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DAY BY DAY

with People of the Bible

Reflections for Teens

ISBN 978-0-88489-922-8

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The publishing team included Virginia Halbur, development editor; Brian Singer-Towns, co-editor; Lorraine Kilmartin, reviewer; cover image © 2005 Daniel Speck, FreeStockPhotos.com; prepress and manufacturing coordinated by the production departments of Saint Mary's Press.

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Printed in the United States of America

4325

ISBN 978-0-88489-922-8, Print

ISBN 978-1-59982-202-0, Digital

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kurtz, Dennis.

Day by day with people of the Bible : reflections for teens / Dennis Kurtz, Michaela Hedican, Judy Kramer ; with contributions by Virginia Halbur.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-88489-922-8 (pbk.)

1. Christian teenagers—Prayers and devotions. 2. Bible—Meditations. 3. Devotional calendars. I. Hedican, Michaela. II. Kramer, Judy, 1939- III. Halbur, Virginia. IV. Title.

BV4531.3.K87 2007

242'.63—dc22

2007004459

Introduction

The Bible recounts the stories of many people of faith who throughout salvation history have put their trust in God. In a real way, these people are our spiritual ancestors, who show us how to deepen our relationship with God. *Day by Day with People of the Bible* looks at the lives of over seventy biblical characters. These people were chosen because they play an important role in salvation history. Generally, each person or family is covered by a series of seven reflections. The first day of the series usually begins with a brief background on the biblical person or persons covered in the series. The six reflections that follow focus on a particular aspect of the person's or people's life. In an effort to tie in with the liturgical calendar, reflections on the biblical characters are not necessarily in chronological order.

Each daily entry begins with a Scripture passage related to the biblical person's story, followed by a reflection on that passage that speaks to the experience of the biblical person and how her or his situation relates to your own life. The reflection may provide historical or cultural background, theological insights, or aspects of Church teaching to deepen your understanding of the context in which the biblical person's story was written or the story's meaning for your life today. A brief question and prayer are provided after the reflection to help you integrate what you have learned into your daily life. The

“To go deeper” section at the end of each reflection lists suggested Scripture readings for further study.

Try to spend ten to fifteen minutes each day with the reflections in order to understand how God is calling you to deepen your faith and share the message of God’s love with others. To facilitate this process, you may wish to start a journal in which you write your responses to each day’s question.

It is our hope that through these daily reflections, you will not only grow in your knowledge of the people God has called throughout history but you will also see parallels between their story and your own life experiences. God uses ordinary human experiences to nurture faith in each of us.

Adam and Eve: God's Best

God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.

(Genesis 1:31)

After God finished creating the world, he found it to be **very** good. Human beings were the culmination of creation, made in God's image and likeness. So we too are **very** good.

There is no better feeling than when you have created something wonderful with your own hands. You feel good because it is the culmination of all the best in you. You sit back and in honest review admire what you have brought into being. You have a special affinity for this creation. Now take that feeling and multiply it many times over, and you will begin to recognize how God feels toward creation.

When have you been pleased with what you have created because it was good? How has your own creativity helped you to understand God as Creator?

Creator God, thank you for creating me as a uniquely wonderful person and for giving me the ability to cocreate with you.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 1:14–31.

Adam and Eve: Companions in Life

And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman.

(Genesis 2:22)

What a wonderful blessing to have a trusted friend. Life is full of so many things, good and not so good, that we want to share with one another. God understood this about human beings, so God created Adam and Eve as equal companions, derived from the same flesh.

As a Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit coexist as a community in mutual love. The love within the Trinity serves as a model for how we are to love one another. In God's plan, mutual love is the basis of marriage. This is symbolized by God taking an inner part of Adam and miraculously expanding it into a whole person. God brings together two individuals who, being of one flesh, are perfectly matched.

Do you have a friend with whom you can share the intimate details of your life experiences?

God, you know me from the inside out. Give me people in my life who can know me in a similar way.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 2:18–24.

Adam and Eve: God Provides

And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east.

(Genesis 2:8)

After creating Adam, God planted a garden for him and provided for Adam's every need, even to the point of creating a human companion for him. The garden provided food for them and a place for them to nurture their relationship with each other and with God. Adam and Eve were given the task of cultivating and caring for the garden. In God's design, human beings share responsibility with God in caring for all creation.

Today it is critically important to remember that God has charged us with caring for the world. With so many forces threatening our environment, we all need to do our part to care for the earth.

When have you felt in complete harmony with all of God's creation? How do you demonstrate care for the earth?

Thank you, God, for generously providing me with everything I need to sustain my life. May I always express my gratitude through kindness to others and care for the earth.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 1:8–15.

Eve: Desiring False Wisdom

God commanded . . . “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat.”

(Genesis 2:16–17)

Despite God’s warning, Eve fell for the serpent’s temptation that she could be equal to God in wisdom if only she would eat the forbidden fruit. She was seduced into thinking she would be happier if she had more than she already possessed. But instead of gaining more, Adam and Eve lost their perfect life. What a shocking reality. They lost their innocence and could never again look upon life the same way.

Have you ever wanted more—influence, friends, clothes, electronics—when you already have enough? Marketers work hard to convince you that you need their products for true happiness!

Which particular things in your culture lure you with the empty promise of providing fulfillment?

Merciful God, you are always by my side, even when I allow myself to be deceived by others. Give me your grace so I will have the confidence to turn back to you.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 3:1–13.

Adam and Eve: Held Accountable

“By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread.”

(Genesis 3:19)

Adam and Eve were banished from the Garden of Eden because of the seriousness of their offense. To survive, they now had to work hard for what was once easily attainable. Whenever trust is violated and relationships are broken, the road to repairing them is usually long and intense. One hope remained for Adam and Eve—that God would continue to offer his unconditional love to them.

We all have experienced the painful consequences of making a bad decision. Bad decisions not only cause us to suffer but also can impact others in a significant way. We are responsible for the consequences of our actions, whether for good or bad.

What are some harsh consequences you have had to face because of your own bad decisions? Where did you find hope in the situation?

God, I know you are always there for me even when I feel thousands of miles away from you. Continue to sustain me in your love.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 3:14–24.

Cain and Abel: The Two Faces of Humanity

“If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door, its desire is for you, but you must master it.”

(Genesis 4:7)

Human nature is complex. Each person can become a Cain or an Abel, choosing to act in a way that is good or bad. The Scriptures tell us that human beings are not subjects (slaves) of sin, but rather we can triumph over sin. It is a matter of desire.

Sometimes when we hear someone has done something bad, we debate whether the root cause was nurture or nature. In other words, was the person born evil, or did something in his or her upbringing make him or her evil? The story of Cain and Abel tells us that no one is destined for evil. God has given every person the ability to choose one or the other.

Have you had to choose between good and evil actions in your life? What is your compelling desire?

God, in your infinite wisdom, you gifted me with free choice. May I always use it to choose good in life.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 4:1–16.

Cain and Seth: The Population of the Earth

“Cain knew his wife and she conceived and bore Enoch.”

(Genesis 4:17)

“[Adam] became the father of a son in his likeness, according to his image, and named him Seth.”

