



Sept/Oct 2020

Today

refresh, refocus, renew

**DYING
TO LIVE**

ALSO: JACOB: CHANGED BY GOD'S GRACE

Dear Friends:

In Michigan, where I live, we sometimes joke that we have only two seasons: winter and construction, a cynical reference to our state's much-needed roadwork.

In our September meditations, Syd Hielema notes that all of us who follow Jesus are "under construction." In other words, although Jesus has redeemed us, we all have a long way to go in learning to live for him. And this process of learning to live for Jesus ultimately means daily "dying" to ourselves. For all of us, this is a slow, oftentimes painful, lifelong process of putting aside our will, our desires, our aspirations, and our goals and learning to seek God's will first and the coming of his kingdom in our lives and in this world.

In October, Joel Vande Werken follows up that theme with a series on the life and struggles of the patriarch Jacob, whom God renamed *Israel*. For many of us, Jacob is something of a confounding "hero." He can be deceitful. He lies. He cheats. He runs away. He whines and feels sorry for himself. Yet, by the end of Jacob's life, we can see that God's grace has transformed him.

So these meditations remind and assure us that although we struggle with faults and weaknesses, God, through the grace of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit, can and will transform and sanctify us.

I pray that each of you will be refreshed, refocused, and renewed as you meditate on God's Word!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Kurt Selles". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

—Kurt Selles



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**“Dying to Live”
Syd Hielema**



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october

Jacob: Changed by God's Grace

Joel Vande Werken

Jacob is one of my favorite people in the Bible. But I don't think I would have liked him much if I had met him early in his life. He was cunning, manipulative, and crafty. He acted out of self-interest and didn't think much of others. But God loved him, and the book of Genesis shows how God pursued and softened Jacob's heart until he eventually understood that God's blessing comes by grace alone.

That truth changed Jacob's attitude toward God and others. And that's a lesson we all need to learn. Our individual challenges and sins may not be the same as Jacob's, but they are just as much in need of Christ's transforming power. We all deeply need the assurance that God will save us. And by his grace, all who believe in Jesus Christ, God's Son, as Savior will be changed to enjoy full life with him forever.

Joel Vande Werken has been a pastor since 2007, serving churches in Sussex, New Jersey, and in Whitinsville, Massachusetts. He and his wife, Brandie, have four young children.

START OF A STRUGGLE

The babies jostled each other within her, and she said, "Why is this happening to me?"
—Genesis 25:22

As a parent of four children, I see my share of sibling rivalry. Thankfully, my children's struggles so far have been minor misunderstandings between kids who mostly love each other. But, as a pastor, I know that family conflict is a source of stress and deep pain for many people.

The Bible portrays Jacob and Esau's rivalry as starting even before birth. Jacob was born "grasping Esau's heel." His very name describes his tendency to nip at the heels of his brother.

But as we will see, Jacob's relationship with Esau reflects his struggle with God as well. Though he might think his biggest struggle is with his brother, Jacob will eventually learn how much he "grasps at the heels" of whatever he thinks will bring him some advantage. Jacob spends a lot of time chasing God's favor rather than

simply receiving God's mercy and blessing.

We have much to learn from Jacob. Even when family relationships are healthy, we find ourselves jostled by the struggles of life. We tend to "grasp at the heels" of whatever we believe will fulfill us.

For this reason we need to ask Rebekah's question: "Why is this happening . . . ?" And we need to listen for God's invitation to see him at work, changing our hearts to receive his gift of mercy in Christ.

Heavenly Father, when we are frustrated by the conflicts of life, help us to watch for your work in our hearts. Heal our relationships with others—and especially with you. Amen.

A POT OF SOUP

Jacob replied, "First sell me your birthright."

—Genesis 25:31

As Jacob grew up, his life began to take a very different course from that of his brother, Esau. Not only did Jacob and Esau have different interests and personalities, but their parents' favoritism likely fueled their sibling rivalry. And in the back of Jacob's mind, there was probably often a reminder of God's response to Rebekah—a prophecy saying that "the older [brother] will serve the younger" (Genesis 25:23).

Have you ever been frustrated by the feeling that *you* were not getting what you deserved? Knowing that God intended to bless him, Jacob took steps to secure that blessing for himself. And Esau, whose hunger for soup overruled his common sense, cooperated by selling his birthright.

Perhaps like Jacob, we often see God's blessing as something we should have—or may-

be even deserve—and we think we need to seize it or secure it by making some kind of deal or bargain. But blessings from God are an undeserved gift. They cannot be purchased for any price other than the blood Christ gave for us on the cross. Yet as Jacob's story will show us, it can take a lifetime to set aside our human tendency to struggle against the work of God and to receive his love as a gift.

Pray that God's Spirit will begin to help you learn that lesson today.

Gracious God, we often try to seize for ourselves what you delight to offer as a gift. Help us to look today to Christ, who has already paid the price of your blessing for us. Amen.

PLOTTING A DECEPTION

"I would appear to be tricking him and would bring down a curse on myself rather than a blessing." —Genesis 27:12

Today's story brings us to a decisive moment in Jacob's life. Isaac has grown old, and he is nearly blind. And now he intends to pass along his blessing to Esau as the firstborn, including special blessings and promises from God. So Jacob is spurred to action by his mother.

