack me, along with my wives and children.

Reflection

Jacob's worst fear seems to have come to a head. Not only was Esau still angry but he was coming at him with an army! If ever there was a moment to doubt what God had told him to do, this was it. Why would God send him back to his own land, and tell him that he would be treated kindly, if he knew Esau was going to attack him and his family? He had seen God be faithful to him before and yet now he was having to plead to be rescued. How quickly our faith can falter!

There are situations in life that bring fear and anxiety. We can receive bad news about our health, lose our job, have relationships break up or struggle with our finances. You might be going through something like this right now, or have experienced some of these things in the past.

When we go through challenging times, it is good to remind ourselves of what God has promised us. The Bible says that God is your refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble (Psalm 46:1). Have faith in God's words and trust that He is in control rather than panicking and trying to control everything yourself.

Think back on those times when God has come through for you. It is often said that we experience God more profoundly when we are going through our challenges because we recognise our need for Him. Lean into His Word and believe that His power and grace will prevail in your situation.

Consider and pray

What are you facing that is causing you to experience fear or anxiety? Pray that God would remind you of His faithfulness to you in other hard situations, and remind yourself of His promise to be near to you in these times.

Scripture

Genesis 32:13–18 (NIV)

He spent the night there, and from what he had with him he selected a gift for his brother Esau: two hundred female goats and twenty male goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams, thirty female camels with their young, forty cows and ten bulls, and twenty female donkeys and ten male donkeys. He put them in the care of his servants, each herd by itself, and said to his servants, "Go ahead of me, and keep some space between the herds." He instructed the one in the lead: "When my brother Esau meets you and asks, 'Who do you belong to, and where are you going, and who owns all these animals in front of you?' then you are to say, 'They belong to your servant Jacob. They are a gift sent to my lord Esau, and he is coming behind us.'"

Reflection

Have you ever been in a situation where you have damaged something expensive? You might remember a time where you got into trouble for ruining a piece of furniture or putting a hole in the wall. You might have been involved in minor car mishaps – bumping the car in front or misjudging your surroundings when backing out. You might have gone into financial debt over some foolish decisions. Some damage we do is far worse and involves other people's emotions. When we damage things, there is an expectation to fix the damage, repay the damage or be punished for it.

Jacob had taken Esau's entire inheritance, and he would have correctly assumed that Esau would want to get back what he had lost. He had to think of a way to repay him to earn back some favour or, at least, to make sure his brother didn't kill him. What Jacob had earned over the years from his work with their uncle was likely a very good repayment or, at least, a good start, but he also needed to accompany this with a change of heart. Notice that he calls himself a servant to his 'lord', Esau. This is a very different attitude towards the same brother he had competed with, and cheated, to win.

Whether intentional or not, our wrongs put us in some form of debt, and they lead to consequences. But we can't carry all of that on our own. That's why Jesus came to save us – to take our debt to the cross and pay it Himself. The ultimate sin of humanity's sin, death, has been reversed. Jesus conquered that and brought us forgiveness and life. Instead of struggling to make things right in our own strength, we can rely on the grace and power of Jesus to help right our wrongs.

Consider and pray

What wrongs are you trying to make right in your own strength? Pray for God's grace to release you from your own efforts, and let the power of His forgiveness and new life work through you.

Scripture

Genesis 32:22–26 (NIV)

That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two female servants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob’s hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. Then the man said, “Let me go, for it is daybreak.” But Jacob replied, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.”

Reflection

Jacob had come to a crisis point in his life. He was trying to follow God’s direction, but there were so many unknowns of what would meet him there. He had parted with his family and was left alone with his fears, questions, frustrations and loneliness. It is in that state of mind that he confronts another man, and Jacob’s instinct is to fight. Whether he knew this was God or a messenger of God is unknown but Jacob did not want to give up. His struggle was as much physical as it was emotional.

We will all have our crisis moments. The Bible doesn’t seem to condemn Jacob for struggling, but the story ends with God having the final say. God will allow you to fight, question, get angry and try to get what you want in your own strength. He might allow this for a long time, as you work through your pain and frustration.

Eventually, however, God will remind you that He is in control and you will need to surrender and simply ask Him for what you need.

If you are in the middle of a struggle right now, remember what salvation is all about. Our life is not about what we have earned or fought for, it is about what has been freely given to us, from Jesus and through Jesus. Accept the blessing that comes from the gift of salvation in the middle of your difficulties.

Consider and pray

What crisis are you facing right now? How will you recognise when it is time to surrender? Pray that the Holy Spirit would give you the wisdom to know when to let go.

Scripture

Genesis 32:27–32 (NIV)

The man asked him, "What is your name?" "Jacob," he answered. Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome." Jacob said, "Please tell me your name." But He replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then He blessed him there. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared." The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip. Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the tendon attached to the socket of the hip, because the socket of Jacob's hip was touched near the tendon.