(Genesis 5:3)

Just as Cain chose evil, so did his descendants. Lamech had a man killed for wounding him, and a teenager killed for striking him. Cain’s descendants lived by a law of extreme retaliation. But revenge does not solve anything and only perpetuates the cycle of violence. This tendency to want to retaliate remains a part of the human condition today. An alternative, however, is found in the person of Seth. Seth, according to legend, was a good and righteous man, and his descendants produced Noah, the archetype of a good and righteous person.

Can you think of a time when you asked for justice for some harm done to you when what you really wanted was revenge?

God of justice and fairness, help me seek your justice rather than revenge in all situations in my life.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 4:17–5:32.

Noah: Am I the Only One?

The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great. . . . But Noah found favor in the sight of the Lord.

(Genesis 6:5,8)

As the mythical story of Noah begins, all other human beings have been led astray and only Noah is found to be faithful. God decides to destroy all creation and then asks Noah to do something strange—to build a three-story houseboat to save his family and a pair of every living creature. God entrusts Noah with a strange and difficult task. People thought Noah was delusional, but Noah carried out God's command even though he must have felt foolish and alone. Early theologians compared Noah's ark to the Church: both try to carry all sorts of characters through a dangerous life to safety!

How do you respond when you think you are the only one being asked to do something—such as observe a curfew, help with household chores, or attend church?

Dear God, help me be courageous and respond faithfully when I am asked to do something difficult.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 6:5–17.

Noah: God Makes a Promise

“I will establish my covenant with you.”

(Genesis 6:18)

The first time we find the term *covenant* in the Scriptures is in the Book of Genesis. God speaks with Noah and promises to be in covenant with him. A covenant is a solemn and firm promise made between human beings or between God and human beings. God was terribly disappointed with the wickedness of people. But through faithful Noah, God decided to give the human race another chance.

If you have ever been deeply hurt by someone, you know how difficult it is to forgive and trust that person again. We should remember God’s covenant with Noah. Despite the hurt human sin causes, God is always ready to give us another chance. Can we be as forgiving?

Have you ever been given a second chance? What promises did you make as a result of that second chance?

God of second chances, thanks for giving me another chance when I fail, and help me always be faithful to you.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 6:18–20.

Noah: His Unnamed Wife

And Noah with his sons and his wife and his sons' wives went into the ark to escape the waters of the flood.

(Genesis 7:7)

Noah's wife certainly was a vital partner in saving the human race and all the species of animals on the earth. However, we do not even have a name for this courageous woman. Because most of the Scriptures were written by men, even heroic women who followed God with great faith are seldom recorded or named in the Bible.

Noah's wife must have loved Noah with every fiber of her being in order to believe and trust in God as her husband did. Build an ark? Get everyone and animals on board? The uncertainty, the dreadful voyage to an unknown landing, the discomfort and danger of the trip must have been terrible!

What name would you give to Noah's wife?

Who are the female unnamed heroes you know? What can you do to recognize their contributions?

Dear God, bless the women who are models of courage and faith for me, and help me serve as a model for others.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 7:6–17.

Noah: The Flood

And the waters increased, and bore up the ark, and it rose high above the earth.

(Genesis 7:17)

Noah had done everything God had commanded. The huge boat was ready. Noah warned and gathered his family. The animals were waiting to board. What squealing, shouting, cursing, and doubting! Then they heard the first clap of thunder. The forty days and nights that followed were full of uncertainty and terror. Noah and his family saw God's power and might. The rain poured down, soaking, choking, and drowning all in its path.

Endings and new beginnings are rarely easy, especially when we are victims of circumstances beyond our control. These times really test our faith in God.

Have you ever experienced an unexpected move, a dramatic loss, or the sudden death of someone? Where was God for you during this time?

God of justice and love, lift me and carry me over the troubled waters of my life. Wash away all that is displeasing to you and give me a new start.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 7:17–24.

Noah: Safe at Last

In the seventh month, on the seventeenth day of the month, the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat.

(Genesis 8:4)

Calculating time and distance has developed into a sophisticated science in our modern world. But Noah and his family measured their journey far more simply. When the ark's motion (and no doubt motion sickness) stopped, they needed a way to know if their terrifying journey was at an end.

So Noah sent out a raven and later a dove to search for dry ground in the early weeks after the ark came to rest. Finally, the dove brought back an olive branch. Safety at last! The promise of a better future, a new start, spread before them. Hope was born again that day.

What signs of hope do you see in our world today?

Symbols of white doves and two fingers lifted in a peace gesture are only a start, Lord. Let us see progress toward peace in our lifetime.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 8:1–18.

Noah: The Rainbow Promise

The LORD said, “. . . I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, . . . nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done. . . . When the [rainbow] is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature.”

(Genesis 8:21, 9:16)

The first thing Noah and his family did after they safely climbed out of the ark was to offer a sacrifice to God. God responded to that pleasing gift with a sign—a rainbow in the sky. The rainbow never fails to enchant us and fill us with awe. The rainbow is a sign of the covenant God made with Noah (and with us all) to never again destroy the whole earth. The promise we make in Baptism—to believe and to turn away from evil—is our covenant response.

When did you last see a rainbow and marvel at the hope it stands for? How are you a sign of hope for others?

God of goodness, beauty, and glory, help me live out my baptismal promise to be a sign of hope for others.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 8:20–9:17.

Noah: Noah's Boys

The sons of Noah who went out of the ark were Shem, Ham, and Japheth.

(Genesis 9:18)

Noah's boys had to get along while they were afloat, but once on dry land, discord began. The brothers parted, headed in three different directions, settled the land, and fathered people of many cultures and languages. Shem and his family settled in the hill country to the east. Ham, the second son of Noah, became leader of a mighty clan of hunters. However, Ham's son, Canaan, dishonored his grandfather and was cursed and disowned by Noah. The third son, Japheth, settled along the coast, and his kin became prosperous merchants.

The author of Genesis used this story to explain why the people of his time were often in conflict. Although we are all part of the same human family, true peace escapes us.

What are some causes of division in your own family? Are you a peacemaker? What does it take to be a peacemaker?

Lord God of goodness, help me respect and trust others so that one day I will attain lasting peace.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 9:18–28.

Abram: Moving On Out

The Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you."

(Genesis 12:1-2)

The most growth-filled experiences in life often are the result of our ability to take risks and trust that all will be well. Abram—the father in faith of Jews, Christians, and Muslims—found this to be true in his life. For God's blessing to be fulfilled, Abram had to leave behind his comfortable and familiar life and allow God to lead him into a new land with new experiences.

Young peoples' lives are full of challenges and the unknown—taking new classes, starting new jobs, meeting new people. Life is full of opportunities that require us to trust that God will show us the way as we journey.

As your life unfolds, what new experiences require you to trust in God?

Guide me, Lord, as I am called to enter new areas in my life. May I trust you to bless all my ventures.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 12:1-9.

Abram: Too Much Stuff

Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold. . . . Now Lot [Abraham's nephew], who went with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents, so that the land could not support both of them living together.

(Genesis 13:2,5-6)

As Abram and his nephew Lot discovered, having more possessions doesn't necessarily lead to peace and security. There was a limit to what the land would support.

Having the best and the latest of everything is sometimes a goal of young people today. The North American ideal seems to be one of ever-growing affluence. You may find, however, that all these possessions lead to conflicts and quarrels. And it may actually lead to an unfair distribution of the earth's resources. Finding just and peaceful ways to share God's gifts continues to be a challenge.

