



August 2020

Beginnings 2

**Readings,
Reflections,
Prayers
from
Genesis (2)**

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Heritage Day, Monday, August 3: Genesis 27:41-28:9

In 1974 the Government of Alberta declared the first Monday in August – today – as "Heritage Day." It's an annual holiday to recognize and celebrate the varied cultural heritage of people living in our province.

In cities like Lethbridge – and in churches like ours – we are very aware of our diverse cultural heritage. The fact that people in our church come from First Nations backgrounds, as well as countries from Burma to Ghana, from Guatemala to Romania, from China to Germany, from Nigeria to El Salvador – and many, many more – creates a strong, dynamic community that mirrors the Kingdom of God as a whole, which is composed of people *"from every nation and tribe and people and language"* (Revelation 7:9).

Our heritage, personally, is linked to the specific people in our own "family tree." My family is remarkably British. Both of my grandfathers were born in England and one grandmother was born in Guernsey (one of the Channel Islands). My other grandmother was born in Diamond City, just north of Lethbridge, but her parents had just emigrated from England. My father did some digging into our ancestors in England; they are all about as British as British can be. It's all rather bland.

Some people in our family tree are wonderful examples of faith, integrity, and godly values. Some, perhaps, were more colourful.

Every family has its "interesting people." Consider Isaac's family. What about Rebekah? What about Esau? What about Jacob? Sometimes it amazes me that faith in God ever survived the reprobates we find in Genesis. It's a testimony to the patience, longsuffering, faithfulness, and power of God that faith survives these characters at all.

What about our "spiritual" family tree? Who are those people who have been influential in our spiritual lives? For some of us, our biological family tree and our spiritual family tree may overlap. Our parents and grandparents were profound spiritual influences who helped shaped our lives of faith. For others, their spiritual parents and grandparents may be unrelated to them, biologically. But are no less important.

- Who helped shape your spiritual journey in the past? These could be people in your life, like parents or friends. Or biblical characters, like Peter. Or (hopefully good) authors or musicians.
- Who is helping you grow spiritually now? Again, these could be people in your life, like parents or friends. Or biblical characters, like Peter. Or (hopefully good) authors or musicians.

Who can you encourage in the faith? Pray for someone you know who needs God's presence today.

*Out of this muddle, I cry to you,
God who has ordered the universe,
in whose hand the cosmos is secure.
Guide me to make a right beginning,
to do those things that are most needful,
and to know when to stop and rest.
Grant me humor and a light spirit in the face of what seems overwhelming.
Make my hands steady at their work,
my heart steady at its prayer,
and let me, in all things, navigate by love,
for Your love's sake.
Amen*

Tuesday, August 4: Genesis 28:10-22

Isaac, has twin sons – the older is Esau, the younger is Jacob. Jacob swindles his older brother out of his birthright (the honour and double portion of the inheritance that comes from being the firstborn) and, with

his mother's help, steals their father's blessing from Esau, too. Jacob (and his mother, Rebekah) are deceitful, dishonest, conniving people. They sin. Over and over.

Lesson 1: Trust. Did Jacob change history by stealing Esau's birthright and blessing? Has he managed to receive what should have been Esau's thanks to his own sharp wits? No ... God was planning to bless the world through Jacob anyway. Jacob could have known the pure joy of being blessed AND kept his family close. Instead, Jacob creates (dis)stress by stealing from his brother; he destroys his relationship with his closest relative (Esau wanted to kill Jacob [Genesis 27:41]); he carries a huge burden of guilt and fear. It didn't have to be this way. God was going to bless him anyway. Sometimes we try too hard ...

Lesson #2: God is God. The image of "Jacob's Ladder" is intriguing. It emphasizes a connectedness we can feel in relation to God. God is not some impersonal being "way out there." We know Him personally and powerfully through the person and presence of the Holy Spirit. However, there still is a categorical difference between ourselves and God. This dream highlights that God is God, and I am NOT God. There is a world of difference between us. We live in a tension between

- a sense of *radical connectedness with God* – knowing and loving God as our intimate friend and in His indwelling personal presence as Holy Spirit, and
- a profound sense of *incomprehensible distance from God* – finding ourselves at the foot of the ladder, aware of the awesomeness and glory of Almighty God: Creator, Sustainer, Judge, and King.

Lesson #3: (Baby) Steps of faith. Our life with God often has milestones along the way. We all have times when something happens – good or bad – and we discover the power, glory, and grace of God in special ways (if we take time to notice). We sometimes mark these times with baptism, rededication, or other symbolic action. Those are good things. Important things. People in the Bible are always setting up stones or building altars to commemorate special encounters with God. Why? How can we do that?

Life Lesson 4: God is with you. "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I wasn't even aware of it." (Genesis 28:16). That is the reality of our lives. God is in "this place" – whatever and wherever "this place" is for you (wherever you are physically, spiritually, relationally). Are you aware of it?

Jacob's final vow (vs. 20-22) reveals that he is struggling to come to terms with this. He isn't sure yet that God will provide for him. But God's promise is "I am with you, and I will protect you wherever you go ... I will not leave you until I have finished giving you everything I have promised you." (When will His promise be finished? Never!)

*O God, I ask not for easier tasks.
I ask for stronger aptitudes and greater talents
to meet any tasks which may come my way.
Help me to help others so that their lives may be made easier and happier.
Strengthen my confidence in my fellow men despite what they may do or say.
Give me strength to live according to the Golden Rule
(to love others as you would have them love you),
enthusiasm to inspire those around me,
sympathy to help lighten the burdens of those who suffer,
and a spirit of joy and gladness to share with others.
Amen*

Wednesday, August 5: Genesis 29:1-15

God provides for us. Why do we struggle to trust Him?

Jacob and Esau are the twin sons of Isaac and Rebekah. Esau is older. However, Jacob has swindled Esau out of his birthright, the honour and double portion of the inheritance that comes from being the firstborn (Genesis 25:27-34). Jacob (with his mother, Rebekah's complicity) connived to steal Isaac's blessing from

Esau (Genesis 27). As Jacob heads off to find a wife from among his mother's family, God appears to Jacob in a dream (yesterday's reading, Genesis 28:10-22). The Lord reiterates to Jacob the same promise He had made to Abraham – there would be a blessing for all people on the earth through his family.

Has Jacob changed history by stealing Esau's birthright and blessing? No. Has Jacob seized the opportunity to receive what should have been Esau's thanks to his own sharp wits? No. From the beginning, God intended to work out His blessing through Jacob, not Esau. God is more than capable of working in and through Jacob, even if he had not stolen Esau's birthright and blessing. There is no approval, here or anywhere else in Scripture, of Jacob's amoral behaviour. To the contrary, we see loud and clear that God is in control of history, His will IS done, what He desires DOES come to pass ... despite our stupidity, attempts to gerrymander things to our advantage, and our sinfulness. God is Lord. He is King.

God was always planning to bless the world through Jacob. Jacob could have experienced the joy of being blessed, allowing God to work miracles in and through his life. Instead, Jacob puts himself through all the (dis)stress of plotting how to steal from his brother; he destroys his relationship with his brother; he is riddled with guilt and fear. What a miserable life Jacob creates for himself. It didn't have to be this way.

Now God is going to provide the perfect wife for Jacob – if he can have faith in God. If he doesn't spoil it, like he seems to spoil everything else.

Why do I find it so hard to trust God? Can I live with integrity, righteousness, purity, honesty, etc ... and simply accept the blessings God brings my way? This is not a call to passivity but to godliness – a way of living with no moral compromise and trust where I say, with sincerity, *"Not my will, but your will be done."*

Can I trust God in all things?

*Grant me, O Lord, to know what I ought to know,
to love what I ought to love,
to praise what delights You most,
to value what is precious in your sight,
to hate what is offensive to You.
Do not suffer me to judge according to the sight of my eyes,
nor to pass sentence according to the hearing of the ears of ignorant people;
but to discern with a true judgment between things visible and spiritual,
and above all, always to inquire what is the good pleasure of Your will.
And then to do it.
Amen.*

Thomas À Kempis (1380-1471)

Thursday, August 6: Genesis 29:16-35

Folk wisdom says that *"What goes around comes around."* Jacob, the deceiver and trickster, is hoodwinked by Laban (the name "Jacob" literally means "he deceives"). I wonder how upset Jacob is now that the shoe is on the other foot? I wonder if he appreciated a little bit of Esau's frustration and anger now he's the one fooled. Of course, in Jacob's case it all works out ... fourteen years later.

(Aside: In 2020 we may struggle with the practice of multiple marriages in the Old Testament. Where this practice came from is unclear; it certainly wasn't common. A man had to be very wealthy to have more than one wife. Also, there were often problems among the wives. When wives were from outside Jewish faith, they often led their husbands away from God (e.g. Solomon). After the time of David and Solomon the practice seems to have died out. It was certainly not practiced in the time of Jesus. Possibly it developed in earliest, nomadic times – a time of very high infertility and mortality rates – to ensure an heir would be born and survive. However as Jewish society became more settled, safety increased, health improved, midwives became more accessible, etc., the practice was dropped.)

From the beginning, Jacob's home was not harmonious and peaceful – Rachel was well loved, but Leah was not. It sounds remarkably like Jacob's own childhood – his mother, Rebekah, loved Jacob more than Esau; his father, Isaac, loved Esau more than Jacob.

Jacob had not learned from the dysfunction of his own upbringing that favouring one person over another causes problems. I wonder if Jacob recognized that the same rivalry and tension he grew up with was being lived out between his two wives? I wonder if he ever thought about what he could do to make his home a healthier, happier place?

Favouritism would carry on for another generation in his own home, creating deep problems between his son, Joseph, and his other children.

One of the hardest things for us to do is to look honestly at our lives, our homes, our families, our workplaces ... and recognize the problems or dysfunctions that are there. It is easy to see other people's problems. It is difficult to recognize our own issues. But we all have them. What are yours?

To what extent are those problems your responsibility? Are there negative things from your childhood or previous experiences that shape who you are and how you act? What can you do to change those? How can you intervene so problems don't continue for another generation?

How can you be a constructive problem-solver who makes things better?

*Give us, O Lord, steadfast hearts,
which no unworthy thought can drag downwards;
unconquered hearts,
which no tribulation can wear out,
upright hearts,
which no unworthy purpose may tempt aside.
Bestow upon us also, O Lord our God, understanding to know You,
diligence to seek You,
wisdom to find You,
and a faithfulness that may finally embrace You.
Amen.*

Friday, August 7: Genesis 30:1-24

Is this a healthy, functional family? I don't think so. Can you imagine the atmosphere in the family tent? This is not a congenial, supportive, loving home ...

But God is going to use Jacob's family, despite all its problems, to fulfil His plans. Leah's son, Judah, will become the great-great-great ancestor of David, Solomon, and Joseph and Mary – and thus, Jesus. Judah is not the son of the favoured wife; he is not Jacob's oldest son; but he is the one through whom God will work out the great blessing He had given to Adam, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Just as God chooses Jacob, the younger brother, over Esau, he will choose Judah over the others. God has a habit of choosing unexpected people: David is the youngest of eight brothers (1 Samuel 16).