Reflection

When we are asked our name, we are sharing a part of our identity. When God asked Jacob's name, He was asking him about his identity. Jacob's name as 'the grasper' had defined his whole life up until now. He schemed, cheated, worked hard, and wrestled all night, to ensure he would get the blessing he felt he deserved. When God changed his name, He was telling Jacob that he didn't need to strive any more. Jacob had overcome.

If you were asked to describe yourself, what would you say? Would you say you are confident, friendly, anxious or hard-working? There are a number of ways we can define who we are, but the one that matters the most is the name

God gives you. Instead of seeing yourself the way the world defines you, see yourself the way Christ does. To Him, you are an overcomer and part of His eternal family. Your identity through Jesus is a blessed one.

Like Jacob, you might walk with a limp from all of the struggles you have had in life, and with God. Rather than a sign of weakness, this proves your strength – that you have been impacted and shaped by those difficulties. It proves that you have engaged with God in those darkest moments and He has left a sign of your ability to overcome.

Consider and pray

What struggles have resulted in you walking with a limp? Pray that God would remind you of what that limp represents – a struggle, a surrender and a blessing.

Scripture

Genesis 33:1–4 (NIV)
also 35:1–15 (NIV)

Jacob looked up and there was Esau, coming with his four hundred men; so he divided the children among Leah, Rachel and the two female servants. He put the female servants and their children in front, Leah and her children next, and Rachel and Joseph in the rear. He himself went on ahead and bowed down to the ground seven times as he approached his brother. But Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. And they wept.

Reflection

We have seen a lot of movies depicting the greatest battle scenes with hundreds, sometimes thousands, of men in armour approaching one another for war. These are the scenes that come to mind when Esau and his tribe of 400 approached Jacob. We know Jacob was fearful of Esau's reaction towards him and was still not sure whether or not he was angry enough to kill him and his family. This was Jacob's moment of truth.

We have these significant moments in our lives where we see our worst fears approaching us. It could be waiting for results from medical tests, a meeting about the future of a job, or seeing the signs of a turn in our mental health. We are at our most vulnerable at these times and, like Jacob, there may be nothing left to do but kneel or bow down and accept what is coming our way.

Things turned out well for Jacob in this moment with his brother running towards him and embracing him. He was forgiven and there would be no retribution. Not all of our situations are met with joy and relief. You might not be able to stop the storm or the bad news this time. However, in the good or the bad, God is running towards you to meet you and to be with you. He will show Himself to you and promise you that, in the end, He will make all things right. Have hope beyond your situation into your eternal future.

Consider and pray

What is coming on the horizon for you that is creating uncertainty and concern? Pray that you would see Jesus in the middle of it all and focus on His embrace.

Scripture

Genesis 33:5-11 (NIV)

Then Esau looked up and saw the women and children. "Who are these with you?" he asked. Jacob answered, "They are the children God has graciously given your servant." Then the female servants and their children approached and bowed down. Next, Leah and her children came and bowed down. Last of all came Joseph and Rachel, and they too bowed down. Esau asked, "What's the meaning of all these flocks and herds I met?" "To find favour in your eyes, my lord," he said. But Esau said, "I already have plenty, my brother. Keep what you have for yourself." "No, please!" said Jacob. "If I have found favour in your eyes, accept this gift from me. For to see your face is like seeing the face of God, now that you have received me favourably. Please accept the present that was brought to you, for God has been gracious to me and I have all I need." And because Jacob insisted, Esau accepted it.

Reflection

It's often said it can be better to give than to receive. This is because receiving gifts, particularly in our culture, is hard to do. We let our pride get in the way of allowing people to bless us through their time, money and other offers of support. Jacob knew how much he had taken from Esau and really wanted to give back generously to him; he wanted to repay his debt.

Esau, however, did not need the gifts; he had more than enough through what he had earned over the years. Jacob was right to think that Esau was like God, because he was experiencing grace – undeserved favour. Esau was focused on reunion with his brother and family, not compensation. While he didn't need what Jacob was offering, he accepted it because of Jacob's need to show love in return.

Whether you have a lot in life or a little, there are times when you just need to let people bless you because they want to show you love and support. Perhaps they feel they need to repay the kindness you have shown them. Allow yourself to accept help from others. It is Christ's way of showing Himself through the goodness of His people to one another. As scripture reminds us, "Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples", John 13:35 (NLT).

Consider and pray

What kindness has someone shown you recently? Pray that you would not let pride get in the way of accepting the goodness of others, and ask Christ for opportunities to bless others in the same way.

Scripture

Genesis 33:12-17 (NIV)

Then Esau said, "Let us be on our way; I'll accompany you." But Jacob said to him, "My lord knows that the children are tender and that I must care for the ewes and cows that are nursing their young. If they are driven hard just one day, all the animals will die. So let my lord go on ahead of his servant, while I move along slowly at the pace of the flocks and herds before me and the pace of the children, until I come to my lord in Seir." Esau said, "Then let me leave some of my men with you." "But why do that?" Jacob asked. "Just let me find favour in the eyes of my lord." So that day Esau started on his way back to Seir. Jacob, however, went to Sukkoth, where he built a place for himself and made shelters for his livestock. That is why the place is called Sukkoth.