When have possessions been a source of conflict between you and a friend or family member? How did you resolve it?

Giver of all good gifts, help me realize that my possessions are meant to be used in the service of others.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 13:1-12.

Abram: A Star-Spangled Promise

[The LORD] brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." Then he said to [Abram], "So shall your descendants be."

(Genesis 15:5)

Stars are an ancient and universal symbol of dreams, hopes, and desires; in fact, the word *desire* means "of the stars." Abram desired an heir, and God affirmed his desire by pointing to the stars. By that simple gesture, Abram was convinced God's word could be trusted.

You might sometimes feel that living as a Christian is pointless and impossible. We see Christian people acting hypocritically, sometimes even Church leaders' not living up to their responsibility. When those times happen, look at the stars and remember that our trust is in God's word and not in fallible human beings.

Which of God's promises are most difficult for you to believe?

Creator of the stars of night, light my way when I am in the darkness of doubt.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 15:1–20.

Abram: What's in a Name?

Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, ". . . No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations."

(Genesis 17:3,5)

Children often protect themselves from insults by singing, "Sticks and stones can break my bones, but names can never hurt me." A change in name can, however, signify a turning point in one's life. Many people prefer to drop a childhood nickname as they move into the more sophisticated teenage years. You may even ask others to call you by a variation of your name that has special meaning for you.

Whatever our situation, a special name we've been given by loved ones unites us to them in a particular way. Like Abraham, we know we are lovingly cared for every time we hear our special name.

What special names have loved ones given you?

Loving God, as you call me by name, may I respond in faith and trust in your word.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 17:1–27.

Abram: Taking in Strangers

He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant."

(Genesis 18:2–3)

Encountering a new student in the halls of school or on the athletic field often feels awkward. What should you say or do? Abraham, our father in faith, sets before us an inspiring example of welcoming a stranger. Like Abraham, we are to go out of our way to greet and welcome the new student and the stranger.

People are often afraid of strangers. It can take real courage to reach out to someone you don't know. In the end, Abraham discovered that strangers are God's messengers. We too may be surprised by the blessings we receive from the new people we welcome into our lives.

When were you a stranger in an unfamiliar setting? What did it feel like?

Welcoming God, hear my prayer of thanks for all who have made me feel welcome in new situations in my life.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 18:1–8.

Abraham: Isaac, “Son of Laughter”

Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him.

(Genesis 21:2–3)

Old age seemed to provide no hindrance to God’s desire to fulfill a promise. Both Abraham and his wife, Sarah, were beyond their childbearing years. Upon hearing the promise of a son, they both laughed. Isaac’s name, “son of laughter,” was a permanent reminder that God sometimes has the last laugh. Do you believe God enjoys a good laugh and likes to surprise us at times? Does God take delight in your times of good fun with friends?

Are you able to gently laugh at yourself when you think God can’t possibly see you through a tough time?

Teach me, Lord, to delight in the joy of laughter and to realize it is a gift from you.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 21:1–8.

Abraham: Tested to the Limits

After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." [God] said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you."

(Genesis 22:1–2)

Tests of any kind tend to bring with them feelings of anxiety and dread. God's request of Abraham seemed to be the ultimate test of willingness to do whatever God asked. Abraham was determined to give anything, even his beloved son Isaac.

Abraham's faith in God amid his test is an encouragement to us. At times, we really believe we are doing God's will, but then our hopes are dashed or our plans seem to fail. We shouldn't lose faith during those times, but we should keep listening for God's voice and direction as Abraham did.

When have you felt God's putting you "to the test"?

Grant me the courage I need, Lord, to lovingly respond, "Ready!" to your will for my life.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 22:1–14.

Sarah: Mother of Our Faith

"[God] will bless [Sarah], and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her."

(Genesis 17:16)

Sarah was the wife of Abraham and the mother of Isaac, thus the mother of the Hebrew people. Sarah's father-in-law, Terah, decided to move with his family from Ur, which today is southern Iraq, to Canaan in the hope of finding a better life in a new land. As a woman of that time, Sarah would not have had much say in this decision.

Yet we know that Sarah placed her trust in God throughout her life and set forth on an adventure of faith that granted her a distinguished place in the biblical story. As a young person, you may not always feel that you have a say in all the decisions affecting you. Like Sarah, you need to place your trust in God.

When have you placed complete trust in God? How has trusting God led to new opportunities and a deeper journey into the heart of God?

Mother Sarah, continue to show me the way to faith by helping me place my trust in God.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 11:31 – 12:9.

Sarah: God's Future Promise

Your wife Sarah shall bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac.

(Genesis 17:19)

The name Sarah means "princess." God chose Sarah for a significant role in the salvation of humankind. The mother of Isaac and of the Hebrew people, she is also our mother in faith. It was through the faith of Abraham and Sarah that the foundation of the Jewish and Christian faiths was formed. Jews and Christians today profess a belief in one God, Creator of all.

Do you ever wonder what fruits your faith will produce in the future? It is difficult to imagine that being faithful to God now may have positive results in the future. Sarah could not have known that we today would hold her in high esteem because of her conscious act of being faithful to God.

We are all chosen by God for a special role in passing on the faith. What is God calling you to?

Sarah, help me as I discern the special role God wishes me to fulfill.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 17:15–22.

Sarah: Questioning God's Promise

[Abraham's] wife bore him no children.

(Genesis 16:1)

Sarah knew God to be true to his word. God promised that a great nation would come from Sarah and Abraham—that their descendants would number more than the stars in the sky or the sands of the seashore. As Sarah and Abraham grew older, even though in faith they believed God's promise could be fulfilled, their humanness led them to question: How was it physically possible to have children when they were past childbearing age?

Do you sometimes doubt your God-given potential? Even though you believe that in God all things are possible, do you sometimes question whether God is actually working in your life? It is human to wonder if you can fulfill all that God is asking of you!

What human limitations do you have that cause you to question your God-given potential?

In my doubting, mother Sarah, help me remember that in God all things are possible.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 15:1–6.

Sarah: In God's Own Time

[Sarah] said to [Abraham], "You see that the LORD has prevented me from bearing children."

(Genesis 16:2)

When Sarah determined she was too old to give birth to any children, she decided to help God keep his promise. As was the acceptable custom, Sarah gave Abraham permission to have a child with her maidservant Hagar. With Sarah's blessing, Abraham took Hagar as his wife and had a son named Ishmael. God blessed Ishmael greatly, but God was still intent on fulfilling the promise of a great nation coming through Sarah.

Part of being human is feeling impatient as we wait for the fulfillment of promises made to us. Future rewards are difficult to wait for because we want to experience them sooner rather than later. However, God's promises to us will be fulfilled in God's own time—we just have to be patient.

What future promise do you wish would be fulfilled in your life today?

God, be patient with me when I find it difficult to wait for your promises to be fulfilled.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 16:1–4.

Sarah: Laughter of Disbelief

So Sarah laughed to herself.

(Genesis 18:12)

Sarah overheard the conversation between Abraham and the three strangers that had visited them. The strangers told Sarah's husband that at this time next year, when they returned, Sarah will have given birth to a son. Because of Sarah's advanced age, she laughed in disbelief at this prediction. Sarah laughed to herself, but the strangers, who were messengers of God, were informed by God of Sarah's laughter. When Sarah was confronted, out of fear she denied she had laughed.

