

Best laid plans

July 2020 (5 July - 1 August)



Sometimes things don't go to plan. As Robert Burns, Scotland's national bard, says in his poem *To a Mouse* "The best laid schemes o' Mice an' Men / Gang aft agley" [*thanks to Edward Steel for illustrating this incredible theme image above*]. The line comes after the narrator has stumbled across a wee timorous beastie with his plough. The ploughman didn't plan to engage in rodent demolition and the furry critter certainly wasn't expecting it.

Sometimes we are the mouse — with home and life and gravity turned suddenly upside down.

Sometimes we are the plough — blundering in, oblivious, confused.

And sometimes we are the poet — looking on, feeling keenly and kindly.

This month we are going to consider what happens when things don't go to plan. When there's a sudden departure that turns a humdrum chapter into a crucial plot point. Sometimes we plan for excitement and adventure and find instead we are faced with tedium and frustration. Sometimes we plan for happiness and wonder and instead come across devastation and loss. And sometimes we plan for disappointment, loneliness and despair and instead find joy and blessing and delight.

Through it all we hold on to the fact that plan or no plan, mouse or man — our God loves us and travels with us through all the twists and turns — promising hope and restoration and beauty and justice and mercy.

Each week of the theme runs Sunday-Saturday and has its own subtheme, which contains daily Bible readings and thought triggers.

Swings and roundabouts (5 July)

This first week we are thinking about the plans and canceled plans of love, romance and the wider relationships that make up our lives. Loving one another is often joyful and thrilling but it can also be wearying and frustrating. Our relationships, both romantic and platonic, take hard work and an open mind. Sometimes a co-worker becomes a husband and sometimes a romantic relationship has to end so that it can grow into a friendship. When we find ourselves exhausted and over extended, vulnerable and battered, overdrawn and over-hurt we can always come to Jesus whose yoke is light, and we will be granted rest.

- 1. Genesis 24: 7-8, 57-67**
 - 1. She said yes!** In this story you could argue that Rebekah is the one with the agency. Despite the fact they lived in a majorly patriarchal society the men are fairly passive. Isaac does nothing more than happen to be walking in a field. Abraham sets pretty vague instructions. The servant's plan isn't exactly watertight either, leaving it all to fate. It's Rebekah that goes over — sees what's what and decides to see where the next chapter goes. She didn't plan to get married when she spoke to the stranger at the well...
- 2. Psalm 45: 10-17**
 - 2. Romance as a liminal place.** A transitional time where identity is in flux.
- 3. Song of Solomon 2: 8-13**
 - 3. Romance as disruption.** We can sitting minding our own business when suddenly our beloved swans in with a harebrained scheme...
- 4. Zechariah 9: 9-12**
 - 4. A warhorse or a chariot is no match for this donkey!** In our romantic and platonic relationships we are often blinded by status and prestige when we should be looking elsewhere.
- 5. Psalm 145:8-14**
 - 5. When everything is whirling and birling** we can turn to our gracious compassionate God.
- 6. Matthew 11: 16-19**
 - 6. Hypocrisy, double standards, name calling; damned if you — damned if you don't.** Sometime it doesn't matter what you do — others will find a way to judge you.
- 7. Matthew 11: 28-30**
 - 7. Come to me all who are weary and heavy laden.** When the yoke and burden of our relationships weigh down on us we can turn to one who is humble in heart.

Traps and escapes (12 July)

There are many ways we can feel trapped. Sometimes others try to ensnare us, sometimes we are held captive by our health, sometimes the claustrophobia of our circumstances will stifle us. Our lives don't always go to plan but we follow a God who is good at escape routes, daring rescues, and surviving captivity.

1. Genesis 25:
19-34

1. **Family conflict.** Sometimes it is our own family members who know best how to trap us, push our buttons and play on our weaknesses.

2. Psalm
119:105-112

2. **A lamp to my feet.** Inclining our hearts towards God as a way through traps and snares.

3. Isaiah 55:
10-13

3. **Out of thorn and briar.** God's words doesn't return empty; in the midst of prickliness is the promise of the clapping boughs of trees.

4. Psalm 65: (v8 especially)

4. **Holding on to the gateways of the morning through the long night.** Night can be a place that traps us but with God's grace we can shout for joy in the evening.