Reflection

When you go on long road trips, there are lots of reasons to stop before you reach your destination – usually for things like food, petrol and sleep. Jacob had many of these stops on his journey to receive God's promise. He wandered for a long time to avoid the wrath of his brother, he worked for his uncle for around 20 years for his wife Rachel, he stopped and wrestled with God on his journey back, and, now, he had to stay in one place for a while until his family and flock were ready to move on. They could seem like obstacles but, for every stop, there was something Jacob learned about himself and his God.

Our destination is the inheritance of eternal life that Jesus gave freely to us when He came to earth, died for our sins, and rose again to defeat the grave. We all journey in different ways to live out this story on earth, and to bring other people into the family of God. As we live out our lives, sometimes we can wonder if we will ever 'arrive'.

You might feel like the ordinary things of life – your job, maintaining a home, working out or a short mission trip – are distractions from the 'big thing' God is calling you to. Remind yourself that, like Jacob, each of these experiences is leading you closer to our God. Be grateful for the stops along the way because these are the times when your heart and mind are shaped towards the promise of home.

Consider and pray

What important stop of the journey are you experiencing right now? Pray that God uses your current situation to prepare your heart, mind and soul for His greater purpose in your life and the lives of others.

Scripture

Genesis 35:1–3 (NLT)

Then God said to Jacob, “Get ready and move to Bethel and settle there. Build an altar there to the God who appeared to you when you fled from your brother, Esau.” So Jacob told everyone in his household, “Get rid of all your pagan idols, purify yourselves, and put on clean clothing. We are now going to Bethel, where I will build an altar to the God who answered my prayers when I was in distress. He has been with me wherever I have gone.”

Reflection

We can let our lives be consumed with all kinds of earthly desires – things that bring us momentary joy, comfort and status. Jacob was all about fighting and grasping for these things when he began his journey. But, as he wandered, worked and struggled his way back home, he encountered God. He began to listen to God, respond to His call, and work towards restoring his relationships. Jacob made a point of ridding himself and the family of other forms of worship so that they could centre their lives, and their worship, on the one true God.

There are times when we have to make a clean start. We can stray quite far from God’s calling and forget to walk in step with Him. You might have fought so hard for a career that you squashed others in the process, and missed out on time with your family and friends. You may have let addictions or obsessions rule your time and wallet or been caught up in a circle

of unhealthy relationships. Take a closer look at what you have been pursuing, and ask God if there are any ‘idols’ that you need to throw away.

The truth is that God is the one who will answer your prayers and be with you wherever you go. Reflect on the words of the Psalmist and make this your prayer: “create in me a clean heart, O God. Renew a loyal spirit within me”, Psalm 51:10 (NLT).

Consider and pray

What are the things that you are pursuing in life that are leading you away from worshipping your Creator? Pray for the strength and grace to throw those things away and ask for God to prepare your heart for a clean start.

Scripture

Genesis 35:9–15 (NIV)

Now that Jacob had returned from Paddan-aram, God appeared to him again at Bethel. God blessed him, saying, “Your name is Jacob, but you will not be called Jacob any longer. From now on your name will be Israel.” So God renamed him Israel. Then God said, “I am El-Shaddai – ‘God Almighty.’ Be fruitful and multiply. You will become a great nation, even many nations. Kings will be among your descendants! And I will give you the land I once gave to Abraham and Isaac. Yes, I will give it to you and your descendants after you.” Then God went up from the place where he had spoken to Jacob.

Jacob set up a stone pillar to mark the place where God had spoken to him. Then he poured wine over it as an offering to God and anointed the pillar with olive oil. And Jacob named the place Bethel (which means “house of God”), because God had spoken to him there.

Reflection

The Bible doesn’t say exactly how God appeared to Jacob, but it was clear that God had spoken. Jacob had been following God’s voice ever since he was told to return home. He was finally learning to trust God and walk in line with His calling. His obedience was all God needed to confirm the blessing that had been declared over Jacob by his father, Isaac.

There are moments in our lives when we finally understand something of God’s power and love in our lives. We hear Him speak clearly and we are reminded of His promise and purpose. These are our ‘Bethel’ moments and are worth returning to.

Jacob’s story is a story of redemption. He pursued his own selfish desires until he met God face to face and was changed forever by his encounter. He humbled himself to return home, and was met with grace and mercy.

This is the story that Jesus brought to the world. We are selfish and pursue many things for our own gain. Walking towards God and being willing to engage with Him, even in our brokenness, allows Him to reach out, touch us and restore His promise to us. God has spoken; you are forgiven, made new and restored. Praise God for your own story of redemption and use it to influence the world around you.

Consider and pray

What is your story of redemption? Thank God for the evidence of His grace in your life and in this world.