God knows us like a best friend—one who knows what we are thinking, even though we do not express our thoughts in words. God is a friend who understands our moments of disbelief and who seeks to bring us to understanding.

What unexpected thing might God bring to life in you?

God, you know me better than I know myself. Continue to reveal yourself to me.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 18:1–15.

Sarah: Bringing Forth New Life

The LORD dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as he had promised.

(Genesis 21:1)

Sarah came to know the faithfulness of God through the birth of her son. Despite her old age, God broke through and fulfilled the promise that Sarah would give birth to a son who would give rise to a great nation. Sarah named him Isaac, meaning “he laughed.” Sarah’s laughter of disbelief was now turned into laughter of delight at the birth of her son. God brought great joy into Sarah’s life through the blessing of the birth of her son.

Our heart naturally takes delight when God uses our lives to bring about goodness in the world. Whenever you say a kind word to another person, help a stranger, or make a choice not to give in to temptation, you should smile with joy too.

What experience in your life has caused you to laugh with delight?

*God, thank you for always keeping your promises.
Help me take delight in their fulfillment in my life.*

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 21:1–8.

Sarah: Graced with Faith

Sarah died at Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan; and Abraham went in to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her.

(Genesis 23:2)

At the close of Sarah's life, her family must have recounted her witness of faith in God. Through the legacy of Sarah's son, Isaac, God is known by many people throughout the world. God found Sarah a willing servant involved in bringing faith to life in others. Sarah was graced because ultimately she and Abraham trusted in God. She was buried in a simple tomb in the cave of Machpelah, which many visit today in the city of Hebron. Sarah, the mother of faith, continues to lead others on their journey of faith today.

Who has been a person of faith, like Sarah, in your life? How has that person been a willing witness and servant of God?

Mother Sarah, thank you for your dedication to God and your family. You continue to grace us with your faith.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 23:1–20.

Hagar: Slave Girl of Sarah

And [the angel of the Lord] said, "Hagar, slave-girl of [Sarah], where have you come from and where are you going?"

(Genesis 16:8)

In ancient cultures, slavery and polygamy were acceptable practices. Hagar was one of the slaves of Abraham's wife, Sarah. Sarah, who was barren, gave permission for her slave to marry Abraham in order to bear a son. Hagar's story of mistreatment and rescue teach us that although slaves may not have had legal rights in biblical times, God still considered them precious and protected; God guided and loved them.

God loves all people no matter their status, gender, color, or culture. All men, women, and children are created by God and are called to participate in God's plan of salvation. We are called to love all people and work to free ourselves and others from physical and spiritual slavery.

What are some of the things people become enslaved to today?

God of love and justice, free us from those things that lead us away from you.

- To go deeper: Read Galatians 4:21—5:1.

Hagar: Pride and Jealousy

When [Hagar] saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. . . . Then [Sarah] dealt harshly with [Hagar] and she ran away.

(Genesis 16:4,6)

Hagar was sent by her mistress, Sarah, to produce an heir for Abraham. When Hagar became pregnant, she treated Sarah with contempt, and Sarah in turn was mean to her pregnant servant girl. Hagar's situation became so unbearable that she ran away into the wilderness.

Pride and jealousy often set in motion a downward spiral of violence. Some are angry because they can't have what they want, and others flaunt their good fortune, fueling the fires of jealousy even further. When you flaunt your looks, your athletic successes, your good grades, or your family's wealth, trouble cannot be long in coming.

Have you ever been jealous of others? How do you react when others are jealous of you?

God of the fortunate and unfortunate, heal me of all jealousy and pride.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 16:1–6.

Hagar: Encountering God

So [Hagar] named the LORD who spoke to her, "You are El-roi"; for she said, "Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?"

(Genesis 16:13)

Having found Hagar beside a stream of water, God's messenger asked Hagar what brought her to the wilderness. Hagar told the angel she was running away from her mistress, who had mistreated her. The angel responded by telling Hagar to return to her mistress. He said God had taken notice of Hagar's suffering. Hagar's response to the messenger is one of awe that she, a woman and a slave, had encountered the God of Israel and lived.

When we feel hurt or rejected by our family, it is natural to also feel abandoned by God. Hagar's story reminds us that God never abandons us. Many people tell of times when someone gave them a word of hope or kindness when they most needed to hear it.

When have you unexpectedly encountered a "messenger" of God?

Lord, hear the cry of the poor, especially those who have no one to turn to.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 16:7-15.

Hagar: Trusting in God

Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram named his son . . . Ishmael.

(Genesis 16:15)

Despite the possibility of being mistreated by Sarah again, Hagar went back to the camp of Abraham as the angel had instructed her. There she had a son, which fulfilled the promise God had made to Hagar. Abraham named the boy Ishmael and rejoiced at the birth of his son.

Even though Hagar was not one of Abraham's tribe, she trusted in God's messenger. Her faithfulness did not go unnoticed, and God fulfilled the promise he made to her. God does not want us to be in abusive situations. When we find ourselves in those situations, we need to trust that God is with us and not lose hope. We need to ask God for strength and guidance, and look for the help that is there for us.

When have you done something as an act of faith?

Lord, help me not to fear following your word. Rescue me when I am a victim of injustice.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 17:20–27.

Hagar: Hopeless Again

[Hagar] said, "Do not let me look on the death of the child."

(Genesis 21:16)

A son, her only child, was all Hagar had. After being cast out by Abraham into the desert with her son (Abraham had God's assurance that Hagar and Ishmael would be okay), Hagar collapsed in tears when the little bread and water she had was gone. Desperate, she laid the child in the shade under a bush and walked some distance from him so as not to hear his cries, and she prepared to die.

Hagar might have had more hope if she had focused on God's earlier assistance when she fled into the dessert. How easy it is to forget the times when God provided the help we desperately needed! Wouldn't our lives be easier if we remembered those times and trusted in God?

Single women and children suffer the most from poverty and hunger. What can you do to support a local effort to feed and protect women and children?

Make a list of times when you worried about something, but things worked out okay in the end. Thank God for helping you through those times of worry and desperation.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 21:8–10, 14–16.

Hagar: God Helps Us Help Ourselves

God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy."

(Genesis 21:17)

A tender detail in the harsh story of the slave woman, we are told that God took notice of Hagar's and Ishmael's suffering and sent an angel to comfort them. God then opened Hagar's eyes so she was able to see a well of fresh, cool water nearby.

The story of Hagar is really about God's seeing the plight of the oppressed and answering their cries for help. God does not magically fix Hagar's situation, but opens her eyes so she can discover the solution to her problem. God cares for us and wants to help us, but we also must make good choices for ourselves.

When have you asked God to help you and then discovered a solution to your problem?

God, don't let fear blind me to the solutions to my problems. Help me to know what actions I can take to help myself.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 21:15–19.

Hagar: Promises Kept

“Come lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.”

(Genesis 21:18)

Hagar, now a single mother, was left to raise her son on her own. Without the security of community and wealth that Abraham’s protection provided, Hagar and Ishmael’s future was grim. God’s messenger encouraged Hagar and told her to lift up her son and support him, because God had plans for Ishmael. God kept his promise, and Ishmael grew into a strong man. He eventually took an Egyptian wife and is believed to be the patriarch of the Arab peoples and the Muslim faith.

