UPC Family Devotional

October – Week 1

Memory Verse of the Week:

“So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, “It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared.”

-Genesis 32:30

Oct 10 Monday Genesis 32:21-24

As Jacob sends his family and herds ahead of them, he is left alone and encounters God in the form of a man. The physical struggle that ensues portrays for us what it means to come before the Lord and ardent prayer. At various times in our lives, we will encounter situations that require more than a quick one-sentence prayer whispered under our breath. When insurmountable challenges lay ahead of us, we, like Jacob, must be willing to enter into times of intense prayer as we pour out our hearts to God and press in until we hear His response. We will find that the LORD is more than willing to engage with us if we make the effort to engage with Him.

When have you entered into a season of intense prayer? In what ways did you encounter God during that season?

God finally brings an end to this long struggle with Jacob by dislocating his hip, no doubt causing him to helplessly clutch onto God, refusing to let go until He blesses him. God responds by changing Jacob’s name to Israel - one who wrestled with God and prevailed. Through this dramatic encounter we learn a precious spiritual truth: the best possible outcome in our prayers is when we find ourselves helplessly dependent on God and desiring His blessing above all else. If you are feeling distant from God and stagnant in your faith, pursue Him in prayer and persevere until He gives you a fresh revelation of how much you need Him.

What stops you from living in complete dependence on God? How can you express your deep need for Him today?

Oct 11 Tuesday Genesis 33:1-11

Having entrusted all things into God's hands, Jacob carefully proceeds to meet Esau face to face and bow seven times to the ground in an act of humble and contrite reverence before his elder brother. In our broken world, powerful people thrive on making a show of their dominance and refusing to back down to their opponents. Imagine how much conflict and loss could be avoided if people would simply admit to their wrongdoings and show some humility toward the people they have harmed! As children of the Almighty God, we can confidently lay down our pride and humble ourselves before others because we know that the Lord will lift us up in due time.

When have you had to humble yourself before another person? How can practicing humility improve your relationships that are tense and hostile?

Jacob finally receives the divine favor he has been waiting for Esau’s surprising response. Esau kisses and embraces Jacob and displays an emotive desire to be acquainted with his family. Though Esau initially refuses Jacob generous gifts, Jacob’s joy and relief makes him insist on the offering, for the goodness of God has overflowed into his life. In this beautiful reunion we see that throughout the many years the brothers had been apart, God was powerfully at work in life, blessing him and dissolving his bitterness toward Jacob. Today, God is surely working in the same way in the lives of those we consider our enemies. He is with them just as He is with us.

When has God restored one of your relationships in a surprising way? How does this encourage you in your current conflicts with other people?

Oct 12 Wednesday Genesis 33:12-20

Jacob is now a changed man, as his new name, Israel, attests. While he and his brother, Esau, are reconciled, Jacob finds it more prudent to settle in the land away from his brother. So, Esau departs with his men, leaving Jacob to build a place for himself. Reconciliation does not always mean a complete restoration of broken relationships. Like Jacob’s hip, some things cannot be mended. Just as Christians, we should seek to live at peace with all people while building lives that follow God's plans and the purposes in all that we do. Like Jacob, we must learn to live with others while maintaining our spiritual identity and calling.

What challenges do you face as a believer trying to maintain healthy relationships with others? Why is understanding our identity in Christ important in our relationships?

Archaeological excavations indicate that Shechem was a major center of pagan worship. Like his grandfather Abraham and his father Isaac before him, Jacob builds altars of his own as he travels through these idol- worshipping territories. He calls the altar El Elohe Israel, which means “mighty is the God of Israel.” This altar thus serves as a beacon proclaiming Israel’s God, and it stands as a declaration of faith in God's gracious promise to the descendants of Abraham. We may not build physical altars today, but we can and should proclaim our communities and cities for Christ in prayer while living as lights that testify to God's grace and power.

Which places or persons are you claiming for Christ in prayer? What are some things in your life that serve as witnesses to God's work in you?

Oct 13 Thursday Genesis 34:1-17

The issue of Shechem raping Dinah, a horrifying crime in itself, becomes even graver when we consider the spiritual threat this poses to Jacob’s family. As a result of Shechem actions, Dinah is defiled by an uncircumcised, pagan man, and the entire family is being pressured to settle in the land, intermarry, and integrate into Shechem community - whereas God had called them to journey on. We likewise experience a collision of worldviews as our culture constantly clashes with our Christian values. The world may offer compromises that distract us from the path God has placed before us, but we must not allow ourselves to succumb to things that may threaten our divine calling to be set apart.

How are you tempted to deviate from God's ways? How can we protect ourselves from the deceitfulness of compromise?

Jacob’s sons use circumcision, the sign of the covenant between God and their family, as a ruse designed to incapacitate their Shechemite neighbors and carry out their vengeance. Outwardly, they offer peace, but the condition they give has nothing to do with the faith they have been taught to uphold. In fact, it is a precursor to violence. Whenever we use our Christian faith to justify our desires to harm another person, we betray the very spirit of the God we serve and are guilty of committing religious violence. God has revealed His covenant to us not so that we can attack others with it but to help others know and love Him.

When have you used your Christian faith as a weapon to get back at someone? How can you guard against misusing your faith?

Oct 14 Friday Genesis 34:18-31

While Jacob’s son is the sign of God's covenant as a means to enact their vengeance, the Shechemites see in it a way of satisfying their own greed. Wives, livestock, and property are their primary incentives for agreeing to the condition that they be circumcised. God, the author of the covenant, has nothing to do with this decision. They are all misusing religion for personal gain. This is worldly wisdom at its worst. Our Lord Jesus Christ teaches us that true spirituality is not self-centered. To follow Him, we must be willing to leave lands, families, and wealth. But by losing our lives for His sake, Jesus promises that we will find true, everlasting blessing.

When are you tempted to seek godly living as a means to gain a benefit for yourself? How have you lost and gained as a result of your decision to follow Jesus?

Simeon and Levi slaughter every male in the city, and their brothers plunder it, carrying off women, children, and property. While Shechem’s rape of Dinah was horrendous, Jacob’s sons are no better. They deceive an entire city of men and then annihilate them when they are at their most vulnerable. By taking justice into their own hands and behaving with such treachery, they have put their entire family at risk. Vengeance belongs to God alone. When we indulge in it or seek to profit from it, we bring great harm to ourselves and the body of Christ. Let us never endorse hostility or violence toward others as this will provoke animosity upon ourselves and our fellow brothers and sisters.

What are some ways in which Christians act with hostility toward unbelievers today? How was the message of Jesus undermined when His people fight as the world does?

Oct 15 Saturday Genesis 35:1-15

Now that he is forced to leave Shechem, Jacob is open to receiving God's guidance once more. God instructs him to return to Bethel, the place where he first encountered the Lord. It is a reminder of God's call on Jacob’s life. For this reason, he is instructed not only to settle in Bethel but to also build an altar to God in that place. To prepare for the journey, Jacob’s family put away idols, purify themselves, and change their clothes. In these things, we see God's call on our own lives. Jesus calls us to follow Him. To answer His call, we must be willing to put away anything that would hinder our obedience and our new life in Christ.

What circumstances have made you more open to receiving God's guidance? What can you do to effectively prepare to go where God is calling you?

Jacob returns to Bethel in obedience to God. He builds an altar and claims the place in the name of his God. The Lord appears to Jacob reminding him of the promise to his ancestors to make them into a great nation that will possess the land of Canaan. God also reminds Jacob of the significant change that has occurred in his life: he is no longer Jacob the deceiver, but Israel, the one who wrestles with God. Similarly, we have a new life and identity in Christ. We are delivered from the deceitfulness of sin and called to diligently seek God’s purpose for our lives and for those whom God has entrusted to our care.

What promises has God made to you as a result of your commitment to Jesus? What are some ways in which you are pursuing God and His will?