

Reconciled by Grace

August 2020 (2-29 August)



This month we are going to do a bit of family introspection. During lockdown some very interesting stories have appeared on the internet about how families have coped with the pressure of being together in a small space for such an extended period of time. At the other end of the scale there are those who belong to extended families who have had to live through isolation shielding themselves because of their underlying illness. All the tensions associated with loving, caring, providing, supporting, listening has meant that there has been a knitting together of some relationships while other have been like the knitting that has been ripped apart.

It would appear that lawyers specialising in family issues have been reporting an increase in divorce requests, while others such as care organisations have been highlighting the issue of domestic abuse. Children and teenagers have also been separated out as vulnerable groups having to deal with issues that may affect them for many years to come.

Only the naive believe people of faith are immune from family struggles. A cursory glance at the Bible will soon make you aware of flawed and broken individuals. Many of them had to face up to the results of their behaviour and the behaviour of others and in doing so live through the consequences.

This month we are going back in time to a number of key family stories found in the Hebrew Scriptures and from these stories we hope to glean insight into the nature of God and how God deals with flaws and failings as an example or a blueprint for us all to follow.

- In week 1 we will recap on the life of Jacob and see how jealousy and rivalry between brothers ended up in a lifetime of estrangement and deception that finally is brought to a resolution when Jacob is forced to wrestle with his conscience before finding some kind of closure. Yet even then it is a closure that left him with a limp. We learn even the best outcomes leave their mark.
- In week 2 we learn how Jacob's son Joseph, the one who has been wronged, ends up becoming the grace giver, bringing reconciliation to a troubled family. We are invited to consider the role we might play in being peacemaker within a wider context of family.
- In week 3 we delve further into the biblical theology of grace and we explore the feeling and movement of grace in the heart of the individual.
- In week 4 we return to look again at our family histories and seek to uncover the promises of God which have been passed down through the generations. We also look to the new work of Christ in the individual bringing us into a new family the one and the many in Christ.

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

Restless God talk leads to a restful mind (2 August)

During week 1 we explore passages of scripture that help us to engage with the inner struggles of our hearts as we strive to live at peace with family, neighbours and friends. Jacob wrestling with God offers us an insight into the cost of our own discipleship asking us to reflect on our own times of wrestling. Seldom do we want to surrender all to God.

Take time to reflect on the entirety of the week's readings. The seven prayers and reflections should seek to explore how our personal feelings can be changed as we gain greater knowledge of God. Knowledge of God is not something we strive to win. God has revealed himself to us finally in Jesus. Yet there is a wrestling and a restlessness that takes hold of our souls until we find ourselves at peace with God.

- 1. Genesis 32: 22-31**
 - 1. After the long struggle: the limping — but the sun rises again.** Explore what might have been going through Jacob's mind as he prepared to return home after many years. How had his heart changed? And what of his brother?
- 2. Psalm 17: 1-7,15**
 - 2. An honest conversation with the Almighty.** This psalm explores a kind of innocence and integrity. We realise that we are not perfect, but sometimes we need to tell God we have tried our very best.
- 3. Isaiah 55: 1-5**
 - 3. God's free offer of beating the blues.** This reading opens up a rich theme. God is so generous even when we don't deserve his generosity and we have nothing inborn to offer.
- 4. Psalm 145: 8-9, 14-21**
 - 4. Nothing can overwhelm you forever.** The more we find out about God the more we discover he already knows about us. This is an opportunity to talk about God's provision for our lives.
- 5. Romans 9: 1-5**
 - 5. When others can't see.** When we see the truth of a situation it can cause us as individuals great hurt and anxiety but we can't live another's life
- 6. Matthew 14: 13-21**
 - 6. Put your gift in the right hands.** Compassion begins by seeing the need and giving what you have. This is a personal challenge to offer our five loaves and two fish and see what happens when placed into the hands of God.
- 7. 1 Peter 5: 6-11**
 - 7. Talk to God, he wants to hear about your struggles.** Jesus reminds us that God is a loving father who wants the best for us. We must never be afraid to share with God in prayer the burdens of life we carry. Jesus reminds us to bring our trouble to him: Come unto me all you who are overburdened...

It's our families that cause the most pain (9 August)

Using the story of Joseph (Jacob's youngest son) as our key resource text — our prayers and reflections will centre around the human condition that highlights the destructive forces and feelings found in families often amidst selfless acts of love and devotion.

1. Genesis 37:
1-4,12-28

2. Psalm
105:1-6,16-2
2,45b

3. 1 Kings 19:
9-18

4. Psalm 85:
8-13

5. Romans 10:
5-15

6. Matthew
24: 22-32

7. Revelation
21: 1-5

1. **Was Jacob's gift a coat of many problems?** An opportunity to explore sibling rivalry and blended families.
2. **It's God who turns a coat of many problems into a coat of many colours.** Explore the idea that in God's hands the problems and difficulties of a life time can be shaped into an amazing techno coloured life jacket.
3. **Be careful, don't judge without the big picture.** In our interaction with others we can become self obsessed; Elijah thought he was the only faithful servant of God. In families we can misjudge the motives and workload of another.
4. **God can restore families even after a huge fall out.** It's not wishful thinking to long for peace and reconciliation among our families.
5. **Never be afraid to share your hopes and dreams.** If God can set things right between us as individuals — will he make us look silly if we believe he can set things right within our families?
6. **The unexpected presence.** When the wind is against you and your family — Jesus comes walking on the stormy water.
7. **God is the God of new beginning.** Nothing will stay the same for ever. When we grasp this it changes the way we look at life and each other. Family circumstances can change.