Hagar and Ishmael could see only their present situation and had to trust that God’s promise would eventually come true. The fulfillment of God’s promise did not take place until long after their death.

What promises have been made to you that require a great deal of trust on your part?

God, help me trust that your promises to me will be fulfilled, even if they are not realized in my lifetime.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 21:20–21, Psalm 112.

Isaac: Finding a Lifetime Friend

"O LORD, the God of my master Abraham . . . let the young woman who comes out to draw, to whom I shall say, 'Please give me a little water from your jar to drink,' and who will say to me, 'Drink, and I will draw for your camels also'—let her be the woman whom the LORD has appointed for my master's son."

(Genesis 24:42–44)

Finding the right wife for his son Isaac was a major concern for Abraham. Abraham's servant took very seriously the task given him by his master and offered a prayer, asking for a sign so he would select the right woman. This sign would assure the servant of finding a God-fearing spouse for Isaac. As you develop friendships, it is wise to ask God's help in choosing good, kind, and faithful friends—those who will be friends for life.

Have you asked God to help you find faithful friends as companions on your life's journey?

Ever-living Lord, faithful friend of all who call on you, fill my life with friends who will help me stay close to you.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 24:1–48.

Isaac: Rebekah, the Love of His Life

Then Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent. He took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her. So Isaac was comforted after his mother's death.

(Genesis 24:67)

The death of a loved one, especially a parent, can be devastating. Isaac knew that pain in the loss of his mother, Sarah. Having Rebekah come into his life at this time of sorrow was a gift from God. Isaac could share the love in his heart with his wife.

Often in times of grief and loss, we seek to find someone to love us. Isaac is a marvelous model of how reaching out and sharing our love with others, even when we are in pain, can be a source of comfort and healing.

When has grief become an opportunity for you to reach out to others?

God of all consolation, help me, especially in times of sorrow and loss, to share the love in my heart with others.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 24:50–67.

Isaac: Sibling Rivalry

The LORD granted [Isaac's] prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived. The children struggled together within her.

(Genesis 25:21–22)

Our ancestry in Christ is filled with sibling rivalry, conflict, and struggles. Isaac's twin sons began their battles before they were even born—when they were “womb-mates.” Struggles, disagreements, and jealousies are often a part of family life, especially between siblings. This can be very painful and make you wonder, where is God in all this? But as the story of Isaac's sons unfolds, we see God's grace at work even amid tumultuous relationships.

How would you describe your relationship with other family members? How is God working amid these relationships?

Jesus, my brother, guide me in my treatment of other family members. May jealousies and struggles never stand in the way of your desire to unite us.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 25:19–26.

Isaac: The Favored Son

Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game.

(Genesis 25:28)

It is not unusual for one child in a family to feel that his or her parent favors one sibling over another. In Isaac's family, this favoritism was evident. Isaac favored Esau over his brother Jacob because Esau was a skillful hunter and brought meat home to eat. Jacob responded by using his cooking skills and trickery to win his brother's birthright and ultimately his father's favor and blessing.

Feeling as though we do not measure up to our parents' ideal can be devastating. However, instead of resorting to trickery or trying to manipulate our parents by going out of our way to please them, we are called to trust that God will guide us through those feelings.

What are your experiences of being favored by a parent, or of not measuring up to a parent's ideal?

God of all acceptance and love, guide me to realize that you are not partial, but loving and accepting of all.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 25:24–34.

Isaac: A Change of Plans

The LORD appeared to Isaac and said, “Do not go down to Egypt; settle in the land that I shall show you. Reside in this land as an alien, and I will be with you, and will bless you.”

(Genesis 26:2–3)

When faced with difficulties, Isaac devised a plan that he thought best for him—he would avoid the famine of the area and go to Egypt. God, however, had other plans. God’s plan meant that Isaac would have to live as an alien in a foreign and unfamiliar land. God’s promise to be with Isaac and to bless him was the support Isaac needed to make the shift from what he wanted to what God asked of him.

The plans we make often do not turn out as we expect. Being open and flexible, as Isaac was, can bring a blessing and an awareness of God’s presence.

Amid changing plans, how open are you to God’s will?

Abiding God, teach me to stay open to your call and to find you amid the unexpected.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 26:1–5.

Isaac: Envy's Object

Isaac had possessions of flocks and herds, and a great household, so that the Philistines envied him.

(Genesis 26:14)

Responding with resentment and envy to those who possess more than we do is not an unusual experience. Most of us are keenly aware of those who have the latest gadgets and the most possessions. Like the Philistines, it is easy for us to envy those who have more than we do. Isaac was envied for his flocks, herds, and great household. Nothing is said about him flaunting his wealth. He simply had a lot of possessions.

There will always be people in our lives who have more than we do. Our attitude toward them says more about us than it does about them. Being consumed by envy toward others can keep us from enjoying their presence and appreciating them for who they are as human beings.

What is your attitude toward those who have more than you do?

Keep me, Lord, from letting feelings of envy prevent me from accepting those who have more than I do.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 26:1–33.

Isaac: Tricked by the Trickster

[Isaac] said, "Are you really my son Esau?" [Jacob] answered, "I am." Then [Isaac] said, "Bring it [the food] to me, that I may eat of my son's game and bless you."

(Genesis 27:24–25)

Realizing that someone else is receiving the recognition, honor, or blessing that you rightly deserve is a pain unlike all others. The cry, "It isn't fair," rises from the depths of one's soul. Being old and blind, Isaac didn't realize his son Jacob (whose name means "the trickster") was pretending to be his older, favored brother Esau. Esau, as the oldest, had a blessing coming. Through deception, Jacob took the blessing from Esau. Once Isaac pronounced the blessing, it couldn't be taken back, even if Jacob had gotten it dishonestly.

How do you handle situations where others get credit for what you have done?

God of all justice, be with me in times when life seems unfair and others receive what I deserve. Bless me with a gentle spirit.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 27:1–46.

Rebekah: Destined to Be Chosen

Abraham said to his servant, . . . "Go to my country and my kindred and get a wife for my son Isaac."

(Genesis 24:2,4)

Rebekah, descendant of Abraham's brother Nahor, was unaware of the events that would change her life when she went to the spring that day. Under the blazing summer sun, this veiled, dark-haired, olive-skinned woman sweated as she fetched huge jars of water from the well for her family's needs. When a stranger asked her for a drink, she not only cheerfully gave him water but proceeded to draw water for his camels! This was the right one, the servant thought—hardworking, generous, and of a believing family. Rebekah would become Isaac's wife and become a link in the family tree of the Messiah.

The Scriptures record how God actively chose the people who would pass on the faith from generation to generation. Who are the keepers of the faith in your family?

God of all, help me to appreciate the faith that has been handed on to me and to do my part to share my faith with future generations.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 24:1–27.

Rebekah: Answering God's Call

And [Rebekah's brother and mother] called Rebekah, and said to her, "Will you go with this man?"

(Genesis 24:58)

In choosing a wife for Isaac, Abraham's servant watched closely for just the right woman. Every young woman was eager to be pleasing to the men of eligible families. Rebekah, though unassuming and hard at work with her chores, was gracious and helpful. Her family loved her very much and were not eager for her to leave home.

The Book of Genesis notes something special in this arranged marriage. Rebekah's family asked her if she wanted to marry Isaac and go to his home, which was a great distance away. In this culture, women were often not even consulted about whom they wanted to marry! Rebekah seemed to know she was part of a greater plan.