Isn't it refreshing that God can use some crazy, mixed up people to build His kingdom? Isn't it wonderful that God uses surprising people, like Leah and Judah, to be the ones He uses to bless others? God can and does use the brightest and most talented, but He also uses surprising people we might overlook.

God can work despite us ... despite our dysfunctions ... through our mistakes ... around our personality quirks ... But God would much rather have us love Him and seek to live His will in our lives. God would much rather have us live our faith at home than live the kind of mess that Jacob creates for himself. Life is SO

much richer, more fulfilling, and more purposeful when we aim to live our faith at home.

When we do live our faith with integrity – or at least try to, as much as possible – life generally goes better for us. Life goes better for our family and friends. And we bring honour to God and a good reputation to His church. When we don't live with integrity, life inevitably becomes more complicated and stressful, we hurt other people around us, and we bring God and His church into disrepute.

Can people see my beliefs through how I live? How does my faith change the way I think, act, live, and love? How can I live my faith with more integrity?

*O Holy Spirit of God, abide with us;
inspire all our thoughts;
pervade our imaginations;
suggest all our decisions;
order all our doings.
Be with us in our silence and in our speech,
in our haste and in our leisure,
in company and in solitude,
in the freshness of the morning and in the weariness of the evening;
and always give us grace, humbly, to rejoice in Your companionship.
Amen*

Saturday, August 8: Genesis 30:25-43

Jacob is back to being sneaky, conniving, dishonest Jacob. He is not a nice man. He is not trustworthy. He does not have integrity – no wonder his family is so messed up. Do you think he has any friends? I doubt it.

The tragedy of Jacob's life is that he leaves a trail of broken relationships behind him: he has no relationship with his father, his brother, his father-in-law, one of his wives (Leah), and (we shall see) shows favouritism to only one son, alienating his other children. He has no friends we know of. Jacob may have manipulated himself into some sort of material comfort, but he is a lonely, fearful, guilt-ridden person. He has no ongoing relationship with God. I suspect he is not content, not joyful, and not fulfilled.

What lessons are his children learning about life? About family? About the Lord? It is quite astonishing that faith in God survives at all in this household, given all the dishonesty, corruption, jealousy, conniving, favouritism, and deception that is occurring. We never hear Jacob praying to or caring about God.

The important things in life are rarely our possessions. Most of us appreciate that people – our friends and family – are much more valuable treasures than all the "stuff" we may accumulate.

We, who love Jesus, know how important that relationship is. Ultimately, our faith in Jesus is the most important thing in our lives. Our identities and characters are formed by our foundational love for Jesus.

We know that in our heads – do we live that in our lives? Does our investment of time and energy reflect the priorities we believe in?

People learn faith through relationships. "*Faith is more caught than taught*" one wise person has observed.

What do people learn in my home about Jesus? About faith? About hope? About life? Do I live my faith in my home? How can I be more consistent in doing that?

*God, help us
to be generous in our opinions of others,
to be considerate of all we meet,
to be patient with those with whom we work,
to be faithful to every trust,
to be courageous in the face of danger,
to be humble in all our living,
to be prayerful every hour of the day,
to be joyous in all life's experience,
and to be dependent upon You
for strength in facing life's uncertainties.
Amen*

Sunday, August 9: Genesis 31:1-21

Can a leopard change its spots? Can people change? I believe that, through the power of the Spirit, they can. But Jacob chooses to be the same old Jacob.

"Jacob noticed that Laban's attitude toward him was not what it had been ..." (v.2) – was that a surprise? After all that has happened, I wouldn't think so. What does Jacob do? "Jacob deceived Laban by not telling him he was running away" (v.20). The same tired pattern of deceit and sneakery continues ...

God is certainly at work in Jacob's life. God has plans for him and his family. But Jacob consistently forces the issue by his own scheming, plotting, and conniving. The end result might be same. But by NOT waiting for God to provide, and by jumping in with trickery and lies, Jacob is alienating his family. He is making enemies not allies. He is a lonely, bitter, man. Morally broken. Struggling with guilt. Spiritually bankrupt.

Had Jacob been willing to wait for God's timing and His provision, he probably would have ended up in a similar life situation – but with good relations with his father, brother, father-in-law, wives (and kids). Most importantly, he would have a rich and fulfilling relationship with God. That relationship is becoming increasingly strained, approaching a breaking point (as we shall see in Genesis 32).

Do you ever get frustrated waiting for God? Do you ever wish God would just get on with solving your problems? Do you ever take things into your own hands, doing something you know is wrong? How does it work out? What can you learn from Jacob's impatience?

How could you make those waiting times productive? How can those days, months, years of waiting be positive times of spiritual growth and ministry to others? God can bring tremendous blessings through those times – we can learn and grow closer to Him as we depend on Him, AND we can care for other struggling people with an integrity, compassion, and empathy that only come through shared pain.

*Lord, I shout with joy to you.
Help me to worship you with gladness.
Help me to come before you singing with joy.
Lord, I affirm that you are the Lord, my God.
You made me, and I am yours.
I am your child, a sheep of your pasture.
I will enter your gates with thanksgiving;
I will go into your courts with praise.
I will thank you and praise your name.
For you are good.
Your unfailing love continues forever,
and your faithfulness continues to each generation.
Amen*

Monday, August 10: Genesis 31:22-55

"Be sure your sins will find you out" (Numbers 32:23). There is much wisdom in that little saying, isn't there? God has a way of bringing to light the dishonesty and hidden things of our lives. Poor Jacob – his sin is recorded for everyone, everywhere, for centuries to come, to read. Imagine the embarrassment we might feel if everyone could read our stories as we read Jacob's?

Rachel is an enigma, too. She has stolen her father's household gods (carved images); she lies so she doesn't have to let them go. What does this say about Rachel's faith in the true God? What does this suggest about the spiritual leadership that Jacob has been providing to his family? What does this say about integrity and ethics in Jacob's family?

Jacob tries to justify himself, but at the end of the day he tries to blame others. Richard Carlson, in his book, *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff* writes, "We typically think that if something is missing, someone else must have moved it; or if your expenses exceed your income, then your spouse must be spending too much money. Or if the house is a mess, you must be the only person doing your part ... When the house is a mess, you clean it up. When you're over budget, figure out where you can spend less money. Blaming others takes an enormous amount of mental energy. It's a 'drag me down' mindset that creates stress."

Jacob and Rachel both need to learn integrity and honesty. They need to grow up and take responsibility. Otherwise their children are going to learn the way to live is to cheat your brothers, lie to your parents, and hide the truth. Jacob and Rachel also need to come to true faith in God. They are relying on their own wits and superstitions (idols). Their children are going to learn that they need to out-think, outsmart, and outwit everyone, too. They certainly won't learn faith in God. Their kids are learning from their example ...

It's a pity Jacob and Rachel didn't have the benefit of Paul's wisdom: "True godliness with contentment is great wealth. After all, we brought nothing with us when we came into the world, and we can't take anything with us when we leave it. So if we have enough food and clothing, let us be content."

"But people who long to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many foolish and harmful desires that plunge them into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. And some people, craving money, have wandered from the true faith and pierced themselves with many sorrows ... (Asp people of God) run from all these evil things. Pursue righteousness and a godly life, along with faith, love, perseverance, and gentleness" (2 Timothy 6:7-11). Lord, give us wisdom.

*O, You who are the Way, the Truth, and the Life,
I lift my heart to You.
Guide me in the Way this day,
enlighten me with the Truth,
and grant me the more abundant Life which You alone can give.
This I ask, not that I may selfishly get good or glory for myself,
but that I may do good to others and so glorify Your name.
Amen.*

Tuesday, August 11: Genesis 32:1-21

How many people never pray until they are in a jam? Believe it or not, for the first time ever, we read the words, "Jacob prayed ..." in this passage (32:9). The tragedy of Jacob's life is that until now he has tried to outsmart, out-plan, outwit, out-fox, out cheat, and out maneuver his family and the Lord. Now, when he is caught between the hammer and the anvil – the father-in-law whom he has offended and stolen from, and the brother he has offended and stolen from – he finally prays.

If Jacob had spent time with his Lord, had he taken time to pray more often, he might still have healthy relationships with his family. And if Jacob had worked on knowing God, he would know the strength, peace,

joy, and wisdom that comes from a relationship with His Creator, His Sustainer, and His Ever-Present Helper.

I certainly appreciate the presence of God when I am between a rock and a hard place. But I don't want a relationship with God that is just for the desperate times – I want a relationship with God every moment of every day. The presence of God – at all times, in all circumstances – is what really brings joy and fulfillment. Learning from, living with, and seeking to please Jesus is the most rewarding aspect of my life.

When I discipline myself to spend quality time with God, life becomes so much fuller, richer, and more meaningful. It does take energy and discipline to spend quality time with God every day; I can easily let the relationship slip away. It takes effort and discipline to remind myself every moment that God is with me, He cares for me, and He desires to help me through the situations I face; I can easily think I am all on my own. "Discipline" (not a popular word these days) is essential to a rich, satisfying life with Jesus.

Lord, help me be humble enough to earnestly pray to you – in the good times and the bad. Help me to listen and learn. And help me to obey.

Lord, be near me as I spend time in prayer with you, today.

*O God, I thank You for this universe, my great home;
for its vastness and its riches,
and for the vast array of life which teems upon it
and of which I am part.
I praise You for the arching sky and the blessed winds,
for the driving clouds and the constellations on high.
I praise You for the salt sea and the running water,
for the hills, for the trees,
and for the grass under my feet.
I thank You for my senses by which I can see the splendor of the morning,
and hear the jubilant songs of love,
and smell the breath of the summer.
Grant me, I pray, a heart wide open to all this joy and beauty,
and save my soul from being so steeped in care or so darkened by passion
that I pass heedless and unseeing
when even the thorn-bush by the wayside is aflame with the glory of God.
Amen.*

Wednesday, August 12: Genesis 32:22-32

Why do we think we can run away from God? If God really is the Creator of the universe, is that even possible? Yet we often try, nevertheless.

This story summarizes Jacob's life to date – "Jacob" (the name literally means "he deceives") wrestles with God. All of Jacob's life he has been trying to do things on his own. God made him promises; Jacob took it upon himself to make them happen, ignoring God. God established principles of holiness and righteousness; Jacob relied upon deceit and thievery. Now, as Jacob's past (Esau) catches up with him, he is forced to confront himself and God. There is no wiggle room left to escape. He is trapped.

Who exactly is this "man" with whom Jacob wrestles? Is he actually God in human form? Possibly. Is he an angel? Possibly. Scholars suggest both options; I'm not sure it matters. Certainly Jacob understood him to be a representative of God, if not God himself (32:30).

In the early 1900's British poet Francis Thompson wrote a long poem, "The Hound of Heaven," which describes his own running away from God: "*I fled Him, down the nights and down the days; I fled Him, down the arches of the years; I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways of my own mind ...*" Thompson

describes the ways he has rejected God – following his own wits, rationalizing God out of his life, living for the moment, enjoying life’s pleasures to avoid thinking about what he knows is most important. Jacob could have identified with Thompson’s sentiment – so could many others. (Can you?)

Thompson goes on to describe how he kept hearing and seeing signs of God’s presence – in nature, in children, in the world around him. He can’t escape God. It is as if God is a hunting dog, tracking him relentlessly, constantly reminding him of His love, never letting him forget His grace. Thompson keeps pushing God away, shutting his eyes, rebelling against God’s relentless presence. But God never loses Thompson’s trail. The more Thompson runs, the more God is there.

At last Thompson feels cornered, just like Jacob. In Thompson’s poem, God says to him: "*Strange, piteous, futile thing. ... Rise, clasp My hand, and come. ... Ah, fondest, blindest, weakest, I am He Whom thou seekest. You drove away love from thee, when you drove away Me.*" We drive away love when we drive away God.

This is the lesson Jacob must learn – he is driving love away from himself when he drives God away. God is willing to let him fluster, fight, scratch, kick (and no doubt try to trick, connive, deceive, and cheat). But at the end of the day God prevails. God reaches out and touches Jacob – crippling him as a reminder of his ongoing need to depend on God, and his need to stop fighting Him all the time.

Then God gives Jacob ("he deceives") a new nickname, "Israel" ("he wrestles with God"). This name will be an apt summary of the rest of Jacob/Israel’s life. Jacob will always struggle in his walk with God – but he does seem to walk with greater faith and a new humility after this incident.

In what parts of my life do I run away from God or His will? What do I try to hide from Him? In what ways do I wrestle with God, His commands, or His will? What will it take for Him to get my attention?

*I pause for a moment and reflect on God's life-giving presence in every part of my body,
in everything around me,
in the whole of my life.
I need to close out the noise, to rise above the noise:
the noise that interrupts, that separates, the noise that isolates.
I need to listen to God again.
In God's loving presence I unwind the past day,
starting from now and looking back, moment by moment.
I gather in all the goodness and light, in gratitude.
I attend to the shadows and what they say to me,
seeking healing, courage, forgiveness.
What is stirring in me as I pray?
Am I consoled, troubled, left cold?
I imagine Jesus himself standing or sitting at my side,
and share my feelings with him.
Thank you, God, that I have been able to spend a few moments alone with You.
Thank You for what I have learned and how I have grown.
Amen.*

Thursday, August 13: Genesis 33

Can I forgive someone who badly hurt me? Who stole from me? Who abused my love?

Can Esau possibly forgive Jacob? Should he? Before Jacob’s wrestling match, Jacob had sent his flocks ahead to placate Esau – Jacob was lagging behind (32:21). After his encounter with God, Jacob "*himself went on ahead*" (33:3). Jacob becomes a leader – finally.

What follows is a surprise. Esau welcomes Jacob with open arms – a far cry from Esau’s death threat twenty years earlier (27:41). Jacob is learning that God can actually take care of things pretty well. When you trust God, He can handle things quite nicely. You don’t have to trick, cheat, or manipulate your way in the world. When you act with courage, integrity, and righteousness, God can work things through just fine.

Barnabe Assohoto and Samuel Ngewa, African writers, comment: *"Esau’s attitude is a challenge to the many in Africa (and, I would add, in Canada) who hold grudges for years. We must focus on the fact that we are all brothers and sisters. Christ has given us a perfect model in the unity he has brought to all people of the world by making us all children of God through personal faith in him (Galatians 3:26-29).*

"We must see each other as brothers and sisters, forgive past hurts and try to outdo each other in kindness. This same attitude is necessary when it comes to dealing with race issues in America, where black people always remember how white people have treated them, and white people do not show a spirit of humility when dealing with the past. It is also needed by those who have lived with apartheid in South Africa, with the Hutu-Tutsi situation in Rwanda, and the native-colonialist relationships in many African countries (what about Canada? Aboriginal relations? Middle-eastern peoples?).

"We should not act as if nothing wrong ever happened; but we should be willing to forgive. And once issues are settled, we should carry on with life. Life needs to continue. We cannot dwell on the past forever."

Esau’s attitude is a challenge. Who do you need to forgive? Who do you need to welcome with open arms. The past happened – nothing can change that. But life needs to continue.

*Lord, what I'm trying to do is set aside time to focus on my life – both temporal and spiritual.
Jesus, I try to imagine that You are sitting here beside me,
and I talk over with You what has been going on for me.
Jesus, I attempt to understand that in a myriad of ways
You enter the everyday circumstances of my existence.
But life is fast and full.
Often, pressures and commitments drown out the little voice at my core.
I know that.
I want to do something about it.
Knowing that You love me unconditionally, I can afford to be honest about how I am.
How has the last day been, and how do I feel now?
Thank You, Lord, that I can share my feelings openly with You.
How do I find myself today?
Where am I with God?
With others?
Do I have something to be grateful for? Then I give thanks.
Is there something I am sorry for? Then I ask forgiveness.
I try to become still and receptive to what Your Holy Spirit might want to impart to me.
Thank You for these few moments spent alone with You
and for the insights I have been given.
Amen.*

Friday, August 14: Genesis 34

Two steps forward and ... three steps backwards.

Just when we thought Jacob was getting his life together, he has settled close to a Canaanite city, and is building close ties with the local Canaanite tribes. He allows his unchaperoned daughter go into a city of foreigners, with different gods and different values, something that was unheard of in that culture. When Jacob’s daughter, Dinah, is brutally raped, he says nothing. He seems to accept it all passively.

Over and over, the text refers to poor Dinah as "*the daughter Leah had born to Jacob*," "*daughter of Jacob*," "*his daughter*," "*Jacob's daughter*" ... As a father, he ought to say something, do something, and take a stand. Demand justice. But Jacob does nothing. He says nothing.

He doesn't pray. He doesn't cry out to God. He doesn't speak to anyone. He turtles.

When his sons, Dinah's brothers, return, they are furious (as one would expect), but Jacob does and says nothing. Without any leadership or wise counsel from their father, the boys take matters in their own hands and overreact in a bloodbath of murder and thievery. This is not justice. This is bloodlust and theft.

When Jacob finally does open his mouth, at the end of Genesis 34, he betrays fear not faith. He has no concern for anyone or anything but pities himself and fears for his own hide.

It's interesting that Jacob is referred by his OLD name, Jacob, once again, not his new name Israel. This is old Jacob coming out, once again.

There is little redemptive in this sad, tragic story. It is a sobering reminder that even after spiritual highs, we can fall to unexpected lows (remember Noah, after the "high" of surviving the flood, lying drunk and naked in his tent). And it is a reminder that, when tragedy strikes, we need to turn in faith to God. Yes, what happened to Dinah was horrible. But surely God could have given Jacob some wisdom to do something. Surely God could have helped him comfort his daughter and give guidance to his sons. God can help us, even in our darkest moments, if we turn, in faith, to Him.

How do I struggle to trust God? What do I need to pray about that I am holding on to?

*Dear heavenly Father,
Slow me down.
Give me clean hands, clean words, and clean thoughts;
Help me to stand for the hard right against the easy wrong;
save me from habits that harm;
Teach me to work as hard, and play as fair in Your sight alone,
as if the whole world saw;
Forgive me when I am unkind,
and help me to forgive those who are unkind to me;
And keep me ready to help others.
Amen*

Saturday, August 15: Genesis 35:1-15

Sometimes we just need to start over. We need a second (or 3rd or 4th or 5th) chance. Thankfully, God is a God who forgives, and gives us those opportunities (1 John 1:9).

Jacob reconciles with Esau (Genesis 33). But then things go sideways. His daughter, Dinah, is raped by the son of a local Canaanite warlord (Genesis 34). Two of Jacob's sons take the law into their own hands. They slaughter **all** the men in the Canaanite city. Jacob's other sons gleefully, "*plundered the town ... They seized all the flocks and herds and donkeys – everything they could lay their hands on, both inside the town and outside in the fields. They looted all their wealth and plundered their houses. They also took all their little children and wives and led them away as captives*" (Genesis 34:27-29). They sin. Understandably, Jacob is afraid for his life from the people of the surrounding cities.

God tells him to move to Bethel. "*Bethel*," which literally means "*the house of God*," is a significant location in Genesis. This is the place Abraham first pitched his tent when he came from Haran (then Bethel was called "Luz," it's Canaanite name (Genesis 12:8)). After a disastrous sojourn in Egypt, when Abraham pretended Sarah was his sister, they return to Bethel (Genesis 13:3). Here Jacob had his vision of the ladder

to heaven; this is when he gives this place the name "Bethel" (Genesis 28:19).

God now commands Jacob to return to Bethel, the place where he first met God. Bethel is a holy place. A place to meet God. A place to start over again. After the disastrous confrontation of Jacob's sons with the locals, God is calling Jacob's family to repentance. They are to change their clothes, symbolic of putting aside the old ways and choosing a new way of living. A godly way of living.

More importantly, they are to bury anything related to the worship of foreign gods. The implication is that at least some of Jacob's family have been worshipping the local gods of the Canaanites (probably among the loot the boys brought home from their bloody sortie). Or perhaps it's referring to Rachel's father's household gods she had stolen earlier (Genesis 31). Or both.

At Bethel, Jacob builds an altar to commemorate the place where he first got to know God for himself. He is again named "Israel" – "he who wrestles with God" – by God. This is a time when Jacob and his clan are called to examine themselves, let go of other gods, let go of their stiff-necked stubborn independence, and actually trust God. After decades of struggling with God, Jacob/Israel is again called to faith – true faith. Can he make a go of it this time?

The writer of Hebrews urges us, "*let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith*" (Hebrews 12:1-2). That sounds easy, but is SO hard to do. Pray that God would help you to keep the faith. "*For the joy set before him he (Jesus) endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart*" (Hebrews 12:2-3).

Spend some time in prayer ...

*I remind myself that, as I sit here now,
God is gazing on me with love and holding me in His hands.
I pause for a moment and think of this.
"In these days, God taught me as a schoolteacher teaches a pupil" (Ignatius).
I remind myself that there are things God has to teach me yet,
and ask for the grace to hear them and let them change me.
I remind myself that I am in the presence of the Lord.
I will take refuge in His loving heart.
He is my strength in times of weakness.
He is my comforter in times of sorrow.
In this expectant state of mind, I turn to the text for the day with confidence.
I believe that the Holy Spirit is present and may reveal whatever the passage has to say to me.
Lord, help me read reflectively, listening with the 'ear of my heart' to what is going on in my heart.
Jesus you speak to me through the words of the Scriptures.
May I respond to Your call today.
Teach me to recognize Your hand at work in my daily living.
I thank God for these few moments spent alone with him
and for any insights I may have been given concerning the text.
Amen.*

Sunday, August 16: Genesis 35:16-29

Life can be difficult. We face struggles. We endure grief. How can we cope?

Rachel is Israel's (Jacob's) beloved wife. Can you imagine his emotions as she dies in childbirth? How do you think he feels about Benjamin, the son of his treasured partner? What questions do you think Israel has for God during these times? How do you think he handles them? What comfort will God provide?

Israel/Jacob's stress is compounded by the behaviour of his eldest son, Reuben. Undoubtedly Israel is furious. He knows about Reuben's sin and gross disrespect. His emotions are boiling over – with Rachel's death, Benjamin's birth and now this.

But for once Israel/Jacob doesn't rush into the situation relying on his own smarts. He doesn't explode. He doesn't act rashly out of his emotional vulnerability. The sin will be dealt with (see Genesis 49:3-4), but in God's time. Patience, self-control, and faith are becoming part of his character.

Jacob/Israel models exemplary (and, to this point, uncharacteristic) self-control. He doesn't ignore the problem; it will be dealt with. But he doesn't overreact or act with poor judgment, blasting out his raw emotions. Neither does he simply turn passive and "turtle" as he did when Dinah was raped. Time, reflection, and probably prayer, allow him to act wisely and well.

Peter encourages us to remember the power and promise of the Spirit that God gives us. Then he tells us to *"Make every effort to respond to God's promises. Supplement your faith with a generous provision of moral excellence, and moral excellence with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with patient endurance, and patient endurance with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love for everyone"* (2 Peter 1:5-7).

This is exactly the change of heart Jacob/Israel is learning. What a contrast from "the deceiver" to "the wrestler-with-God". May God help me learn these lessons, too.

*Grant to us, O Lord, the royalty of inward happiness,
and the serenity which comes from living close to you.
Daily renew in us the sense of joy,
and let the eternal spirit of the Father dwell in our souls and bodies,
filling every corner of our hearts with light and grace;
so that, bearing about with us the infection of good courage,
we may be diffusers of life,
and may meet all ills and accidents with gallant and high-hearted happiness,
giving you thanks always for all things.
Amen*

Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-94)

Monday, August 17: Genesis 36

OK, I know genealogies are not that interesting. Especially when they repeat some of the same names twice. The genealogy is not even the main character's genealogy (Jacob), but his less well-known and not-so-chosen sidekick, Esau. You are welcome to "skim" this chapter. Don't memorize it. 😊

Esau, also known as Edom, had sold his birthright. He, unlike Jacob, marries Canaanite women, who might lead him away from following the true God. Esau also leaves the Promised Land in search of greater prosperity. He does none of the "right" things that would keep him in a good relationship with God.

Esau's descendants, the Edomites, did, in fact, seem to follow other gods. Evidence suggests their chief deity was called Qaus. As close relatives of the Canaanites, they may have worshiped such gods as Baal and Asherah, as well. All of these gods are roundly condemned by the God of Israel.

In spite of Esau's rejection of God and his provisions, his descendants have a future. Under God's faithfulness, they, too, have a story (*"Do not detest the Edomites or the Egyptians, because the Edomites are your relatives ..."* says the Lord in Deuteronomy 23:7).

God had said to Abraham, *"I will bless you and make you famous, and you will be a blessing to others ... All the families on earth will be blessed through you"* (Genesis 12:2-3). God's good news is for all people –

including the descendants of Esau. And us. Ultimately, today, descendants of Edom (like all peoples throughout the Middle East) are welcome into the Kingdom of God as they put their faith in Jesus, just as all people who come to Jesus are. Including us (Matthew 28:19, Revelation 7:9).

Praise God that, despite the past, we are all invited to come, in faith, to Jesus. Pray for people you know ...

*God is here.
Before I came to this very spot, God was already here – waiting.
I dwell for a moment on the presence of God around me,
in every part of my body, and deep within my being.
I ask for the grace to let go of my own concerns
and be open to what God is asking of me,
to let myself be guided and formed by my loving Creator.
If God were trying to tell me something, would I know?
If God were reassuring me or challenging me, would I notice?
Conversation requires talking and listening.
As I talk to Jesus may I also learn to be still and listen.
I picture the gentleness in His eyes and the smile full of love as he gazes on me.
I can be totally honest with Jesus as I tell Him of my worries and my cares.
I will open up my heart to Him as I tell Him of my fears and my doubts.
I will ask Him to help me to place myself fully in His care, to abandon myself to Him,
knowing that He always wants what is best for me.
Thank You, God that I have been able to spend a few moments alone with You.
Amen.*

Tuesday, August 18: Genesis 37:1-11

Dr. Bruce Waltke was Old Testament professor at Regent College, Vancouver, for years. We attended the same church, Trinity Baptist, Vancouver – where I came to faith in Jesus and was baptized. We became friends, too. He was one of those academics who wrote many books, including an award-winning commentary on Genesis. He titles this section: *"Introduction to the Dysfunctional Family in Canaan."*

Have we met any other dysfunctional families in Genesis??? Perhaps a better question to ask is whether we have actually met any well-functioning families in Genesis???

A common theme in these dysfunctional families seems to be parental favouritism. As with Esau-Isaac and Jacob-Rebekah (Genesis 25:28), favouritism leads to discord, deception, and heartbreak. Ultimately God can bring good out of the train wreck (camel-caravan wreck?) of these broken families, but never are the lies, cheating, abuse, and violence excused as God's will. God can salvage His plan from the disaster, but never is the architect of the pain and suffering. People can do that all on their own.

Jacob loves Joseph, the youngest, mostly because Joseph is the son of his favourite wife, Rachel. Is this going to create family harmony?

Jacob gives Joseph an "ornate robe" (no one really knows quite what this word means – the Hebrew word is only used once elsewhere, to describe the royal garb of a princess, Tamar (2 Samuel 13:18-19)). Symbolically, this probably meant the elderly Jacob intended Joseph to be the new "head of the household" – his heir. How is this going to go over with the older boys?

Teenaged-Joseph has dreams. That's all well and good. But they reinforce Joseph's claim of supremacy. Is telling them to his older brothers wise? How can he think this is going to turn out well?

As outside observers, we don't find it hard to understand how this family is headed for disaster.

But people inside the situation – Jacob and Joseph – seem oblivious to their missteps.

Do we ever make blunders like that? People outside the situation can clearly see our failures, but we don't see them at all?

Do we have wise, trusted friends, who can help us see clearly? Ask God to help you be wise ...

*I slow myself down for a moment,
and try to realize that God is present.
To me. Here and now.
He is in present in what I do, in the people that I meet,
and the situations I find myself in daily.
How can I make this reality real for myself?
God, please help me to be free from my own preoccupations,
to be open to You in this time of prayer, to come to love and serve You more.
I ask how I am within myself today?
Am I particularly tired, stressed, or off-form?
If any of these characteristics apply,
can I try to let go of the concerns that disturb me?
I take my time to read the Word of God, slowly, a few times,
allowing myself to dwell on anything that strikes me.
Do I notice myself reacting as I pray with the Word of God?
Do I feel challenged, comforted, angry?
Imagining Jesus sitting or standing by me,
I speak out my feelings, as one trusted friend to another.
I thank God for these few moments spent alone with him and for any insights
I may have been given concerning the text.
Amen.*

Wednesday, August 19: Genesis 37:12-36

To be honest, Jacob is not too bright. Two years earlier, Levi and Simeon had slaughtered the men of Shechem and the other brothers had plundered the city (Genesis 34). Now Jacob has sent his boys 130 kms from home (Hebron) **to Shechem** with all his worldly goods, his flocks. Then he sends his favoured son, Joseph, on his own, **to Shechem**, to see if the other lads are alright.

A nameless Shechemite tells Joseph his brothers are 20 kms further away, in Dothan.

How do Joseph's brothers treat him? Are we surprised? Curiously, despite the earlier plundering, a pagan Shechemite has treated Joseph better than his own brothers do.

There is nothing noble in anyone's actions in this story, except possibly Reuben's attempt to rescue Joseph.

In Romans 8:20-28, Paul writes to believers going through persecution and hardship, "*Yet what we suffer now is nothing compared to the glory he will reveal to us later. For all creation is waiting eagerly for that future day when God will reveal who his children really are ... And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them.*" Note: the Scripture does not say that God causes all things to happen. It does say that God causes everything (even things that may happen because people make bad choices) to work together for good ...

God is going to work Joseph's situation out for good – for Joseph, Jacob, and (ironically) the brothers. But it is going to take some doing.

Be thankful for the promise that "*God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love*

God and are called according to his purpose for them.” That can be hard to accept. It can be hard to pray this way. Paul, in Romans, encourages us, “The Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness. For example, we don’t know what God wants us to pray for. But the Holy Spirit prays for us with groanings that cannot be expressed in words. And the Father who knows all hearts knows what the Spirit is saying, for the Spirit pleads for us believers in harmony with God’s own will” (Romans 8:26-27).

Is life a mess? God can use our difficulties and pain to accomplish His purposes through you and for you. Jesus is with you. His Spirit is pleading for you. Be encouraged.

*O most sweet and loving Lord, whom I now devoutly wish to receive,
you know my weaknesses and my needs.
You know how many bad habits and vices I have.
You know how often I am burdened, tempted, shaken and stained by sin.
I come to you for healing.
I pray to you for comfort and support.
I speak to you, who know all things, to whom all my inmost thoughts are evident.
You alone can adequately comfort me and help me.
You know what good things I need most,
and you know how poor I am in virtue.
I stand before you poor and naked, asking your grace and imploring your mercy.
Feed me, for I am hungry.
Inflame my coldness with the fire of your love.
Illuminate my blindness with the light of your presence.
Make all that leads me from you not worth thinking about.
Make me forget it all.

Lift up my heart to you in heaven,
and let me not wander aimlessly about the world.
From now on, you will be my only delight,
you alone are my food and drink,
my love and joy, my sweetness and whole good.
Oh, that by your presence you would set me fully on fire,
totally consume me and transform me into you,
so that through the grace of inner union and by melting in love's flames
I would become one spirit with you.
Do not leave me hungry and thirsty,
but treat me mercifully as you have so often and so admirably treated your saints.
How wonderful it would be if I were burned and wholly consumed for you,
since you are a fire always burning and never consuming,
a love that purifies the heart and enlightens the mind.
Amen*

Thomas À Kempis

Thursday, August 20: Genesis 38

I mentioned a couple of days ago that biblical scholar, Bruce Waltke, titles this section: *"Introduction to the Dysfunctional Family in Canaan."* Did you want more evidence of dysfunction? Here we have it.

Judah, Jacob’s fourth son, moves into Canaanite territory and marries a Canaanite woman. Like Esau, he is rejecting both the land and the god of his fathers. He does not do the right thing for his widowed daughter-in-law. He forces her into prostitution (he, himself, thinks she is a pagan temple prostitute – why in the world is **he** sleeping with a shrine prostitute from a pagan religion?). He callously orders the brutal execution of his daughter-in-law without any investigation.

The only redeeming feature of Judah’s character is, in the end, he recognizes his own guilt: *"She is righteous, not I."*

Why is this story even in Scripture?

It's another one of those tales of sin and evil that remind us that God can, in fact, bring good even out of evil. One of the twin boys born of this unholy union is Perez. In Ruth 4:18-22, we read, *"This is the genealogical record of their ancestor Perez: Perez was the father of Hezron. Hezron was the father of Ram. Ram was the father of Amminadab. Amminadab was the father of Nahshon. Nahshon was the father of Salmon. Salmon was the father of Boaz. Boaz was the father of Obed. Obed was the father of Jesse. Jesse was the father of David."*

Who, ultimately is a son of David, therefore the son of Perez? Jesus. In both Matthew 1:3 and Luke 3:33, Perez is named as an ancestor of Jesus. Interestingly, Matthew mentions Tamar by name as well. Matthew, by the way, also mentions three other women in his genealogy of Jesus: Rahab (a non-Jewish prostitute), Ruth (a Moabite/non-Jew), and Bathsheba (a victim of rape). Jesus has an "interesting" pedigree.

God really can bring good things out of the messes we can make of our lives. However, it can take a LONG time to see those blessings.

The not-so-subtle message of all this dysfunction is that life does go SOOOO much better when we actually keep faithful to God, follow in His ways, and keep His commands. We can save ourselves (and those we love) a LOT of grief when we just make smarter choices in life.

Do I ever make dumb decisions? The good news is God can forgive us when we repent (1 John 1:9).

Do I need God's wisdom now? Pray for His guidance ...

*Lord God, you are everything to me.
My spirit rejoices in you, my Savior.
Thank you for seeking me when I was lost and for finding me.
Thank you for choosing me to go forth and bear lasting fruit in your name.
Thank you for enabling me to bear fruit for you, Lord.
Without you, I can do nothing.
You are good, O Lord, and you are always ready to forgive.
Thank you for your plentiful mercy in my life which I always receive when I call upon you.
You are always there to help me; therefore, I will never be confounded.
You truly are a very present help to me, and I am receiving your help even now as I pray.
Thank you, Father.
You are my refuge and strength,
and because this is true, I will not fear anything or anyone.
You are in my midst, and I will not be moved.
You are always there to help me speedily.
You are with me, Lord. Knowing this, I will be still.
I know that you are my God.
Thank you for your constant help in my life, Lord.
Amen*

Friday, August 21: Genesis 39

If life throws us some curveballs, does it mean God has abandoned us? What do you think?

Let's go back to Joseph, sold by his brothers, slaving away in Egypt. *"The Lord was with Joseph ..."* (39:2). Though Joseph's situation has changed drastically – from being Jacob's pampered, favoured son, to being a slave – God has not abandoned him. God is still with him. Isn't that encouraging?

In fact, even in Joseph's lowly position, God is blessing him AND others through him. God promised Abraham all nations would be blessed through his family (Genesis 12:1-33); it's happening right here in Egypt. God can work things together for good, despite the apparent tragedy of the situation.

Paul, in Romans 8:35 asks, "*Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death?*" Those are good questions. Hard questions. The implication is that we may face some of those challenges, so we might want to pay attention to Paul's answer.

How does Paul answer? "*No! Despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us. And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord*" (Romans 8:37-39).

Of course, things go a bit sideways when Potiphar's wife seeks to seduce Joseph. Notice that Joseph, unlike Judah in Genesis 38, chooses NOT to compromise his ethics. He makes the right choice. He pays a price.

Choosing to do the ethical thing is not always easy. It does not always "pay" in the short term. But it is the right thing to do. And, in the long run, it does always bear fruit (as we shall see).

Nothing can separate you from God's love. Jesus is our "*Immanuel*" – "*God with us*" (Matthew 1:22-23). How is that an encouragement to you?

Doing the right thing is always the right choice. What right choice do you need to make?

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love,
Where there is injury, pardon
Where there is doubt, faith,
Where there is despair, hope,
Where there is darkness, light,
Where there is sadness, joy.
O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much
seek to be consoled as to console,
not so much to be understood as to understand,
not so much to be loved, as to love;
for it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
it is in dying that we awake to eternal life.
Amen*

Francis of Assisi

Saturday, August 22: Genesis 40

Even in an Egyptian jail, God is still with Joseph: "*But while Joseph was there in the prison, the Lord was with him; he showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden*" (39:20-21).

God is using the evil acts of wicked men to further His agenda. No – God is NOT causing all these bad things to happen to Joseph. Bad people make bad decisions that impact Joseph. But God can bring good things, even out of the deplorable actions of nasty people. God will use this time in the dungeons to bring Joseph to the attention of Pharaoh, who will make Joseph second-in-command of all Egypt, and Joseph will save both the Egyptians and his own family. But all that is still in the future ...

In the meantime, how do you think Joseph is feeling? Probably not too good about life. Or about God.

He had rejected the advances of Potiphar's wife. What had his faithfulness to God gained him? Prison.

Do you ever feel like God should be treating you better? Like things aren't going as well as they should? You deserve better. Welcome to Joseph's world. Welcome to Jesus' world.

Isaiah writes about the suffering Messiah, words that could equally apply to Joseph: *"He was oppressed and treated harshly, yet he never said a word. He was led like a lamb to the slaughter. And as a sheep is silent before the shearers, he did not open his mouth. Unjustly condemned, he was led away"* (53:7-8).

Perhaps we feel like that, too.

The good news is that the Lord is we are never abandoned. Jesus tells us, *"I am with you always, even to the end of the age"* (Matthew 28:20). He says that to His disciples as He sends them into the world to be His ambassadors. Many would face great hardship. Eleven of his twelve closest friends would die as martyrs for their faith (only John died a natural death). But the presence of God carried them through.

Be assured of this: He IS with you always.

*O gracious and holy Father, give us wisdom to perceive you,
intelligence to understand you,
diligence to seek you,
patience to wait for you,
eyes to see you,
a heart to meditate on you,
and a life to proclaim you,
through the power of the spirit of Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.*

Sunday, August 23: Genesis 41

Some commentators have seen the Joseph story as foreshadowing Jesus' life and ministry.

Joseph is lifted from the depths of a dungeon to a place of great honour. Through Joseph, the people of Egypt and his own family are saved.

Jesus, of course, is liberated from the prison of a tomb and exalted through His resurrection and ascension. Through Jesus, all the nations of the world are saved. Paul, writing about Jesus, says, *"Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When he appeared in human form, he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross.*

"Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honor and gave him the name above all other names, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue declare that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:6-11).

Sidney Greidanus comments, *"As Joseph was exalted to the right hand of Pharaoh to rule as king of Egypt, so Jesus was exalted to the right hand of God the Father to rule the nations as the 'King of kings and Lord of lords' (1 Tim 6:15, Rev 17:14; 19:16). As all were commanded to bow before Joseph (v 43), so 'at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth' (Phil 2:10). And as Joseph, with bread, saved many people from death, so Jesus, the bread of life, saves many people from eternal death. Jesus proclaims, 'Whoever eats of this bread will live forever' (John 6:51)."*

God has probably not blessed many (if any) of us with the ability to interpret dreams. But God has given each of us unique experiences, talents, skills, gifts, abilities, stories which, if offered to Him, can be used to encourage, help, and bless other people, too.

Pray that God would help you know who you can encourage today ...

*God is with me, but more, God is within me, giving me existence.
Let me dwell for a moment on God's life-giving presence in my body,
my mind, my heart and in the whole of my life.
What most often stops me achieving freedom is my tendency
to be caught up in fears and expectations
about what I 'ought' or 'should' be.
My usual automatic responses tie me down
and inhibit me from exploring new areas of growth.
I ask and pray for a greater sense of inner freedom
and that I might reach the fresh and challenging possibilities God wishes me to realize.
Help me Lord to be more conscious of your presence.
Teach me to recognize Your presence in others.
Fill my heart with gratitude for the times
Your love has been shown to me through the care of others.
What is stirring in me as I pray?
Am I consoled, troubled, left cold?
I imagine Jesus himself standing or sitting at my side,
and share my feelings with him.
I thank God for these few moments spent alone with him
and for any insights I may have been given concerning the text.
Amen.*

Mon day, August 24: Genesis 42

Bruce Waltke, my Old Testament professor friend, in his commentary on Genesis, entitles this section, "*The Dysfunctional Family Reconciled.*" Yay. Things will improve. But it will take a while.

When Joseph's brothers come to Egypt to buy grain, they don't recognize him. They had no idea what had happened to Joseph. Joseph chooses not to reveal his identity to them immediately. He does, however, bless them by giving them back the silver they paid for the grain (although they misinterpret his generosity).

Joseph, of course, has undergone quite a transformation. Much time has passed. Far from the scrawny 17-year old they had sold into slavery, Joseph is now a mature man, a grand lord, dressed in the height of Egyptian fashion, living in a grand Egyptian palace, married to the daughter of an Egyptian priest, speaking to them in Egyptian. They would have no reason to suspect this Egyptian duke was their long-lost brother.

Much like Daniel and his friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, Joseph has risen to prominence in the court of a foreign empire. Both Daniel and his friends and Joseph are examples of how people of faith – people who love God – can survive and thrive in the corridors of secular power. Arguably it was tougher back then than now, because both Egypt (Joseph) and Babylon (Daniel and his buddies) had official religions which key leaders would be expected to follow. In most cases the pharaoh/king was assumed to be divine. This challenge is clearly laid out in the book of Daniel where the people of God are thrown into fiery furnaces and cast into lions' dens for not following the official state religion.

Somehow, Joseph can remain faithful to God, surrounded by and tempted by the religion of the Egyptians (even married to the daughter of an Egyptian priest).

In the stories of Daniel and his colleagues, more details are given of the challenges people of faith can have

in the heady world of business and politics. They refuse to compromise their spiritual integrity. In the short term, it costs them dearly. But God is faithful. He honours their faith by saving them. And blessing them.

Most of us will not end up as deputy prime minister. However, our challenge is still to live with spiritual integrity wherever we are as well. In the short term it may cost us, too. But God honours our faithfulness.

The blessings of a clear conscience, pure heart, and spiritual integrity are worth more than any challenges we may face. How is God calling you to faithfulness today?

*Thank You, thank You, thank You, generous God.
You have injected life with joy, thus we know laughter.
You have dabbed creation with color, thus we enjoy beauty.
You have whistled a divine tune into the rhythm of life, thus we hear music.
You have filled our minds with questions, thus we appreciate mystery.
You have entered our hearts with compassion, thus we experience faith.
Thank You, God, Thank You. Thank You.
Amen.*

Tuesday, August 25: Genesis 43

Assigning moral blame for natural disasters has become a time-honored custom in some Christian circles. So, when Pat Robertson claimed that the 2010 earthquake in Haiti was caused by its people's "pact with the devil," few were surprised. Blame the victims.

Following the devastating terrorist attack on 9/11, televangelist Jerry Falwell said 9/11 occurred because of "*pagans, abortionists, feminists, gays and the lesbians, and the American Civil Liberties Union.*" It had nothing to do with the actual perpetrators, twisted ideologies, or US foreign policy. Blame the victims.

After Hurricane Katrina, John Hagee said "*I believe that New Orleans had a level of sin that was offensive to God, and they were recipients of the judgment of God for that.*" Blame the victims.

With Covid-19, similar "Christian" conspiracy theories have arisen. Popular pastor John Piper, was asked what he would say to pastors who claim that the pandemic is God's judgment on sinful cities and arrogant nations; he replied: "*God sometimes uses disease to bring particular judgments upon those who reject him and give themselves over to sin.*" Blame the victims.

Using his theology, what do these teachers make of the fact that the U.S.A. has BY FAR the most cases and most deaths globally from Covid-19? Are Americans especially wicked? Are they being severely judged?

How do these pastors process the reality that 90% of Covid-19's deaths are seniors? Many in care facilities? Most victims are poor? Many are ethnic minorities? Victims typically have underlying health conditions? Are these folks especially wicked? Do we blame the victims?

In some, very specific circumstances, God does link suffering with sin. For instance, the Israelites' exile in Babylon is directly linked to their stubborn refusal to abandon foreign gods, their immorality, their injustice, and their oppression of the poor, widows, and foreigners. But this is the exception not the rule.

For us, still wrestling with Covid-19, we need to resist the temptation to blame the victims. Rev. Michael Coren, responds to these blame-the-victim ideas, that, "*At a more serious or theological level, this is a reductive and banal spirituality that may satisfy the zealot but is dangerously crass and in fact profoundly ungodly. It depicts a genocidal God, sufficiently cruel to hurt indiscriminately, and too indifferent or impotent to be able to punish only those who have genuinely caused harm. It's all the product of an ancient, fearful belief system that has nothing to do with the Jesus who called for love and forgiveness, and so distant and different from the Gospel calls of Jesus to turn the other cheek, embrace our enemies, reach*

out to the most rejected and marginalized, and work for justice and peace.”¹

Let's go back to the famine ravaging the land of Canaan. Was this famine punishment for some sin Jacob or his family had committed? There were many, many to choose from. But NOWHERE, EVER, in the Bible is this natural disaster linked to sin. God doesn't blame the victim.

In fact, nowhere is the cause of the famine identified. Sometimes evil things just happen. It's a mystery.

Instead of giving us a reason, God, through Joseph, provides a path through the disaster. God has prepared a way through the crisis: Joseph's rise to power. God never deals with the question of WHY the famine is occurring. God does answer the WHAT DO I DO question: He gives Joseph wisdom to stockpile food. And He inspires Jacob to do something profoundly practical: there is grain in Egypt, go and get it. Do the practical things that need to be done.

God rarely answers the "Why?" question about suffering and evil. He much more often answers the "What do I do?" question. *"Love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength ... and love your neighbour as yourself"* (Mark 12:29-31). Be people of faith. And be people of practical love and service. God simply wants us to be His people, faithfully living for Him, moment by moment, day by day.

Do what needs to be done. What is God saying to me?

*I arise today, through a mighty strength, the power of the Trinity,
Through the belief in the threeness,
through confession of the oneness of the Creator of Creation.
I arise today through the strength of Christ's birth and his baptism,
Through the strength of his crucifixion and his burial,
Through the strength of his resurrection and his ascension.*

*I arise today through the strength of heaven:
Light of sun, radiance of moon, splendor of fire, speed of lightning,
swiftness of wind, depth of sea, stability of earth, firmness of rock.*

*I arise today through God's strength to pilot me:
God's might to uphold me, God's wisdom to guide me,
God's eye to look before me, God's ear to hear me,
God's word to speak for me, God's hand to guard me,
God's way to lie before me, God's shield to protect me,
God's host to save me from snares of devils,
from temptations of vices, from everyone who shall wish me ill,
afar and anear, alone and in multitude.*

*Christ to shield me today.
Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me,
Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ on my right, Christ on my left,
Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down, Christ when I arise,
Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,
Christ in every eye that sees me, Christ in every ear that hears me.*

*I arise today, through a mighty strength, the power of the Trinity,
Through belief in the threeness, through confession of the oneness,
of the Creator of Creation.*

Amen

Patrick (born 387?)

¹ <https://www.macleans.ca/society/is-the-coronavirus-a-judgment-from-god-no-it-is-not/>

Wednesday, August 26: Genesis 44

Can a leopard change its spots? Can people change?

When we are first introduced to Joseph's brothers in Genesis 37, they are jealous of Joseph's favoured status in their father's eyes. They are scoundrels, selling their brother into slavery. They are liars, telling Jacob they didn't know what happened. They are deceitful, claiming Joseph was killed by a wild animal.

Now Judah, and the others, seem to have come terms with the fact that one son is the favourite – now Benjamin. They have integrity, wanting to pay in full for the grain they received and to return the cup to Joseph. And they are truthful. They have changed and grown.

Judah is not the oldest of Jacob's sons, but he has become the leader. And the closest to God (curious given Genesis 38!). When Judah offers to give his own life for Benjamin's, it is the first time in Scripture that one person offers to give his life for another. His self-sacrificing love for his brother, for the sake of his father, foreshadows the love of Jesus. Jesus' voluntarily gives His life to heal the breach between the Father and His brothers and sisters – us. Judah, the ancestor of Jesus, behaves in a Kingdom of God way.

Bruce Waltke comments, "*Jacob will crown Judah with kingship because he demonstrates that he has become fit to rule according to God's ideal of kingship that the king serves the people, not vice versa. Judah is transformed from one who sells his brother as a slave to one who is willing to be the slave for his brother. With that he exemplifies Israel's ideal kingship.*" The ideal king serves his people.

Can people change? Through the power of God's Spirit – through His forgiveness, grace, and mercy – absolutely. Judah is a living, breathing case study in radical transformation by the Spirit (c.f. Genesis 38).

Is there anything in your life that needs to change?

Bring it to God. Invite His Spirit to change you ...

*The fruit of silence is prayer: Lord grant me silence.,
The fruit of prayer is faith: Lord, help me pray.
The fruit of faith is love: Lord, grant me faith.
The fruit of love is service: Lord, gift me with love.,
The fruit of service is peace: Lord, help me serve.
Lord, grant me your peace.
Amen*

Thursday, August 27: Genesis 45

Can I forgive a person who has hurt me? Badly hurt me?

Can Joseph forgive the rats who sold him into slavery and inflicted years of untold misery? Does he?

Remember the story? Joseph, the father's favourite son, is sent to his brothers. They sell their brother for twenty pieces of silver. He forgives them. In the end, he becomes their lord. In Genesis 50:20, Joseph will say to his brothers, "*You intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good. He brought me to this position so I could save the lives of many people.*"

Does the storyline sound familiar? Jesus, God's only begotten Son, is sent to His people. He is sold for a few paltry pieces of silver. He forgives those who crucify Him (Luke 23:34). In the end, He becomes our Lord. "*God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners. And since we have been made right in God's sight by the blood of Christ, he will certainly save us from God's condemnation*" (Romans 5:8-9).

The amazing truth of the good news of Jesus is that we are forgiven by God through Jesus.

Our challenge, then, is to be just as gracious in our forgiveness of other people. In the Lord's Prayer we are taught to pray (every day), "*Forgive us our sins, **as we have forgiven those who sin against us***" (Matthew 6:12). This is the only phrase in the Lord's Prayer Jesus chooses to elaborate on, probably because He knows how hard that can be for us to do. He goes on to say, "*If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins*" (Matthew 6:14-15). Is Jesus serious about us forgiving those who hurt us? You bet.

Not only is forgiving others a blessing to them (just ask Joseph's brothers), it is also a blessing to the one who does the forgiving. When we hold on to hurts and grudges, we give ourselves ulcers, heartburn, and stress; we lose sleep, get anxious, and grind our teeth. When we forgive others, we let it all go. We give ourselves the gift of peace.

- Is there someone you need to forgive?
- For your own sake, ask for God's help to let it go ...

*May there always be work for my hands to do;
May my purse always hold a coin or two;
May the sun always shine upon my windowpane;
May a rainbow be certain to follow each rain;
May the hand of a friend always be near to me, and
May God fill my heart with gladness to cheer me.
Amen.*

Friday, August 28: Genesis 46

Do you ever wonder if God leaves you on your own? Do you ever feel like He has abandoned you?

The good news throughout the Bible is that God never, ever leaves us. He is with us always, even to the end of the age (Matthew 28:20).

In this passage, God reminds Jacob/Israel that "*I am God, the God of your father. Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for there I will make your family into a great nation. I will go with you down to Egypt, and I will bring you back again*" (46:3-4).

The Israelites lived in a world of local gods – the Egyptians had gods like Anubis and Ra, the Babylonians had Marduk, the Canaanites had Baal, but the one true God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, was not limited by geography. As the Creator of the universe, He is with His people wherever they go.

Just as God assured Jacob that He would be with him as he went down to Egypt, God's promise is that He will also lead the Israelites back up out of Egypt (the story of the Exodus). This promise will be the beacon of hope that will light the hearts of the Israelites as they struggle in slavery in Egypt, as Moses emerges as their leader, and as they journey to freedom in the Promised Land.

It's good for us to know, too, that God is always with us. The promise of Psalm 139 is this:

*O Lord, you have examined my heart and know everything about me.
You know when I sit down or stand up. You know my thoughts even when I'm far away.
You see me when I travel and when I rest at home. You know everything I do.
You know what I am going to say even before I say it, Lord.
You go before me and follow me. You place your hand of blessing on my head.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too great for me to understand!*

*I can never escape from your Spirit! I can never get away from your presence!
If I go up to heaven, you are there; if I go down to the grave, you are there.
If I ride the wings of the morning, if I dwell by the farthest oceans,
even there your hand will guide me, and your strength will support me.
I could ask the darkness to hide me and the light around me to become night—
but even in darkness I cannot hide from you.
To you the night shines as bright as day.*

Where do you find yourself today? Know this: God IS with you.

*Dearest Lord, may I see you today and every day in the person of your sick,
and, while nursing them, minister unto You.
Though you hide yourself behind the unattractive disguise of the irritable, the exacting, the unreasonable,
may I still recognize you, and say:
"Jesus, my patient, how sweet it is to serve You."
Lord, give me this seeing faith, then my work will never be monotonous.
I will ever find joy in humouring the fancies and gratifying the wishes of all poor sufferers.
O beloved sick, how doubly dear you are to me, when you personify Christ;
and what a privilege is mine to be allowed to tend you.
Sweetest Lord, make me appreciative of the dignity of my high vocation, and its many responsibilities.
Never permit me to disgrace it by giving way to coldness, unkindness, or impatience.
And O God, while you are Jesus my patient,
deign also to be to me a patient Jesus, bearing with my faults,
looking only to my intention, which is to love and serve You in the person of each one of Your sick.
Lord, increase my faith, bless my efforts and work, now and for evermore,
Amen.*

Mother Teresa (1910-1997)

Saturday, August 29: Genesis 47:1-12

Hospitality is a BIG DEAL in many cultures. When I was in Lebanon, for instance, Lebanese people bent over backwards to make us feel welcome and feed us VERY well (even though they were not wealthy).

In our Western culture, hospitality is often limited to having friends over for coffee or dinner. And if you do have them over, you may expect a reciprocal invitation back, to keep the score even.

Consider the hospitality being offered in Genesis 45-46. Pharaoh and the Egyptians give the best of their land and property to a starving and needy foreign family. To refugees. Does that radical hospitality surprise you? The repetition of the invitation and the gifts and the detail about all the provisions, shows Pharaoh and Joseph anticipate and meet all the physical and psychological needs Jacob and his family might have. This is hospitality on a scale that astounds us.

Hospitality, in the Bible, is not about having someone over for supper, anticipating an invitation in return. In Scripture, hospitality is serious business. It involves sacrificially serving someone in need. Like refugees.

Notice the Egyptians do not force the Israelites to become just like them. They accept them as they are.

"Hospitality," says Henri Nouwen, "means primarily the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people but to offer them space where change can take place. It is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines ... The paradox of hospitality is that it wants to create emptiness, not a fearful emptiness, but a friendly emptiness where strangers can enter and discover themselves as created free; free to sing their own songs, speak their own languages, dance their own dances; free also to leave and follow their own vocations. Hospitality is not a subtle invitation to adore the lifestyle of the host, but the gift of a

chance for the guest to find his own."

The Egyptians are not people who know, love, or worship the God of Israel. But they bless the Israelites by caring for them in their times of need.

How is this a challenge to me? An inspiration to me? What is God saying to me?

*When I am invited into the presence of a friend,
I look forward to the event and feel honoured.
When God invites me to spend time in His presence,
He desires me to know and feel His love.
With faith and hope I turn my heart and mind to God,
and ask Him to help me become more aware of His loving presence.
"A thick and shapeless tree-trunk would never believe that it could become a statue,
admired as a miracle of sculpture,
and would never submit itself to the chisel of the sculptor,
who sees by her genius what she can make of it." (Ignatius)
I ask for the grace to let myself be shaped by my loving Creator.
I thank God for these few moments spent alone with him
and for any insights I may have been given from His Word.
Amen.*

Sunday, August 30: Genesis 47:13-31

We are brought up in a culture where we are repeatedly told that the more stuff we have – wide screen TVs, iPhones, designer clothes – the more successful we are. We deserve all this "stuff." It's our birthright.

However, for many people in our society, unemployment + benefit cuts + higher utility and food bills = deep debt. Financial journalists report indignantly on the 'payday loans' to which many vulnerable people now resort. Shamefully unregulated, with uncapped interest rates, these schemes produce a kind of debt slavery, as repayments spiral out of control. Options for survival become increasingly limited, as they did for the Egyptians whose money had gone in the struggle to survive (47:15-16).

The idea of Joseph gradually taking all the Egyptians' possessions – first their money (47:15), next their livestock (47:17), then their land, and finally even themselves (47:20-21) – in exchange for grain seems harsh and cruel. Why did Joseph not have mercy on the people and give them the grain as charity? Where were CERB, EI, CPP, and the GIS back then?

Can we fairly compare Joseph to the loan sharks benefiting from today's dire economic climate to maximise profits? Genesis 47 doesn't evaluate Joseph's actions one way or another. Scholars are sharply divided. Some argue he was just doing what anyone else might in similar circumstances. Others find his attitude overly opportunistic – the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Joseph apparently exempted his own people from these harsh measures, which seems dastardly (47:27). Some Jewish scribes seem to have been so embarrassed by Joseph's behaviour they amended 47:21 to be less severe.

Like all of us, Joseph is complicated. He certainly has his moments of virtue. He also has his moments when he seems harsh: toying with his brothers' emotions, testing them, and reducing the Egyptians to servitude. Throughout the Old Testament (and the New), God has compassion for the poor and commands his people to care for them (see also Deuteronomy 15, Proverbs 31:9, Amos 8):

- *"Give justice to the poor and the orphan; uphold the rights of the oppressed and the destitute. Rescue the poor and helpless; deliver them from the grasp of evil people." (Psalm 82:3-4)*
- *"Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker, but helping the poor honors him." (Proverbs 14:31)*
- *"Those who mock the poor insult their Maker; those who rejoice at the misfortune of others will be*

punished.”(Proverbs 17:5)

- *“If you help the poor, you are lending to the Lord – and he will repay you!”(Proverbs 19:7)*
- *“The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is upon me, for the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to comfort the broken-hearted and to proclaim that captives will be released, and prisoners will be freed.”(Isaiah 61:1)*

How can we provide practical help to those who are struggling most in our communities?

*For a few moments, I think of God's veiled presence in all things:
in the elements, giving them existence;
in plants, giving them life; in animals, giving them sensation;
and finally, in me,
giving me all this and more, making me a temple, a dwelling-place of the Spirit.
If God were trying to tell me something, would I know?
If God were reassuring me or challenging me, would I notice?
I ask for the grace to be free of my own preoccupations and open to what God may be saying to me.
Lord, grant me the grace to be free from the excesses of this life.
Let me not get caught up with the desire for wealth.
Keep my heart and mind free to love and serve you.
Amen*

Monday, August 31: Genesis 48

You're a good person. I'm a good person. No wonder God loves us. We deserve it. We should be blessed. It's only fair that people get what they deserve, right? And yet it doesn't always work that way.

What is with Abraham's family??? The familiar pattern is repeated: the second born, Ephraim, is blessed as if he were the firstborn. It is eerily reminiscent of Isaac being chosen over Ishmael and Jacob over Esau. There is no logic to this choice: Ephraim is not described as being more godly, noble, or worthy than Manasseh. It is simply an act of grace – unmerited, undeserved favour – that chooses Ephraim.

“What does this mean for us?” asks professor Tremper Longman. As we think about our own 'status' before God, we have to recognize that there is nothing in us that led to God's choice. We not smarter, bigger, more spiritually sensitive, stronger than others. We can only thank God.

“For this reason, there is no boasting. As Paul reminds us, 'For 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 [or in the case of Jacob or Ephraim – by birth order], so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.' (Ephesians 2:8-10).”

We have new life in Jesus by His grace, not because we have earned it. What is God saying to you?

*Help us, O Lord, to know you, and love you, and rejoice in you.
Even though we know we cannot do these perfectly in this life,
let us, at least, grow closer to you every day,
till we come to know, love, and rejoice in you in perfection, in heaven.
May our knowledge of you increase in us, day by day.
May our love for you grow every day more and more.
May our joy become greater and fuller as we live in your presence each day.
May the gifts of grace you give us fill us so that our joy may be full.
To you, O Lord, be the honor and glory,
who with the Father and Holy Spirit lives and reigns,
one God, world without end. Amen*

Augustine (354-430)

Tuesday, September 1: Genesis 49:1-28

How would you feel if you were one of Jacob's sons? As the boys gather around his deathbed, he blesses and prophesies over them. It's something of a mixed bag: Judah and Joseph are the recipients of wonderful words (49:8–12, 22–26) and are promised prosperous futures.

The futures of Zebulun, Dan, Asher, Naphtali and Benjamin aren't too bad. But the other five? Not so good. These are not exactly the words I'd like to hear from my dying father.

The prophecies for Reuben, Simeon and Levi are shaped by the sins of their past. Reuben slept with one of his father's wives, Bilhah (35:22), and Simeon and Levi avenged the rape of their sister Dinah in unnecessarily vicious fashion (Genesis 34). They have to pay for their sins through their futures and the futures of their families.

Their blessings are passed to Judah (49:8), even though his past (with Tamar, Genesis 38) is far from pure. The difference between the sons appears to be their repentance when confronted with their sins. Simeon and Levi try to excuse and justify their evil actions (34:31). They blame others. Judah repents (38:26).

Our past affects our future, but we also see that repentance washes away our sins. Elsewhere in the Bible we also see that prophecies can be reversed through repentance – Jonah warned the people of Nineveh of its destruction, but their repentance changed God's heart (Jonah 3-4). Repentance matters.

In 1 John 1:8-9, we read, *"If we claim we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and not living in the truth. But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness."* Our past does not need to define our present and our future.

What might you need to pray to God about?

*At this instant, as I come to prayer, God is present waiting for me.
God always arrives before me, desiring to connect with me even more than my most intimate friend.
I take a moment and greet my loving God.
I ask for the grace to let go of my own concerns and be open to what God is asking of me,
to let myself be guided and formed by my loving Creator.
How do I find myself today?
Where am I with God?
With others?
Do I have something to be grateful for? Then I give thanks.
Is there something I am sorry for? Then I ask forgiveness.
Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,
As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end.
Amen.*

Wednesday, September 2: Genesis 49:29-50:14

George Santayana quips, *"There is no cure for birth and death so relax and enjoy the interval."*

As people of faith, with hope in the resurrection of Jesus and the certain assurance of our own personal resurrections, we KNOW there actually is a cure for death. Through faith in Jesus, we have the promise of eternal life with God (John 3:16).

For people of faith, death always comes with a mixture of emotions. On the one hand, death is always offensive and upsetting: it was never God's plan for us in the beginning. We should be angry, indignant, and upset by the death of a loved one.

On the other hand, we know that death is only the transition from one form of existence to a better one. When we die we are "with the Lord." Our suffering and pain is ended. We are set free from the infirmities and limitations of these less-than-perfect bodies. So when a loved one dies, we can feel relief and even joy: their struggles are over and they are with Jesus.

We also know that one day, someday, we shall be reunited with our loved ones. The New Testament makes it clear that we will be resurrected with recognizable physical bodies (1 Corinthians 15).

Though there is no theology of resurrection in Genesis, this ambiguity of emotions is apparent as Joseph, his brothers, and the Egyptian officials deal with Jacob's death and honour his last wishes, burying him in Canaan. Everyone mourned Jacob's passing. Grief is a legitimate, human emotion. It is right and good to mourn for those we love who die. Traditional cultures had specific periods of time set aside for grief.

But then we also get on with life. We can be thankful for and celebrate a life. It is good to give thanks. But then, in traditional cultures, there is an end to the time of mourning. And so, as Joseph and the others, return to Egypt, there is closure. They will always remember Jacob, but life continues.

Paul writes, "*O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? For sin is the sting that results in death, and the law gives sin its power. But thank God! He gives us victory over sin and death through our Lord Jesus Christ. So, my dear brothers and sisters, be strong and immovable. Always work enthusiastically for the Lord, for you know that nothing you do for the Lord is ever useless.*" (1 Corinthians 15:55-58).

Even in the presence of death, be strong and immovable. And, work enthusiastically for the Lord ...

*Dear Lord, as I come to you today
fill my heart and my whole being with the wonder of Your presence.
It is so easy to get caught up with the trappings of wealth in this life.
Grant, O Lord, that I may be free from greed and selfishness.
Remind me that the best things in life are free:
love, laughter, caring and sharing.
In Your loving presence I unwind the past day,
starting from now and looking back, moment by moment.
I gather in all the goodness and light, in gratitude.
I attend to the shadows and what they say to me,
seeking healing, courage, forgiveness.
Conversation requires talking and listening.
As I talk to Jesus may I also learn to be still and listen.
I can be totally honest with Jesus as I tell Him of my worries and my cares.
I will open up my heart to Him as I tell Him of my fears and my doubts.
I will ask Him to help me to place myself fully in His care, to abandon myself to Him,
knowing that He always wants what is best for me.
Amen*

Thursday, September 3: Genesis 50:15-26

An apt summary of Joseph's life – perhaps even his epitaph – might be Genesis 50:20: "*You intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good. He brought me to this position so I could save the lives of many people.*" Joseph has been a blessing to his family and to the entire nation of Egypt.

At the end of Joseph's life, he could plainly see the providence of God's guidance, protection, and provision, even using other people's evil schemes to bring blessings into being for himself and for others. Not even the despicable actions of his brothers, Potiphar's wife, or the cup bearer could prevent God from bringing Joseph to the place where he can save both his people and the Egyptians.

Thinking about of Joseph, we can hold on to the promise of Romans 8:28, *"We know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them."* God does NOT cause everything to happen. He can cause good to come from the (sometimes tragic) things that do happen. It may take days, months, years, or even decades to appreciate how that promise plays out. We may not even appreciate it in our own lifetimes. Like the artist whose paintings are never appreciated until after his death, we may never know the influence we have on other people this side of eternity. But, in the long run, we have incredible influence.

Note: Joseph didn't FEEL good about being sold into slavery, thrown in prison, or forgotten by a friend. It's not about "feelings." However, God is his constant companion, comforter, and source of strength. God never leaves him. We may not FEEL good about our circumstances either. But God is always with us.

Ultimately, Joseph dies in the full confidence that God has kept and will keep all his promises.

Back in June we preached through 1 Thessalonians. Paul concludes his letter to the believers in Thessalonica – a rough, tough place to follow Jesus (remember Paul was kicked out by a mob after only 3 weeks), *"Now may the God of peace make you holy in every way, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless until our Lord Jesus Christ comes again. God will make this happen, for he who calls you is faithful ... May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you."* (5:23-28). God is faithful. Praise Him.

"The world is charged with the grandeur of God" (Gerard Manley Hopkins).

*I dwell for a moment on the presence of God around me,
in every part of my body, and deep within my being.*

I will take refuge in your loving heart.

You are my strength in times of weakness.

You are my comforter in times of sorrow.

Lord God I thank you for the gift of freedom.

Help me to use this gift with integrity.

I am free to make choices.

Help me to choose to follow you, to live in a Christian way by caring for others.

*Remind me to consider always those less fortunate than myself, the oppressed, the prisoner,
those who are not free to worship in public.*

Guide me always to seek your holy will in all the events of my life.

Amen

Friday, September 4: Romans 8:18-30

In the light of Genesis, it's interesting to reflect on Paul's teaching in Romans 8.

- We understand why and how all of creation is "groaning" (8:22) because of human sinfulness, from Adam and Eve, through Cain, the days of Noah, the struggles of Abraham, Jacob, Jacob's sons ...
- Like everyone from Adam and Eve on, we groan, too, longing for relief from sin and suffering (8:23).
- Like everyone in Genesis, we look to the future with hope, for deliverance from the evils of sin and death. We yearn to know God in a deep, personal, transformative way.
- As we reflect on the Genesis stories, we see how *"God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them"* (8:28).

We are not the "firstborn" – a technical term for the one who has a special place in the father's love, used to denote the Messiah (Psalm 89:27, Colossians 1:15-18). But we are still His chosen people, His sons and daughters, who come into the Promised Land of eternal life with Jesus now, and forever. God loves each of us. He has a place in His kingdom for each of us.

We are all God's beloved children, made right with God through the love and sacrifice of Jesus. The "issues" of Genesis are all resolved, thanks to the grace of God, the death and resurrection of Jesus, and the ongoing

presence and power of the Holy Spirit. Read prayerfully through this passage.

How is this passage a wonderful answer to the problems highlighted in Genesis?

What is God saying to you?

*Make us glad, Lord God, in speaking boldly of your mercies;
help us rejoice, O Lord, in adoring your Holiness;
and may our chief joy be to glorify and proclaim your holy Name.
Almighty, everlasting God, dwelling in love and power in our souls,
bring people to your light through us,
make yourself known to the world in us,
that all might know the true Light, the bright and morning Star.
We pray that you would fill the world with your glory
and show yourself by the radiance of your light to all nations.
To you be the glory forever and ever.
Amen*

Gregorian Sacramentary (c.593)

Saturday, September 5: Romans 8:31-39

C.S. Lewis writes, "I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else." His point is that, because of faith in Jesus, we see reality more clearly:

- Having faith Jesus helps us know that the world is not meaningless, chaotic, or pointless. Sometimes the world may look confusing, fuzzy and out of focus. We need the lens of faith to bring it in to focus. Through Jesus, we can see thing the big picture more clearly: right and wrong, good and evil, true and untrue, as the Holy Spirit teaches us through His Word.
- Jesus also helps us see our own lives clearly as part of that bigger reality. Each of us is a precious, important part of the big picture of kingdom of God. As individuals, our lives matter. The kingdom of God would not be complete without you.
- Jesus helps us see that we have a role in His kingdom. A few days ago, we read from 1 Corinthians 15:58: *Always work enthusiastically for the Lord, for you know that nothing you do for the Lord is ever useless.*"

You are God's beloved precious child. Romans 8 helps us appreciate His care and His love for us. The practical implication, then, is that our lives matter: *"For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do"*(Ephesians 2:10).

Read prayerfully through this passage.

- What phrases(s) mean the most to you today?
- What difference can the truths outlined in this passage make in your life today?
- What is the Spirit saying to you, today?

*Open my heart, O Lord, and enlighten me by the grace of your Holy Spirit,
that I may seek what is well pleasing to your will;
help me to order my doings after your commandments that I may live a life that pleases you.
May God the Father bless us.
May Christ the Son take care of us.
May the Holy Spirit and enlighten us all the days of our life.
The Lord be our defender and keeper of body and soul
both now and forever and to the ages of ages.
Amen*

Bede (672-735)

Sunday, September 6: Psalm 121

One of the beauties of poetry is that two people can read the same poem and identify with the writer's sentiments very differently. When some people read Psalm 121:1, they see the mountains as a source of danger. So when they lift up their eyes to the hills – and perhaps contemplate a journey through them – they wonder who will protect them from thieves, violent weather, rockslides, and wild animals. When others of us read this poem, we see it differently. For me, when I think of lifting up my eyes to the hills, I think of looking for strength and assurance. For me, mountains are symbols of rock-solid constancy and security. As I look at mountains, I see things that are solid, immovable, and a safe refuge.

Living in southern Alberta, I still identify with the positive side of mountains. When I look west and see the Rockies rising dramatically from the plains, I find comfort in the hills. More and more I appreciate the beauty of the Prairies, but I still find the sight of the mountains to be awe-inspiring and reassuring that despite Covid-19 and chaos, politics and economics, some things are immovable and rock solid.

From my perspective, then, when I read, "*I lift my eyes to the hills ...*" I find that phrase, a profound statement. I can get so wrapped up in my own circumstances, so focused on my own problems, so embedded in my own issues that I cannot see beyond the dust right at my feet. When I face challenges in life, one of the things I need to do is lift up my eyes, to look for hope in the mountains ...

I find that when I spend my time looking down – at my own feet – I get a limited view of reality. I see the potholes. I see the roots I can trip over. I move forward step by step along the path, with no idea of where the trail is leading. But I lack a broader sense of vision. When I do look up, my perspective changes. The world is bigger than my problems. It is good to lift up my eyes, take a look around, and see where I'm going. This helps me keep things in perspective.

Lifting up my eyes also encourages me to look around. On the one hand, this means "*taking time to smell the roses.*" It is good to look beyond the potholes to see the beauty around me ... to enjoy a child's laughter, a walk along the river, a cup of really good coffee. On the other hand, looking around also helps us see there are others who need our help. We can make a difference in the world.

But the mountains are not enough. Despite their apparent strength, I know that they are not as solid as they seem to be. As a geographer, I know processes of weathering and erosion are slowly, but relentlessly, wearing down the mountains. Occasionally cataclysmic events, from floods to earthquakes, can radically reshape the physical landscape. I need something more than the mountains. Simply having a broader perspective – and simply seeing the needs of others around me – is not enough.

Ultimately, "*My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth.*" Beyond the mountains is the One who created the mountains. The eternal One. God. He is the source of life. He is the one who is truly rock-solid, immovable, and a safe refuge.

The psalmist has seen the faithfulness of God, year-in year-out. He knows, from the diverse experiences and challenges of life, that faith does work. He knows, as one who has walked through difficult times, that God will not let His child's foot slip (note, this does not mean that God protects us from those tough situations ... the testimony of experience is that problems come, but God gets us through them). He knows, as one who has faced 7-day a week, 24-hour stress (perhaps a chronic health problem) that God's watch-care for us is constant ... He does not slumber nor sleep. For those of us who struggle to sleep, isn't it encouraging that when we're awake at 3 a.m., the Lord is there with us?

Are you asking, "*Where does my help come from?*" Answer: from God. Read Scripture. And talk with people who have been there. God will speak to you. It may not be "dramatic;" it will be real. It will be powerful. It will provide the encouragement and comfort you need.

If life is going well – keep your eyes up. Look to the Lord. And see those around you who are struggling. Can you come alongside? Can you say, from your own experience, "*The Lord will watch over you ...*" People need to hear ***your*** story. You will make a difference in the life of someone else.

*Thank you, Lord, for being there for me
and allowing me to cry out to you in my times of need.
It is amazing to me that the Lord of the Universe
would take time to listen to me and to care about what I say.
God, there are things happening around me right now that I do not understand.
Some of these things make me feel weak, helpless and afraid.
Even in the midst of this, I know that you are the Lord.
I know that the situation is in Your hand, and I trust You.
I beg you for strength and for wisdom that I would be able to endure this situation
and be able to handle it in a way that would bring glory to Your name.
In Jesus name.
Amen.*

Unknown