Jacob rightly senses the potential for disaster: What if his mother's plan doesn't work? What if his father discovers the lie?

But Jacob goes along with the plot anyway, and the result will be painful for everyone.

The story leaves us with a deeper question: Can a person really scheme their way into God's gifts of prosperity, success, and honor? Despite his misgivings, Jacob is willing to try. But he is not the only one. We too can ignore our

conscience when we think that maybe our best bet is to cut corners, to stretch the truth, or to subtly undermine others. Like Jacob, our main concern is often only that we should get what we want, no matter how we go about it.

But the Bible reminds us that the blessing of a relationship with God cannot be gained by manipulation. Honor and prosperity in God's sight can only be a gift. All other efforts will set us on a painful course until we learn to live by grace through the Lord's work.

Heavenly Father, what an awesome promise it is that you desire to bless us! Forgive us for wanting to scheme our way into your grace, and show us instead how to rest in Christ. In his name, Amen.

DECEIVER

Jacob said to his father, "I am Esau your firstborn."

—Genesis 27:19

Who is Jacob? In this passage, he pretends to be his brother, Esau, in order to receive his father's blessing, which includes special promises from God. Twice he blatantly lies to his father about his identity. He also lies about God helping him on a hunt that never happened. We can imagine Jacob nervously waiting while his father eats, knowing that in just a short time Esau will return and these lies will be revealed.

Jacob was clearly a deceiver, adding one lie to another to trick his aged father. Jacob even faked the way he smelled, and that "smell of a field" reminded Isaac of God's blessing. Jacob wanted to portray himself as someone worthy of his father's approval, but he was not yet someone who could be trusted with the gifts of abundance and blessing that God had promised.

But are we much different? Don't we often lie about our identity—to others and to ourselves? Thinking that God will be impressed with our achievements, we dress ourselves in the claim that we're pretty good people. We lie about our own sins and the harm we do to others. And we too do not (yet) "smell" like the One who has received God's blessing (see 2 Corinthians 2:15).

Who are you? Only in Christ can we admit our true identity: a deceiver, a sinner in need of grace. Be honest with God today, and receive his grace and forgiveness.

Father, forgive us for trying to deceive you and to cover our true identity as sinners. You know who we are. Forgive us, for Jesus' sake, that we may receive your blessing. Amen.

RUNNING AWAY

Rebekah . . . said . . . "Now then, my son, do what I say: Flee at once to my brother Laban in Harran." —Genesis 27:42-43

Jacob's deception got him his father's blessing. But it also damaged the relationships he had with the people around him. Today's reading drives home the tragedy of Jacob's deception. Jacob's brother, Esau, now plans to kill him after their father has died.

Again Rebekah steps in to advise her younger son. "Run!" she says, in effect; "go to live with my brother's family far away." She even offers a rationale to Isaac: there are no potential marriage partners here (see also Genesis 26:34-35). This is an attempt to make it sound like she is concerned about maintaining the family's faith in God, but Rebekah is using this as an excuse to avoid dealing with the deadly breakdown in her sons' relationship.

It is important, of course, to have a marriage founded on a shared love for God. And

we don't know what violence Esau might have done if Jacob had stayed. But even legitimate concerns should not become an excuse to run from the effects of our own sins. We all have a tendency to devise "cover stories" to keep up appearances and make ourselves look better than we are.

Thankfully, God's Spirit can work in us even when we try to run away. God pursued Jacob, and he will pursue us until his redeeming work in us is complete. Thanks be to God!

Faithful God, we confess our preference to run away rather than to admit our own deceitfulness and sin. Pursue us, Lord. Change us to become like Jesus, we pray, by the Spirit's power. Amen.

A STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN

"Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it."

—Genesis 28:16

When Jacob arrives at Bethel, he is a broken young man. Supposedly he has inherited the covenant blessings from his father: the promise that God will be with him, give him a great name, and make him a blessing to all nations (see Genesis 12:1-3; 28:3-4). But as he goes to sleep that night, he is alone and discredited—hardly a candidate to bless *anyone*, much less all peoples on earth.

But that night, in his dreams, Jacob catches a surprising glimpse of the God who has far more in store for him than he has ever understood. The text points out that this occurred in "a certain place," so this was not some imaginary or dreamed-up location. And here, in this ordinary place on the earth, Jacob sees a stairway reaching from earth to heaven, an open passageway to God. And God assures Jacob that all

of his covenant promises will be fulfilled.

Has God ever met you in an ordinary, unexpected place? Sometimes we, like Jacob, imagine that we need to work harder, feel more holy, or storm heaven to seize God's promises. And, like Jacob, we find that our efforts leave us broken and alone.

But God reminds us that we don't need to build a stairway to get to heaven. In Jesus, he has constructed a way for broken people to return to him (see John 1:51). Will you let God surprise you with his grace today?

God of heaven, what a great promise you give us! Help us today to see your grace to sinners, including us. Bring us to Jesus, who alone opens the gates of heaven to us. Amen.

HOME AWAY FROM HOME

Laban said to him, "You are my own flesh and blood."

—Genesis 29:14

When you've made a mess of your life, you need a safe place to land.

After a long journey, Jacob, running for his life, arrives at the home of his uncle. These are "his" people, his mother's family. This, surely, should be a good place to begin rebuilding his life. The fact that God had guided him to this spot—and Laban's warm welcome—must have reassured Jacob. He would have a home away from home.

Perhaps "your" people are a group of friends to whom God has led you, people who will stick with you through good times and hard times. Perhaps you've made a mess of your life, but God has led you to find reliable support in a recovery group or even in prison. Sometimes God graciously provides us safe places, as he does for Jacob, so that we can

begin growing and rebuilding our lives.

But the most important change God works in our lives is not in our circumstances or our location; it is in our hearts. God may sometimes grant a reprieve from the effects of our sin. But as Jacob will learn, God continues to pursue us until we rest in his grace alone.

The only place to truly be at home is at the cross of Christ, where sins are forgiven and messed-up lives are made new. Won't you flee to Jesus today?

Holy Spirit, thank you for providing places of temporary refuge in the midst of our harried lives. Keep directing us toward the true rest that is in Christ alone. Amen.

THE DECEIVER IS DECEIVED

Jacob said to Laban, “. . . Why have you deceived me?”

—Genesis 29:25

Jacob's stated purpose in fleeing to Harran was to find a wife (Genesis 28:2), and it did not take him long to fall in love. Jacob's polygamy and some other marriage customs described here may be foreign to many of us today, but they were not unusual in Jacob's day. The fact that they are included in the Bible does not mean God approves of them; it simply means that God can work to redeem people's hearts even through existing cultural realities.

On the night of his wedding, Jacob the deceiver is himself deceived. In the morning he finds that he is married to Leah instead of Rachel. Laban has played a nasty trick, and it will hurt his daughters as well as Jacob. But Jacob's favoritism will also take a toll, setting the stage for resentment and bitterness that will plague his family for a long time.

It is easy to see the wrong in others. Jacob is quick to name Laban's fault. But Jacob seems to miss the fact that only a short time earlier, he had committed a similar sin against his own father and brother.

We are responsible for the sinful ways we act, and we are more like Jacob than we might like to think. We get irritated when others sin against us, but we are quick to justify our own wrongdoing. Thankfully, God kept working on Jacob—and he keeps working on *our* hearts too.

Heavenly Father, we easily ignore our own sins, but we get upset when others sin against us. Help us to see our hearts as you see them and to forgive others as you forgive us. Amen.

FAMILY MATTERS

When Rachel saw that she was not bearing Jacob any children, she became jealous of her sister.
—Genesis 30:2

Sometimes God humbles us by putting us in situations beyond our control.

For Jacob, this humbling began with his own family. His uncle tricked him into a marriage with Leah, whom he failed to love, creating a rivalry with Rachel for his affection. Nowhere was this rivalry felt more strongly than when Leah began having children. Any struggle with infertility can be deeply painful, and Rachel reacted with predictable bitterness.

While Jacob rightly points out that it is beyond his ability to ease Rachel's pain, his response is one of anger. Like many of us, Jacob is accustomed to leaning on his own ability to solve problems. But his inability to help Rachel frustrates him, and it leads him to frustrate and hurt the people around him. Confidence in our own abilities often does that.

But Jacob's words are truer than he knows: "Am I in the place of God . . . ?" While he has not yet fully grasped this truth, these words reveal a growing awareness that Jacob is *not* God. Life is beyond his control.

We can be frustrated—and we can frustrate others—when we find ourselves in situations outside of our control. Or we can admit that we are not God, and we can begin to embrace his gracious care for us.

Almighty God, all good things come from you alone. We confess our tendency to take things into our own hands, frustrating ourselves and others. Teach us to depend on you alone, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

BUSINESS MATTERS

So the weak animals went to Laban and the strong ones to Jacob.
—Genesis 30:42

Near my home is a billboard that promises rich wages for working from home. Advertisements like that can be appealing because most of us want to find easier ways to make an income.

Laban knows that Jacob has helped him to grow prosperous. So he convinces his nephew to stay and work a while longer, and Jacob comes up with a cunning way to calculate his wages. He asks Laban for the speckled and spotted sheep of his flocks, and these were likely thought of as the smaller and weaker ones. This seems innocent enough, but apparently Jacob has also devised a way to build up a larger, stronger herd through unusual breeding practices.

In a sense, Jacob is a resourceful businessman with a diligent work ethic. But his story also reveals a tension to which

many believers are prone when they pursue success by worldly standards. Though Jacob acknowledges that blessing comes as a gift from God (v. 30), his behavior suggests that he believes he also needs to manipulate his way into God's blessing.

There is no "get rich quick" scheme in God's plan—for Jacob or for us. But we do have the gift of God's unmerited favor in Christ, which leads us to do our work "for the Lord, not for human masters" (Colossians 3:23-24). May Jesus' finished work inspire you to faithful service for God and others in the coming week.

Lord, you have provided all that we need for life and salvation. Help us to rest in your grace as we serve you and others. Amen.

ON THE ROAD AGAIN

"I am the God of Bethel. . . . Now leave this land at once and go back to your native land."
—Genesis 31:13

How do you respond when life is disappointing or difficult? Do you stay and face your struggles, or do you turn and run?

Responding well to life's challenges is a complicated subject, of course. Jacob begins preparing to leave for home because of a revelation from God. But then he sneaks away without telling his uncle about his plan to leave. Sometimes even our obedience to God is tainted with our own tendencies to sin and our reactions to fear.

But in the midst of his fear and uncertainty, Jacob begins to understand something of the faithfulness of God. He hears again the voice of "the God of Bethel," reminding him of that night long ago when God showed Jacob—the runaway with nothing to his name—a stairway to heaven. Now again, even in the midst of another

scheme, Jacob is reminded that God's favor comes as a gift.

The apostle Paul explains that our desire to do good is always frustrated by our sin (Romans 7:18-25). And when we are sinned against, we tend to respond in sinful ways. We run away from our disappointments, and we become resentful and mean-spirited when we face difficulties.

Still, God faithfully pursues us with his loving presence. He reminds us of the way to heaven, the finished work of Jesus, which covers even our misguided efforts to follow God's ways.

Loving God, thank you for pursuing us and sending Jesus to rescue us from sin. By your Spirit, may we learn to live for you. Amen.

PARTING WAYS

Jacob was angry and took Laban to task.

—Genesis 31:36

Most of us learn early, even as young children, that there are difficult people in the world who cannot be trusted. Jacob's uncle Laban was a person like that. While Jacob's flight from Harran is somewhat devious, it becomes more understandable after we hear what life was like for Jacob in Laban's household.

Even so, Jacob himself was not innocent. Though he had suffered in many ways at his uncle's hands, Jacob himself also lived by trickery. We see too that Rachel could be deceptive. She stole her father's "household gods" but managed to cover that up by lying to her father.

As twenty years of pent-up bitterness against Laban comes out, Jacob makes an important statement: "If the God of my father . . . had not been with me . . ." In small ways, Jacob is beginning to recognize his

need for God's presence, his inability to manipulate things for his own advantage.

Has God used Laban's injustice to reveal Jacob's own sin?

Contentious people can be unpleasant to deal with, but God can use such people to remind us of his patience and mercy toward us. God did more than offer us a truce; his Spirit remains with us to protect us from the effects of others' sins—and our own.

Do you see God's grace in your life today?

Protect us, almighty God, from the designs of people who would harm us. Save us also from our own deceptive ways, for the sake of Jesus. Amen.

FEAR

In great fear and distress Jacob divided the people who were with him into two groups, and the flocks and herds and camels as well.
—Genesis 32:7

Fear can be a powerful force in our lives. For much of his life, Jacob had tried to act as a person in control, someone who could figure his way out of any hard place. After he successfully navigated his recent awkward encounter with Laban, we might think he would have felt confident in his abilities.

But now, as reports suggested that Esau, his brother, was coming to meet him with 400 men (an army?), Jacob was terrified. What more could he do to save himself? For the first time, we hear him praying the desperate prayer of a man who knows he can do nothing apart from God's help and power.

We often imagine that we have the resources to deal with any problem that might come our way. Perhaps we even say that we depend wholly on God's power, but we so often live as

if our efforts and our know-how are what really matter.

When we face a situation we cannot control, we realize that we cannot rescue ourselves from our deepest fears. We cannot preserve our health. We cannot redeem our reputation. We cannot reconcile our broken relationships. We cannot save ourselves from our sin. We can depend only on the grace and power of God.

Have you come to the point of desperate prayer? As powerful as fear is, God's grace in Christ is far more powerful. Praise God for his amazing grace!

Gracious God, I am unworthy of your kindness and faithfulness. Forgive and rescue me, Lord. I trust myself to you alone, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

A NEW NAME

"I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared."

—Genesis 32:30

One of the hardest things for any of us to do is to admit our faults. It's much easier to tell ourselves that life's problems come from outside, from the people or circumstances around us. Sure, we're not perfect—but who is? So we hide our sins from ourselves.

Jacob had become very good at hiding. Throughout his life, he had been a schemer. He knew how to manipulate people to get his way. But finally, in this strange wrestling match, God forced Jacob to recognize who he was.

In the Bible, names are a big deal. A name says something about a person's identity and character. The name *Jacob* means "deceiver" (see Genesis 25:26). And in this story Jacob has to admit to himself and God, "Yes, that is who I am."

Who are you? God asks the same question of each of us—not because he wants to embarrass us, but because he longs to *redeem* us. When we come to God, when we admit our sin and our need for God's grace, God gives us a new identity in Christ.

Jacob may have walked away from his wrestling match with a wound, but when God does the wounding, it is always for our good. And from that day onward, Jacob began to live with a new identity, one given by grace.

May we do the same.

Thank you, God, that you pursue and confront us until we recognize our sin and our need for you. We confess our guilt. In your grace, give us a new identity in Christ. Amen.

BROTHERS AGAIN

Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him. . . .

—Genesis 33:4

Twenty years had passed since Jacob and Esau had seen each other. Back then, Esau had threatened to kill his brother, and Jacob had fled for his life. We can understand that the idea of meeting again made Jacob nervous, especially since Esau came with 400 men.

But while Jacob is afraid and still trying to control the situation (vv. 1-3, 8), we can see that something has changed in him. He is more humble and realizes that his gift cannot ultimately win Esau's favor. Quite possibly, Jacob's struggles with Laban have helped him to realize the great wrong he had done to his brother long ago. He now acknowledges that all that he has comes only from God, by grace, and he recognizes that he needs grace from Esau if they are to reconcile.

Many of us have strained relationships with family mem-

bers, friends, or others we have wronged. Perhaps we recognize the need for reconciliation but aren't sure how to go about it. But relationships are always by grace. We cannot control how others respond to us; we can only show grace and enjoy the grace shown to us.

In a similar way, our sin has ruined our relationship with God, and no amount of scheming on our part can restore us. But in Christ we find the unexpected and merciful embrace of God. And for this we can only give thanks and enjoy God's grace shown to us.

Gracious God, thank you for receiving and restoring your wayward children—for embracing me—for Jesus' sake. Amen.

NEVER LEFT ALONE

"I will build an altar to God . . . who has been with me wherever I have gone."
—Genesis 35:3

Sometimes we don't fully understand an event until we have the wisdom of hindsight.

Many years earlier, as he fled for his life, Jacob had experienced a vision of God at Bethel (Genesis 28:10-22). He had heard God's promise to watch over him wherever he would go. Then later, while returning to his homeland, Jacob again encountered God and received a new identity: *Israel*, "one who wrestles with God" yet receives blessing (Genesis 32:22-32).

Now both experiences come together as Jacob leads his family back to Bethel for a time of worship and renewal before God. Previously Jacob's experiences of God were solitary and personal. Now he shares his testimony of God's faithfulness with his household, calling them to wrestle with repentance and faith too.

Perhaps you, like Jacob, have had a long and roundabout journey with God. Maybe you always sensed that God was there, but then in hindsight you have seen how faithful God has been. In spite of our sins and scheming ways, God always proves ready to forgive and bless anyone who comes humbly before him, receiving their new identity given by grace through Christ.

If you have met God and experienced his faithfulness, are you ready to share the story of his grace? Invite others to join you in worship and service to the faithful God today.

Lord, give us a sense of wonder so that we may comprehend your faithfulness to us. Renew us, Lord. In Jesus' name, Amen.

DEATH AND MOURNING

Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath.

—Genesis 35:19

Jacob had experienced renewal in his relationship with God, but that did not mean life became easy for him. In the first years after his return home, Jacob experienced grief from the deaths of his beloved wife, Rachel, and of his father, Isaac.

Death is a reality for everyone living in this world. Even our closest human relationships cannot be shielded from its power. Perhaps, as you read this, you have an empty place in your life left by the death of a loved one.

Grief is natural, even for people who have put their hope in God. It signifies that the person who has died was important to us.

But grief does not have the last word. Jacob continues to live in the hope of God's promise, and he experiences the comfort of human relationships as

he shares the grief of Isaac's death with his reconciled brother.

But God has given even greater hope for believers who follow Christ. Because Jesus has died and risen again, we trust that God will also raise those who have died with faith in Christ (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). We may grieve, but we grieve as those who move forward in the hope of God's promise.

May that hope be yours today as well.

Father God, give us hope in the face of death. Comfort all who grieve and sorrow, and sustain us with the confidence of your promise through Jesus Christ. Amen.

SEPARATE WAYS

Esau took his wives and sons and daughters . . . and moved to a land some distance from his brother Jacob. —Genesis 36:6-7

We live in an increasingly mobile world today. Brothers and sisters, parents and children often live in very different places. This can happen because we settle in a place after attending college there. Or perhaps we move to start a new job. But sometimes families go in different directions because of hurt and heartache.

Esau and Jacob had had a rocky relationship. At one point, Esau had wanted to kill his younger brother (Genesis 27:41). Although they had reconciled and joined together in grief over their father's death (Genesis 33:4-5; 35:29), the Bible's portrayal of the rivalry between their descendants (see Numbers 20:14-21) suggests that the brothers' relationship remained somewhat strained. So it's not surprising that they would go separate ways.

Settling in different places allowed both Jacob and Esau to enjoy material prosperity. But Esau moved away from his brother in another, more crucial way. By taking his wives "from the women of Canaan," Esau signaled his ambivalence toward Jacob's God. The real tragedy of Esau's move is not the distance from his brother but his distance from *God*.

Our mobile society offers challenges to maintaining family relationships. But even more important is the need to help one another seek God's saving grace in Jesus Christ. May we encourage one another never to move away from that blessing.

Faithful God, you bless us in so many ways. Help us to remain close to one another—and especially to you. In Christ, Amen.

FAVORITISM

Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons. . . .

—Genesis 37:3

As he settled down in the land God had promised, Jacob's struggles within his own family intensified. Rachel, Joseph's mother, had always been Jacob's favorite wife (see Genesis 29:30). And that favoritism now began to affect the next generation. Joseph is the new favorite, and his dreams reveal an arrogance that irritates not only his brothers but his father as well. This irritation would later bear tragic fruit in the family.

Sometimes our past sins reappear just when we think we have begun to settle and grow in our life before God. Perhaps we thought we had left behind our marriage struggles, our angry exchanges with a coworker, or our struggles with addiction. We have been encouraged by the work of God's Spirit in our life. Yet we discover that we still have moments of struggle

and temptation, and we sometimes return to the same old sins in our lives.

The Bible is not a story about spiritual superheroes who have "arrived" in their walk with God. It is God's story of working in people's lives, redeeming and restoring them to wholeness for the sake of Christ.

What's more, we have a Savior who understands all our temptations and struggles (see Hebrews 4:15). God would continue to work for Jacob's redemption, and he will continue to work for our salvation as well.

Heavenly Father, help us. Our sins and weaknesses sometimes keep such a grip on us. Be merciful to us, redeem us, and make us whole for Jesus' sake. Amen.

CONFUSION AND GRIEF

They took the ornate robe back to their father and said, "We found this. Examine it to see whether it is your son's robe."

—Genesis 37:32

The problems in Jacob's family ran deep. Never dreaming how much his other sons hated their brother Joseph, Jacob sent his favorite son on a simple mission to see how things were going with the family livestock. This gave the brothers an opportunity to take revenge on Joseph, and they covered up their crime by convincing their father that a wild animal had killed his favorite son.

Jacob did not know he had been deceived, but his life was forever changed by this tragedy. As many grieving parents have experienced, the loss of his son consumed Jacob's thoughts. Indeed, nearly twenty years will pass before we hear any more about Jacob.

Sometimes God allows us to come to a place of confusion, where the road forward seems unclear. Whether it stems from

the death of a loved one, as it did for Jacob, or from some other tragedy in our lives, we find ourselves in seasons of waiting and wondering, confused about God's purpose in it and how it could work out for good and bring him glory.

Do you find yourself fighting the kind of despair that Jacob felt in his grief? Know that God is not finished with your story. His own Son "learned obedience from what he suffered" (Hebrews 5:8), and we too, with Jacob, can learn to wait on God's grace.

O God, teach us to "be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD" (Psalm 27:14). When we struggle to understand your ways, assure us of your love in Jesus. Amen.

GOD'S TEACHING PROCESS

When Jacob learned that there was grain in Egypt, he said to his sons, "... Go down there and buy some for us. ..."

—Genesis 42:1-2

More than two decades had now passed since Joseph was sold into slavery in Egypt. Jacob still thought that Joseph was dead, and much had happened in the life of this family, as well as in the life of Joseph (see Genesis 39-41). But now, a great famine had come over the land, and only Egypt had the resources to help keep people alive. So Jacob was focused on food, and he had no idea of the great family drama that would play out when he sent his sons to buy grain.

But God knew. All through the twists and turns of this drama, God was working to restore Jacob's fractured family life.

Joseph, who was now a major ruler in Egypt, would test the character of his brothers, and God would help their father, Jacob, learn more about his helplessness in the face of life's

circumstances. Jacob would also learn more about God's life-giving faithfulness.

Where might God be teaching *you* to watch for his work in unexpected places? The divine drama of redemption sometimes plays out in circumstances we can hardly imagine. In grace, God teaches us that we cannot maneuver around our own sins and shortcomings. But God has provided the Savior to restore us so that by following Jesus we too may "live and not die."

Faithful God, thank you for always working for our good and for your glory. Teach us to trust you, to acknowledge your leading, and to learn to find our life in Jesus. Amen.

HOLDING EVEN TIGHTER

"Everything is against me!"

—Genesis 42:36

More than anything else, Jacob wanted to hang on to his ability to control life. He spent much of his adult life seeking to manipulate things and get his way. But here, his world was spinning out of control. He thought Joseph was dead. And now his son Simeon was held captive in Egypt. And for some reason all the silver used to pay for the grain was back in everyone's sack! All that Jacob could think about now was that he might also lose his son Benjamin.

So Jacob does what many of us would do: in the face of increasing threats, he tries to hold on tighter to what he has. But God has a way of confronting us with the limits of our abilities. We do not find happiness and peace by being in control of our circumstances; we find these blessings by letting go and entrusting ourselves to God.

Jacob thought that everything was against him. But God, who gave his own Son to restore lost sinners to himself, promises that he will "also, along with [Jesus], graciously give us all things" (Romans 8:32). God strips us of the things we often hold so tightly so that we may learn to receive his blessings by grace rather than trying to grasp them for ourselves.

When you can't hold on tight enough to what you have, remember God's promise to hang on to you (John 10:28-30).

On our own, Father, we cannot stand even for a moment. The world, the devil, and our own flesh are against us. But you are always for us in Christ. Strengthen us, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

RESIGNATION

"If it must be . . ."

—Genesis 43:11

Jacob has reached the end of his rope. For most of his life, he has been fighting. He has used up a lot of resources and personal energy in trying to guarantee that he will receive God's blessings, that things will turn out in his favor.

Being confronted with our limits is not a fun experience. Jacob's cry here is one of resignation, not of trust in God's providence. But when Jacob runs out of options for working in his own strength, he finally discovers the grace of God.

Perhaps you're discovering how powerless you are to control your spouse or your children, or to push past others at work. Maybe you've tried and failed again and again to beat an addiction or a temptation that won't go away, or you fear punishment for a sin that is catching up with you. Perhaps you realize that you have been

trying to "pay God off" with your good deeds in the hopes that he will give you what you want in life.

Where are you "stuck"? Being confronted with limits can be a gift of God's grace because it teaches us that we cannot save ourselves. And once we learn that important truth, we can begin to trust God's providential care and his saving work through Jesus.

Holy Spirit, confront us with our limits. Let us see how much we need the saving grace that comes from Jesus. Teach us to trust not in ourselves but in Christ alone. Amen.

UNEXPECTED JOY

Israel said, "I'm convinced! My son Joseph is still alive. I will go and see him before I die."
—Genesis 45:28

Jacob had sent his sons to Egypt with fear and trembling. Though he had been promised God's blessing, he also felt the weight of pain and loss that had built up in his life. We can imagine that Jacob spent long days during his sons' absence reflecting, worrying, and perhaps praying for a safe return. And although the Bible tells us the remarkable story of the brothers' reunion and reconciliation with Joseph (Genesis 43:15-45:15), their father knew none of that until their return.

Waiting is sometimes a key part of God's work in us. But then come moments of revelation when it is suddenly clear that God has been up to something all along.

That happens to Jacob as he hears his sons' account of their interactions with Joseph, and as he sees the carts and provisions that Joseph has sent from

Egypt. Jacob suddenly has the courage to set aside twenty years of mourning for his lost son, to leave the comfort of a land that was home, and to set out on a new journey in faith.

God delights to give his children good gifts. The death of Jesus on the cross is followed on the third day by the glorious news that Jesus is alive and that his resurrection means renewed life for all who put their faith in him (Acts 4:10-12).

Wait on God's timing, trust in Christ's work, and receive from him the gift of unexpected joy.

Lord, open our eyes to see your work in us. Convince us that your grace is real and that you supply hope and healing in Jesus for all our disappointments and challenges. Amen.

ONE MORE JOURNEY

“Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you into a great nation there.”
—Genesis 46:3

In his old age Jacob now begins one more journey. Many years earlier, Jacob had fled his homeland in fear; now he leaves in the hope of a joyful reunion with a son he had thought was dead. But this journey also requires him to leave the land God has promised to him (Genesis 35:12). This journey will take him to Egypt, a place of danger for his father and grandfather (Genesis 12:10-20; 26:2). Can God be involved in this unexpected change of plans?

It is to Jacob's credit that he begins this journey with worship—for even if a plan seems appealing to us, it will not succeed if it does not honor God. Though his own son had invited him to come and stay in Egypt, Jacob also surely knew of God's warning that his descendants would be mistreated in a foreign land (Genesis

15:13). For this reason, God's assurance is vital to his journey.

Perhaps it seems that God has placed you on a journey you did not expect: a new career, a new home, a challenging situation that stretches your faith. Hear today the great assurance that Jacob heard: “Do not be afraid. . . . I will go . . . with you.” God, who lived among us and journeyed with us in the flesh of his Son (John 1:14), will redeem and bless even the unexpected journeys of all who trust in him.

Lord, sometimes you send us to unexpected places in life. Give us wisdom to discern your leading in our journeys, and give us courage in knowing you are always with us, through Jesus, our Savior. Amen.

REFLECTIONS OF A PILGRIM

"My years have been few and difficult, and they do not equal the years of the pilgrimage of my fathers." —Genesis 47:9

An old folk-hymn proclaims, "I am a poor wayfaring stranger, while traveling through this world of woe. . . ." As Jacob settles once again in a place where he doesn't really belong, he has the opportunity to reflect on how his whole life has been a sort of journey—a journey made difficult at times by the effects of his own sins and his desire to manipulate his way into God's blessing.

Many of us could offer a similar assessment of our lives. Like Jacob, we want to make things work out our way. Like him, our self-centeredness and sin complicate our walk with God and others.

But God remains faithful. God isn't most interested in Jacob's geographic location. As the patriarch looks back, he begins to see that his life has been a pilgrimage, a series of temporary stops that have led him more

deeply into God's grace. This humility gives Jacob the ability to bless others in a way that he was not able to do when he lived mainly for himself.

Where is God leading you? When you look around at this "world of woe," look also for ways in which God has used difficulties to make his work in you clearer. And give thanks that all who humbly journey with Christ can look forward to their true home with him, received by grace.

In the hymn "Amazing Grace" we sing, "Through many dangers, toils, and snares I have already come." Your grace, O God, is the only reason we have come safely thus far; thank you for your promised grace to lead us home. In Jesus, Amen.

LONGING FOR HOME

“Do not bury me in Egypt. . .”

—Genesis 47:31

There comes a time in life when we need to know where our true home is. For many years, Jacob was a wanderer. Even when he settled in a place for many years, he did not think of himself as being at home (Genesis 29:25). And when he finally thought he had come home, he was again uprooted by his long-lost son’s invitation to move to Egypt.

It would have been understandable for Jacob to give up hopes of having a home and to let circumstances determine where he focused his energy. But instead, as he prepares to die, he summons his son Joseph and extracts a solemn promise. In effect, Jacob tells his family, “Never forget where home is.” Instead of merely living in the moment, he calls attention to God’s promises and to God’s ongoing work that

goes beyond the present circumstances.

Often we fall into the trap of settling in a place where God hasn’t finished working in us. We settle for keeping up appearances or living “the good life” instead of reflecting on the ways God is redeeming us from sin and self. But our ultimate home is not in a vision for our future that says we’ve “arrived” in life. We have been created to belong to our Savior, Jesus Christ, who has prepared a home for us (John 14:2-3).