Healing a family rift — Reconciled by Grace (16 August)

Using the story of Joseph's reconciliation with his family we can explore personal family reconciliations and even consider practical suggestions as to how to set up meetings that will bring about positive outcomes. We also use this week to remind ourselves that God has reconciled us to himself through our brother Jesus. Jesus came into our world to be the mediator to bring our hearts back to God.

1. Genesis 45: 1-15

2. Psalm 133

3. Isaiah 56: 1, 6-8

4. Psalm 67

5. Romans 11: 1-2a, 29-32

6. Matthew 15: 10-20

7. Matthew 15: 21-28

1. **A great family reconciliation.** Love overwhelms the peacemaker. Peacemaking is a costly and yet joyous experience. It is also for some a very painful and costly thing to do.
2. **The reward of harmony.** The sheer delight peace and unity brings is beyond words. Hence it's worth striving to believe it can happen. Faith can move mountains and love and move the hardest of hearts.
3. **A Blended Blessing.** There can be great joy and depth experienced through blended families. Making room for those who have been brought into our families is all about extending the blessing.
4. **Peace has to be worked at.** If God accepts us and reconciles us into his family so we must be reconciled to our families and seek the peace.
5. **Leave the door open.** If God as a father refuses to reject even the most rebellious of his children, so then we too must leave space for the rebellious to return, more than that we should leave space expecting them to return.
6. **Empty promises.** This is an important passage to help us realise that we all know the difference between empty rituals and offers that really ring hollow in our ears. When we seek to be reconciled to each other there is nothing quite like speaking from the heart. If we speak from our heart words of reconciliation and forgiveness they have great power. Just as words spoken out of hatred can hurt so our words of reconciliation can bring about healing.
7. **Crumbs for the table.** This could be a difficult passage for it might seem racist when Jesus appears to liken the Canaanites to dogs. However if you look at the context more closely Jesus is all about including the woman. He breaks from despising her race to offering the woman hope and pointing out to the disciples that it is faith that changes everything. When dealing with our family circumstances. faith can move the most despicable of mountains and change hearts.

Healing and re-shaping the family history (23 August)

This week our resource story starts with a lost memory. How easy it is for a new generation to arise and forget what has gone before. Exodus 1: 8 summarises this idea: "Now a king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph." Joseph had been the Hebrew hero who had saved the nation from bankruptcy and famine. But that was now in the distant past. How often in our families, organisations and churches is it true that what was achieved at great cost is forgotten? A new power base grows up with a different agenda completely ignorant of the struggles and blessings that have shaped their heritage. In some situations past injustices can lead to further violence mistrust and hurt as the lessons of the past are forgotten and the same mistakes begin to be repeated. Remembering our spiritual identity and our Baptism is also an essential memory. This week we delve into the past in order to be relevant in the present and productive in the future.

1. Exodus 1:8-2:10 (and Psalm 124)

1. **The importance of sharing good stories in families.**

Remembering who we are, where we have come from and the stories of faith and hope — these are all important in helping us get through times of difficulty and struggle in our family lives. Sharing the promises of God with our children are essential in times of great stress and anxiety. Families can be a great support and encouragement to each other. The monuments of the past are essential to help shape the movements of the future. Sometimes the monuments of the past of course have to be reshaped to bring healing and forgiveness in order that the movement of the future is healthy and just.

2. Isaiah 51: 1-6

3. Psalm 138

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2. Look to the rock. This is an amazing word of encouragement. It is encouraging God's people to tell their stories of faith and hope and deliverance. In telling these stories we gain strength and faith and hope for the future. Above all as Christians we look to Jesus who is our shaper. He is both the rock and the master builder rolled into one. He cuts us out and shapes us. We are not stones or pieces of rock without a home or without a mason's chisel mark. This passage reminds us that we have a place to belong.

3. We are a signed portrait. This psalm is a great prayer that can be said in times of troubled fear. It recommends that we give something to God: that we give our praise. It suggests we bow down low but hold tightly to his promises of faithfulness and love. It reminds us that God listens to the humble heart. God will never forsake the work of his hands.

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Healing and re shaping the family history (23 August)

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4. Romans 12: 1-8

5. Matthew 16: 13-20

6. Galatians 2: 20-21

7. Ephesians 4: 1-5

4. **Our shared identity and history.** Here now is amazing teaching about our personal identities. When we have been born again of the Spirit we take on a new identity. We are no longer individuals instead we become part of a much larger body. A body that reflects the life of Jesus. Collectively as Christians we are Jesus in the world today. Individually we are members of each other. In other words our actions and activities have an impact on our Christian brothers and sisters. We can be a source of encouragement or a great source of worry and anxiety to others. We have a shared spiritual history.
5. **Our future hope.** Here we come full circle. We started off this series thinking about how our individual identities and personalities can contribute to the make up or break up of family life. Knowing who we are is vital, it contributes to our mental health which in turn affects how we relate to others. Jesus wanted his disciples to know who he was so that they could come to know who they were. Knowing who he is enables us to know who we will become.
6. **It's not enough to carry the cross.** Knowing who we are in Christ is essential. To be crucified with Jesus is to realise that our old self-centred life has gone. His death becomes our death but his resurrection is our new beginning. The new life we experience is born out of the love of Christ for us. So it's not enough to carry the cross — 'self' need to die on the cross in order to be born again into our new identity.
7. **The Premium Bond we all must own.** As we leave this theme what an amazing passage of scripture to reflect upon. What will it mean for each of us to be eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace?