

[Genesis 28:10-22](#)

The other day our cat got trapped in Mark's bedroom and weed on his duvet. Going up to the loft to find a spare duvet for him, I had to fight past a couple of blankets and several pillows. Thankfully, none of those pillows was a stone like Jacob uses in our reading (verse 11). Unlike him, I don't think I would fall asleep easily on a stone pillow. Just how tired was he?

Now you may wonder why Jacob's dream is a suitable reading for a church anniversary, and the answer comes in his naming of the place as Bethel (verse 19), for that means 'house of God.'

Yet this is no house of God in the sense of a permanent building structure where God's people gather to worship. Rather, it's a site where God is at work in the formation of a people for his praise through the patriarchs.

And what we learn here about God's formation of Israel applies in New Testament terms to his formation of the church.

Firstly, the people of God are formed by *God's initiative*.

I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. (Verse 13)

It's God's idea to form a people for himself. The people of Israel were not just another nation that emerged from ancient history, and the Christian church is not merely a human institution. God took the initiative. Why?

For the salvation of the world. God's choice of Israel and his election of the church is not just a case of choosing people for their own salvation whereas he doesn't choose others. No! He chooses and makes his people for a purpose: we are chosen so that we are a light to the nations. God chooses us so that we reflect his light in the world and that others might be attracted to the Light of the World, Jesus himself.

Now we are used to understanding that in an individual way. Each one of us is a witness to Christ. But we also need to understand it together as the fellowship of the Church. As the community of Christ we are called to be a light to the nations, beginning in our local area and spreading as far as we may be sent by God.

The Christian Church is not an accident. An individual congregation like this is not an accident, either. God made the first move to create this community and call it according to his purposes, of shining his light in the darkness.

So if we are here by God's initiative, it's an important question to ask how we are shining the light of Christ here and beyond our walls.

If we can identify how we are shining the light of Christ to the wider world, then we are at least in some respects fulfilling our purpose as a church. But if we realise we are not doing so, then we have some hard considerations. Either we must find ways, or we must close, because we're only a pretend church.

Secondly, the people of God are formed by *God's promise*.

Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. (Verse 14)

There are things we need to do for the growth of God's people to come. We cannot be passive. We must have intent if we are to grow. But before all that, the growth of the church is about God's promise. He will make Israel 'like the dust of the earth', and Jesus famously promised that he would build his church. It all starts with God's promise.

So are we seeing the growth of the church? Are people around the world hearing the Gospel through the Christian church? The answers to such questions are a very certain 'yes'.

But what about us? So many of our churches are declining and aging drastically. Churches are closing all over the country. That doesn't sound like God's promise of a growing church, does it?

I think the fairest summary of the overall situation would be to say that in some places we are losing many of the battles against the spirit of darkness, but overall we are winning the war.

But even if that's the case, we still have to grapple with our decline in contrast to God's promise of growth. There are many reasons throughout history why churches decline and close. Sometimes, it's because they are not sharing the Good News. Other times, it's due to hostility in wider society against the Gospel. In some cases, it's a bit of both. Or it could be something else, like being disunited so that we can't demonstrate the love of God to the world.

If we are declining when God's promise is for growth, we need an honest examination of why that is so. When we have identified why, we need to ask whether that reason can be reversed. If we are not sharing the Gospel, will we learn to do so? If we are disunited, will we be reconciled so that we can show God's love to others? If we are in a hostile society, can we find ways of being a winsome witness to Christ despite that?

How we answer these questions help us decide what to do if – like many traditional churches in our culture – we are not seeing God's promise of growth.

How will we respond in our churches?

Thirdly, the people of God are formed by *God's grace*.

I could have begun with this point. But it's also the theme behind the two other points about God's initiative and God's promise. The formation and development of God's people is a matter of God's grace.

After all, this is a story about Jacob. How come he's travelling? He's on the run after deceiving his twin brother Esau out of their father Isaac's blessing. Esau wants blood. Jacob is hardly saintly.

Yet for all that, as the patriarch of the next generation, God is using him in his long term plans to form the people of God. Yes, this scheming, self-centred man! He's not exactly the ideal material, is he?

However, when God intervenes in his life here via the dream at Bethel, Jacob responds with a vow that if God will provide for him and protect him, then the stone he lays will be the house of God and he will give a tenth of all he has back to God (verses 20-22).

In other words, grace transforms sinners.

One of my college lecturers said to me once, 'Never forget that every church is a company of sinners.' And when we look deeply at ourselves, isn't that true? Like Jacob, we are unpromising material. We are not obviously saints in the making – at least not when left to our own devices.

But isn't it also true that over the years we have seen God work changes in our lives as we have responded to all he has done for us in Jesus Christ? Has not the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus coaxed out a response from us to God's grace?

No, we are not the finished article. We are not people who have got it all together. We are like broken pieces, glued together with gold, like the Japanese art of Kintsugi – and that's what makes us beautiful.

For the world isn't always attracted to the smooth operators who seem to have got it all together, whereas broken, fallible people like us who are utterly dependent on the grace of God are a more welcome proposition. We are more relatable.

So for all the challenges that this story is to us, ultimately it's good news. As God's initiative in forming the people of God calls us to be a light to the nations and as God's promise of growth challenges us to face difficult questions if we're not growing, in the final analysis it all comes down to grace.

And God's grace is the most remarkable and wonderful thing, making beautiful creations out of broken people. While we believe that, and live out that truth, there is always hope.