How willing are you to say yes to what God is asking of you?

God of all plans and outcomes, may I be generous and kind to others and open to the plans you have for me.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 24:28–60.

Rebekah: Love at First Sight

Rebekah looked up, and when she saw Isaac, she slipped quickly from the camel. . . . [Isaac] took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her.

(Genesis 24:64,67)

After the servant selected Rebekah as Isaac's wife, arrangements were made to take her to Isaac's family. Rebekah left with her family's blessing and traveled by caravan to her new home. As they neared their destination, Rebekah must have wondered: Will he think I am attractive? Will he love me as my family and friends have loved me?

When the caravan arrived, Rebekah saw a man walking alone in the fields. Learning that the lone man was her future husband, Isaac, she quickly slipped from the camel's back and covered herself with a veil. Isaac embraced Rebekah—it was love at first sight!

Do you think love at first sight is possible? What does love mean to you?

God of goodness and love, on this day when we celebrate love, I pray for my parents and all married couples. May their love be strong and faithful.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 24:59–67.

Rebekah: Barren!

“Isaac prayed to the LORD for his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD granted his prayer.”

(Genesis 25:21)

The greatest disgrace for a woman in ancient times was to be barren, or unable to bear children. A husband was dependant on a strong and healthy wife to give him many offspring to ensure survival of the tribe. Rebekah suffered the disgrace of barrenness for many years. As Isaac and Rebekah waited for a family, their love grew strong and helped them to withstand the shame of Rebekah’s being barren. Then, in answer to Isaac’s prayers, Rebekah conceived. Their time of waiting and suffering had come to an end! Isaac and Rebekah must have rejoiced, knowing that the line of Abraham’s family would continue.

Have you ever prayed for something that you really wanted for a long time? Was your prayer answered the way you expected?

Gracious God, help me be persistent and patient in presenting my prayers to you.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 25:7–21.

Rebekah: Double Trouble

When [Rebekah's] time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb.

(Genesis 25:24)

Rebekah's pregnancy was a difficult one. Early on she felt that she carried not one, but two children. They were lively, and she felt them wrestle within her womb. The months of waiting were full of delight and worry as Rebekah wondered: Will my children be healthy? How do I keep them safe and well? Finally the day arrived, and the twins were born, already struggling and fighting. To this day, the descendants of Esau and Jacob do not get along.

Parents want their children to get along and love each other. It must have caused Rebekah great pain to see her two sons always competing with each other. Someday you may experience this firsthand if you have children

How do you get along with siblings or other family members? Are you a peacemaker or a source of conflict?

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, I want us to be a happy family. Help me do my part to make it happen.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 25:21–26.

Rebekah: Mom's Favorite

. . . but Rebekah loved Jacob.

(Genesis 25:28)

It is hard to believe that a mother would have a favorite child, but Rebekah did, and it changed the course of biblical history. Of her twin sons, Rebekah favored Jacob, perhaps because Jacob was gentler and enjoyed being around the tents with the women rather than in the fields with the men. In any case, Rebekah was determined that her husband's blessing and inheritance be given to Jacob rather than Esau. Rebekah devised a plan that helped Jacob trick her husband into blessing Jacob rather than Esau.

This story is not really about Rebekah's deceit but about God's defying human expectations. Often in the Bible, God chooses the people who are considered weak and unimportant to carry out God's plan.

When has someone you thought was an unlikely choice been given a prestigious honor or task?

God, help me see your presence in the lives of those I consider to be weak or unworthy.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 27:1–29.

Rebekah: A Mother's Wish

"If Jacob marries one of the Hittite women such as these, one of the women of the land, what good will my life be to me?"

(Genesis 27:46)

As youth grow to maturity, parents constantly worry about who and what are influencing their son or daughter. Rebekah was concerned about Jacob and his friends, especially whom he might marry. She did not want him to marry a woman from the tribes who worshiped false gods and did not follow the commands of God.

Sometimes youth "worship" the false gods of our culture: designer clothes, drugs, alcohol, fast cars, gadgets, and other material things. When these things become the main focus of our lives, we can be lured away from what is really important—healthy relationships with family, friends, and the God who created and cares for us.

What are the things that lure you away from God and from healthy relationships with your family or friends?

God, keep me from being caught up in things that lure me away from you and healthy relationships with my family and friends.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 27:46—28:1.

Jacob: Third Patriarch

His brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob.

(Genesis 25:26)

Even though Jacob was a twin, he was the second-born son. Both the birthright and Isaac's blessing, according to cultural tradition, should have gone to Esau, the firstborn. But through God's design, Jacob gained both and became the father of twelve sons, whose descendants became the twelve tribes of Israel. The promise Abraham and Sarah received from God—that their descendants would be as numerous as the stars—was fulfilled in Jacob and his sons.

God uses the circumstances of our lives to make known the divine plan for each of us. As with Jacob, our understanding of God's plan for us takes time to unfold.

What do you see as God's plan for your life, even if it may be only partial at this time?

God, let me see your hand active in each stage of my life.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 25:19–34.

Jacob: The Ladder to Heaven

I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac.

(Genesis 28:13)

One night, while traveling to the house of his uncle Laban, Jacob had a dream. In his dream, Jacob saw a stairway leading from the ground into heaven, and on the stairway were messengers going up and coming down. In the dream, God appeared and affirmed that Jacob was to follow in the footsteps of his father, Isaac, and his grandfather, Abraham. Jacob was told that he was the favored son in whom God's promise of a mighty nation would be fulfilled. Jacob named the site of his dream Bethel, "House of God," and honored it as a sacred place.

There are sacred places in our own lives where we feel God is truly present. It is as if the location has a direct connection to heaven. What place has been a sacred space for you?

Do you invite God to journey with you daily, or do you confine God to your sacred space?

God, you break through into our world in many different ways. Help me recognize your presence.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 28:10–22.

Jacob: An Uncle's Welcome

When Laban heard the news about his sister's son Jacob, he ran to meet him; he embraced him and kissed him.

(Genesis 29:13)

After Jacob revealed his identity to Rachel—that her father, Laban, was his uncle—Rachel went to tell her father and her whole family. As soon as he heard the news, Laban ran to greet Jacob and welcomed him with an embrace and then invited him into his house. After Jacob told Laban who he was, Laban responded, “Surely you are my bone and my flesh!” (Genesis 29:14).

We are blessed in a significant way when we are able to reveal our true identity with our family members. We are doubly blessed when they embrace us for who we are and claim in a profound way that we are a part of them.

How easy or difficult is it for you to be open with your family and reveal your true identity?

God, give me the confidence I need to always be myself so my family can embrace the true me.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 29:1–14.

Jacob: Tricked by Laban

Jacob loved Rachel; so he said, "I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel."

(Genesis 29:18)

Arranged marriages were usually negotiated by the parents, but in Jacob's case, Jacob had already expressed his love for Rachel and made the arrangement to pay the *mohar*, the gift given by the groom to the father of the bride. But the story takes an interesting twist when Jacob, the trickster, is tricked by Laban. After working seven years to win Rachel as his wife, Jacob is instead given Leah, the older daughter. When Jacob discovers he has been deceived, he agrees to work seven more years in order to marry Rachel, as men were allowed to have more than one wife at that time.