5. Romans 8:
1-11

5. **Not trapped by the limitations of the flesh but given the possibilities of the Spirit.** Our bodies aren't bad in and of themselves but they can sometimes feel like oppressive or claustrophobic places to be... Thankfully through the Spirit who dwells in us we are not limited by these physical frames.

6. 1 Timothy 6:
6-10

6. **The Money Trap.** Our desire for evermore 'financial security' can actually compromise our safety and sense of self.

7. Acts 9: 20-31

7. **Who is this basket case?** A daring escape with a basket and Paul is on the road but he's still in danger as folks are worried he's a double agent. We can learn two things here about God's escape plans: 1 they don't always involve respite, sometimes you're just thrown on to the next stage of the adventure. 2: sometimes they feature giant baskets being lowered out of buildings! #WhoKnew

Snakes and ladders... (19 July)

A colour coded bullet pointed list, a carefully mapped out trajectory with diagrams, a 3-5-10 year plan with a mind map on A1 paper is no match for the sudden uplifts and precipitous drops of everyday life. Like the perennial family board game Snakes and Ladders, life is full of headlong head rushes of highs and hurtful helterskelers into heaps. Our God is not only a God of the ascent, our God is with us on every rung of the ladder. Even if the ladder is pulverised into a pile of splinters — God is next to us with a hammer and nail to get started again.

1. Genesis 28: 10-19 1. **A very tall ladder...** Two-way celestial traffic — to and from heaven. Coming across an unexpected 'thin place' on our travels.
2. Psalm 139: 1-12 2. **From the highest rung to lowest depths.** Whether we are sliding down a snake or climbing a ladder — God is there.
3. Isaiah 44: 6-8 3. **First and last.** The only game in town.
4. Romans 8: 12-25 4. **Hope that is seen is not hope.** Sometimes when we are really low it is hard to see a way out, but fortunately being able to see a way out is not a prerequisite of hope!
5. Matthew 13: 24-30, (36-43) 5. **Being ladders and not snakes...** helping others to grow upwards and not choking and constricting them.
6. Isaiah 40: 9 6. **Sometimes in a metaphorical sense you just got get you up a high mountain!** Lifting up our voices.
7. Exodus 7: 8-13 7. **A twist in the tail...** Not all snakes are what they seem...

Finding God amongst it all (26 July)

How do we keep an eye out for God amongst the ashes, the rubble, the fragments of what we hoped was to be and now we must lament that it cannot come to pass? How do we listen out for God amongst the cries, the splinters, the explosions of the things that fall apart? How can we feel God through the coldness, the pressure and the pain? It is not always easy. But even when we can't quite believe it — we can remember that we follow a God that through Jesus knows human suffering, knows what it is to grieve, to feel lonely, to feel agony. And we are never abandoned. It is our God who guides us to find beauty in the midst of the ashes, and cries, and cold. Who works with us through the rubble, the splinters, and the rising pressure, to build again; who can take the fragments and the explosions and the pain and transform them into a new tomorrow.

1. Genesis 29:15-28

2. Psalm 105: 1-6

3. Psalm 128

4. 1 Kings 3: 5-12

5. Psalm 119: 129-136

6. Romans 8: 26-32

7. Romans 8:33-39

- 1. How can this polygamous work-for-wives scheme speak to us today?** We're told Leah has lovely eyes. Rather than look at Jacob as the protagonist of this story — let's think of her as the central figure. Imagine spending seven years married to a man who is in love with your sister. Let's take the opportunity to remember the women that are heartlessly dealt with by men. Leah's life doesn't go to plan but she is nonetheless a strong woman who plays an important role in a pivotal family.
- 2. Seeking God continually.** Remembering wonderful works.
- 3. What if you fear the Lord and walk in his ways and yet your life doesn't look like Psalm 128?** Reconciling this psalm to the complexity of life.
- 4. Wisdom is more use than wealth.** Alternative coping strategies.
- 5. Considering the shining face of God.** A face that brings light, warmth and blessing into darkness, loneliness and fear.
- 6. When there are no words...** The Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.
- 7. Nothing. Can. Separate. Us. From. The. Love. Of. God. Period.** God is always there.