Do you know where home is?

Lord Jesus, thank you for giving yourself for us so that we can have the home you have prepared for us. May our lives reflect that our true home is with you. Amen.

SEEING WITH EYES OF FAITH

Israel reached out his right hand and put it on Ephraim's head, though he was the younger. . . .
—Genesis 48:14

As Jacob enters the last days of his life, he has the opportunity to think about what he has learned in a lifetime of encounters with God. He can look back at the pain of life, both from his own sin and from circumstances around him. But he can also look back and see God's faithfulness throughout his life.

This same Jacob had once tried to manipulate life so that only good, and nothing bad, happened to him. He tricked his brother and father, and then later his uncle, into doing things his way. But something has changed now as he looks back. We no longer see a fearful, anxious, grasping man. We see instead an awareness that God has been at work in his life the whole time.

And it is out of this awareness that Jacob blesses others. He, of course, knows the tradition

that older sons would receive the greater share of the family blessing. But he crosses his arms to switch things up again. Jacob isn't confused, as Joseph assumes. Rather, he has learned that God doesn't work exactly how we want him to—and that is for our good.

Can you say, with Jacob, that God "has been my shepherd all my life to this day"? His grace may sometimes come unexpectedly, but God will always work for our good.

Lord, we sometimes sing, "I know not why God's wondrous grace to me he has made known. . . ." But as we see your character and goodness, Lord, may we, like Jacob, claim you as our shepherd, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

LAST WORDS

All these are the twelve tribes of Israel, and this is what their father said to them when he blessed them, giving each the blessing appropriate to him.
—Genesis 49:28

Last words are always important. Being aware of the shortness of life can often focus our conversations on the most important things.

Jacob's parting words to his sons are recorded in Genesis 49:3-27. Though some parts of this chapter may seem obscure to us now, we can see how Jacob assesses his sons' character and that he offers some rebuke and correction as well as some encouragement and hope. His words are described as a "blessing," a gift that should call each of these sons to seek a deeper relationship with God.

As a final instruction, Jacob issues details about his burial. This is an expression of confidence that the land God had promised to Abraham would someday be the home of Jacob's descendants.

Through a lifetime of struggle, Jacob has seen how God has worked out his purposes and promises. And now, after reminding his family of God's promises, he can die in peace.

The greatest blessing we can pass along to those who follow us is the assurance that God is at work in our lives to redeem us and restore us in Christ. Whether your remaining time on earth is short or long, have you considered how to share that legacy?

Holy Spirit, give us words to speak that tell of your grace and kindness despite our sin. May our conversations speak of Jesus and his salvation, to the Father's glory. Amen.

JACOB'S FUNERAL

So Jacob's sons did as he had commanded them: They carried him to the land of Canaan and buried him. . . .

—Genesis 50:12-13

In my ministry work, I've met a number of people who dislike funerals. They say that mourning the dead is a negative and distasteful experience. It reminds us that everyone is mortal; no one's life will go on indefinitely.

A funeral, however, can also express the significance of a person's life before God and others. Despite their father's flaws, Jacob's sons appear to have loved him. They honored him with all the pomp and ceremony of their adopted home in Egypt. But Jacob's burial in his homeland is also an act of faith: it recalls his trust in God's promise to give Israel's descendants a place where they could live securely before God (see Genesis 48:21).

Grief at a funeral appropriately affirms that a person's life meant something to us and to God. But we do not

grieve as people who have no hope (1 Thessalonians 4:13). Believers who die in the grip of God's grace die with the hope of living securely before God, and those who mourn have the same hope in Christ.

The good news of the Christian faith is that "death has been swallowed up in victory" (1 Corinthians 15:54). Death points to our helplessness to maintain life as we desire it, but it also recalls the resurrection of Jesus through which sin is forgiven and eternal life is given. May our funerals embrace this greatest of all hopes.

Father, you have said that death is an enemy (1 Corinthians 15:26), and we feel that. May we find hope in Christ and his resurrection always—especially in our grief. Amen.

LEGACY

"But God intended it for good. . . ."

—Genesis 50:20

Many tombstones include an epitaph, a statement about a person's life or character. We don't know if there was an epitaph on Jacob's tomb, but Hebrews 11:21 remembers him as one who lived "by faith."

After Jacob's death, his elder sons were afraid that Joseph would seek revenge for mistreating him (see Genesis 37:12-36). After all, payback would be understandable. But Joseph told them, "God intended it for good. . . ."

When we live by faith, we see that "in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28). Joseph understood that God can redeem even the worst of circumstances for good, to show us his salvation. In Egypt, Joseph had suffered difficult times as a person sold into slavery, but

he also learned that God was with him. And God amazingly raised him up to be a ruler in Egypt at a time when people from many nations would need food because of a great famine. So he told his brothers: "God intended it for good . . . the saving of many lives"—including their own.

The lives of Jacob and his descendants show that God can redeem even difficult people. And this means God can redeem us too. We can know the grace and forgiveness that come from Christ's work of salvation. Have you experienced God's grace? Let Jesus move your heart today from self-interest to faith in God, who uses all things for good.

Lord and God, you changed Jacob into a hero of faith. Change me also, for Jesus' sake. Amen.



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