Sometimes what we do to others is returned to us. The same trickery that Jacob used against his brother, Esau, is now used by Laban against Jacob.

How has your own dishonesty or trickery been like a boomerang and returned to you?

God, help me to deal honestly with others and to rely on truth rather than trickery.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 29:15–30.

Jacob: Wrestling with God

Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.

(Genesis 32:24)

Before reuniting with his brother Esau, Jacob spent the night alone near the River Jabbok. It was there that Jacob wrestled with a stranger until dawn. Jacob prevailed even after the stranger struck Jacob's hip socket and bruised it, making him limp. At dawn, the stranger not only blessed Jacob but also told him, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans" (Genesis 32:28). The name Israel means "he who struggles with God."

Sometimes our own restless nights are the result of struggles in our lives. We may perhaps be "wrestling with God" like Jacob. These struggles can lead us to be changed people, more aware of God's direction in our lives.

When have you wrestled with God? How have you been changed by the experience?

God, bless me in my struggles and let me always be changed for the better.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 32:23–33.

Jacob: An Unexpected Embrace

But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him.

(Genesis 33:4)

After twenty years apart, Jacob readied himself for a reunion with his brother Esau. Because Esau was angry with Jacob when he left, Jacob was expecting the worst. When the moment arrived, and Jacob and Esau saw each other, the reunion exceeded Jacob's expectations. Esau ran to meet Jacob and fully embraced him. The two brothers were finally reconciled. Jacob and Esau were once again able to build upon their relationship with each other.

Life is filled with reunions of many different kinds. Reunions between individuals where there is unresolved tension can be very difficult. However, if we are aware of our own shortcomings and choose to reconcile with someone because the relationship is important, the reunion may exceed our expectations.

Which reunions in your life have exceeded your expectations? Why?

God, help me reconcile the relationships in my life that are in need of healing.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 33:1–17.

Jacob: Grieving a Deep Loss

Then Jacob tore his garments, and put sackcloth on his loins, and mourned for his son many days.

(Genesis 37:34)

When Jacob sent his young son Joseph to deliver a message to his brothers, there was no way Jacob could have known he was sending Joseph into harm's way. After selling Joseph into slavery, Joseph's brothers concealed what they did by making it appear as if a wild beast had attacked and devoured Joseph. Jacob mourned his son's apparent death for many days. No one, not even his other sons, were able to console him.

Dealing with the death of a person we have loved deeply is hard. We mourn for that person because he or she was a key relationship in our lives. At first nothing consoles us, but eventually, we may find consolation in knowing that in life after death, we will once again be reunited with our loved one.

Whose death has left a hole in your heart?

God, touch my sadness with understanding and peace.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 37:12–35.

Joseph: The Boastful Dreamer

But when [Joseph] told [the dream] to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him, and said to him, "What kind of dream is this that you have had? Shall we indeed come, I and your mother and your brothers, and bow to the ground before you?"

(Genesis 37:10–11)

As the first child of Jacob and Rachel, Joseph was the favored son who had been given a coat of many colors. Understandably, Joseph's half brothers were jealous. Joseph didn't help the situation when he insisted on sharing the dreams that pointed to the position of power he would wield over his family someday.

Prideful arrogance and jealousy are temptations we all face, especially when we are feeling insecure about ourselves. The story of Joseph and his brothers provides an important lesson on how our attitudes and actions can alienate those closest to us.

When has your attitude or actions alienated friends or family members?

Forgive me, Lord, for the times when I have let pride or jealousy harm my relationships.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 37:1–20.

Reuben: A Caring Big Brother

“Come now, let us kill [Joseph] and throw him into one of the pits.” . . . But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, “Let us not take his life.”

(Genesis 37:20–21)

Jacob and Leah’s firstborn, Reuben, was the typical eldest child. His keen sense of responsibility and desire to care for his siblings saved not only the life of his brother Joseph, but in the end saved the lives of all his brothers, because they would one day need Joseph to save their family. Reuben showed courage in trying to make the right choice even when his brothers were choosing an evil action.

Peer pressure has the power to influence us to make choices for good or ill. To stand against peer pressure when we are being urged to do what we know is wrong takes a great commitment to goodness, the kind of goodness Reuben demonstrated.

In what ways has peer pressure influenced your decisions?

Like Reuben, Lord, may I always have the courage to make good choices.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 37:21–36.

Judah: The Bright-Idea Brother

Then Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites."

(Genesis 37:26–27)

Judah was another, older half brother of Joseph who told his siblings it was wrong to kill Joseph because it would not profit anyone. Judah suggested that Joseph be sold instead of being killed. Although Judah did not go along with his other brothers in wanting to kill Joseph, he still did not choose rightly or well. The bottom line for Judah, as it is for many people today, was profit.

Taking time to reflect on decisions that will affect one's life and the lives of others is a sign of growing into adulthood. It is important that we determine if we are doing the right thing or are simply concerned with how it benefits us.

When have you been grateful that reflection on a decision allowed you to do the right thing instead of acting only for your own gain?

Counselor God, help me to reflect on the decisions I make and to choose wisely and well.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 37:25–36.

Benjamin: Joseph's Baby Brother

Then [Joseph] looked up and saw his brother Benjamin, his mother's son, and said, "Is this your youngest brother, of whom you spoke to me? God be gracious to you, my son!"

(Genesis 43:29)

Benjamin was Jacob's youngest son whose mother, Rachel, died in giving birth to him. Benjamin and Joseph were the only two sons Jacob had with his beloved wife Rachel. The bond between the three men was strong and deep. Even though Benjamin didn't recognize Joseph, he heard his brother's words of tender concern and blessing.

Young people tend to focus on moving beyond family; however, the bond with siblings and other family members continues to be important. Kind words and caring ways are vital to establishing ties that will endure both good times and bad times.

How would you describe your relationship with members of your family?

God of all families, give me the grace to be kind in words and actions toward my family.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 43:26–34.

Joseph and Benjamin: Big Boys Do Cry!

“You must tell my father how greatly I am honored in Egypt, and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here.” Then [Joseph] fell upon his brother Benjamin’s neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck.

(Genesis 45:13–14)

Benjamin, like his brother Joseph, was overcome with emotion as he realized the reunion and reconnection he and his brothers were experiencing. Benjamin’s one and only full-blooded brother—whom he thought was dead—was standing before him! Though an ancient adage proclaims, “Big boys don’t cry,” Benjamin and Joseph freely expressed the depth of emotion they were feeling as they held each other and wept. Feeling and expressing deep emotions is a precious experience of being human. Christ himself shed tears of deep emotion.

When have you felt something deeply and expressed those feelings in tears of joy or pain?

Tender God, teach me to enter into the joys and sorrows of life unashamed of expressing my feelings in tears of gladness or sadness.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 45:4–15.

Joseph: Revealing the Truth

Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him. . . . Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence.

(Genesis 45:1,3)

Someone once said, "The truth will make you free, but first it will make you miserable." This seems to be Joseph's experience. He recognizes the men standing before him as the brothers who sold him to traders after having had second thoughts about killing him. Joseph can barely control himself, and in the midst of loud weeping, he tells his brothers the truth of who he is. Joseph's revelation leaves his brothers terrified and speechless.

The power of truth can never be overestimated. Joseph's willingness to face the truth is the start to the healing his family needs.

When has speaking the truth or hearing it spoken brought you healing?

God of all truth, grant me the insight, wisdom, and courage to speak the truth and to hear it with an open heart.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 45:1–15.

Joseph: Forgiving Family

Then Joseph said to his brothers, “. . . I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life.”

(Genesis 45:4–5)

With these few words, Joseph offered his brothers forgiveness and the hope of healing. As the lord of Pharaoh's house, Joseph could have punished his brothers or gotten even with them for selling him into slavery. Joseph, however, chose to forgive because he recognized that God was using the situation to save everyone's life.

The pain of being hurt by family or friends touches the very core of our being. Joseph models for us the way to forgiveness and how to see God's causing good to come from even sinful choices.

When have you experienced being forgiven for the wrongs you have done?

Compassionate God, help me forgive others as you have forgiven me. May I experience your presence in the difficult situations of my life.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 45:16–28.

Joseph: Gone Is the Grudge

Realizing their father was dead, Joseph's brothers said, "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him? . . . But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God?"

(Genesis 50:15,19)

Joseph not only willingly forgave his brothers but also assured them that they would have nothing to fear in the future. Joseph realized he was not God, and therefore he did not judge or punish his brothers for the pain they caused him. He did not bear a grudge.

In a world where most people find ways to get even, retaliate, or seek revenge, Joseph simply let God be God. Joseph, like Christ, is a model example of how to forgive with no strings attached.

What do you need to do to let go of the grudges in your life?

Gentle God of compassion and forgiveness, give me what I need to forgive others. May the desire to return evil for evil never dominate my life.

- To go deeper: Read Genesis 50:15–24.

Moses: The Law Giver

She named him Moses, "because," she said, "I drew him out of the water."

(Exodus 2:10)

Moses is one of the most important persons in the Old Testament. He is honored as the one who gave God's people the Law, which has guided them to the present day. Moses was a shy person. However, Yahweh determined that Moses was the one to save the Israelites from the harsh slavery of Egypt. This reluctant hero was courageous before the power of Pharaoh and tenacious as he led the Israelites from slavery into a moral life shaped by the Ten Commandments.

Like Moses, we often are too quick to focus on our own flaws and inadequacies. We dismiss the possibility that God could be calling us to do great things. In spite of our human weakness, God is able to use us to free others from the things that deny them their human dignity.

What flaws or inadequacies keep you from answering God's call to help others?

God of Moses, help me overcome my human weaknesses in order to lead others to you.

- To go deeper: Read Exodus 2:1–10.

Moses: Born into Danger

Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, "Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile."

(Exodus 1:22)

Moses was born into a world of danger. His life was threatened from the moment he was born. Through the cleverness of his mother, Jochebed, and under the watchful eye of his sister, Miriam, Moses was adopted by Pharaoh's daughter. God provided Moses safety in the house of the same Pharaoh who sent forth the decree ordering all Hebrew male children drowned in the Nile River. God had favored Moses from birth, but God also had great expectations of him.

Most of us do not live in an environment where our lives are threatened from birth. But, like God did with Moses, God has favored us with many gifts and blessings and expects us to use those gifts to bring about a just world.

What gifts and blessings has God given you? In what ways is God challenging you to use them?

God, protector and provider of all, thank you for the generosity you have shown me.

- To go deeper: Read Exodus 1:1–22.

Moses: God Speaks

Then [God] said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground."

(Exodus 3:5)

Moses was attracted to the burning bush because he saw that it was not being consumed. As Moses drew closer, God told Moses to take off his shoes in reverence of the holy ground he was standing on. The same God who called Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob now called Moses to the noble task of leading God's Chosen People out of slavery in Egypt and back to the Promised Land. Moses doubted his ability to stand against mighty Pharaoh, but God assured Moses he did not go alone, God would always be with him.

God speaks to each of us and challenges us to help free others from the various forms of slavery—addiction, abuse, and so on—prevalent today.

How does God get your attention? Once God has your attention, are you open to hearing what God has to say?

God who calls us closer, help me to be open to hearing your voice.

- To go deeper: Read Exodus 3:1–15.

Moses: Pleading for His People

Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Let my people go.'"

(Exodus 5:1)

Despite Pharaoh's defiance and refusal to allow God's people to go free, Moses was a persistent spokesperson for God. Time and time again, Moses went before Pharaoh as God's advocate and requested that the Israelites be freed from slavery. Because of Moses's faithfulness to God, the freedom of God's people was eventually won.

Advocates who call for justice are needed in our world today. Because of the persistence of specific individuals, freedom from oppression is won for many. Some examples of modern-day advocates are Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Nelson Mandela, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

How can you be an advocate for justice?

God, let me be an advocate for those who suffer injustice today. Help me be persistent in seeking justice for all.

- To go deeper: Read Exodus 5:1–13.

Moses: Reliant on God

Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.

(Exodus 17:6)

Moses was an instrument of God's grace in the life of the Israelites as they made their way through the desert. Interceding on behalf of the Israelites, Moses petitioned Yahweh for fresh water when there was none or when it was bitter tasting. When the people cried for food, Moses promised that God would send manna and quail. Despite the constant complaints of the people and their impatience with God, Moses continued to rely on God completely. Moses's example eventually helped the Israelites to also rely on God.

Our complete reliance on God can help others understand that God does provide for all our needs. But we may have to listen to the grumbling of some people who are not satisfied with God's timing.

When have you had to rely completely on God? How was your reliance a witness to others?

God of providence, we rely on you because we know you will not disappoint us.

- To go deeper: Read Exodus 16:4–15, 17:1–7.

Moses: Lawgiver

Then God delivered all these commandments.

(Exodus 20:1, NAB)

Moses is known as the lawgiver because the Ten Commandments came to the Israelites from God through Moses. Moses helped the Jewish people understand how keeping God's Commandments would unite them as a people and foster human dignity. He showed them how to integrate these standards of morality into their daily life. The Commandments reminded them that they were to live holy lives and to avoid partaking in the immorality and idolatry of their neighbors.

The Ten Commandments continue to function as the moral foundation of Christian life today. Refresh your understanding of the Ten Commandments and their application to your life as a young adult.

How do the Ten Commandments serve as a guide for you in making good moral decisions in your daily life?

God of wisdom and compassion, thank you for giving us the Ten Commandments as a guide for living your law of love.

- To go deeper: Read Exodus 20:1–21.

Moses: Denied the Promised Land

Then Moses, the servant of the LORD, died there in the land of Moab, at the LORD's command. He was buried in a valley in the land of Moab.

(Deuteronomy 34:5–6)

After leading the Israelites for forty years, Moses died before he was able to cross the Jordan River into the Promised Land. Moses did, however, see a glimpse of the Promised Land from Mount Pisgah in Moab. Moses had been faithful to God in leading the Israelites out of slavery, but Joshua was the one God had chosen to lead the Israelites into Canaan.

Part of the frustration of working hard for a cause or an organization is that we may not see the long-term result of our efforts. It is helpful to remember that we benefit from the people who worked hard to prepare the way for us, and our hard work will prepare the way for those who come after us.

Which task(s) that you have given a great amount of time and hard work to will need to be finished by someone else?

God, give me the strength to do my very best even with those tasks that are someone else's to finish.

- To go deeper: Read Deuteronomy 34:1–12.