There are over 500 phobias that are common enough to have a name. New phobias are continually being added to the list such as Nomophobia (the fear of being out of cell phone coverage) or Technophobia (the fear of technology) or Cyberphobia (the fear of computers).

Atelophobia is the fear of not being good enough. This phobia demonstrates an exaggerated fear of any type of imperfection and is a particular malady for perfectionists among us. It can take many forms—the fear of not being smart enough or pretty enough or funny enough.

How about the fear of not being spiritual enough? Do you ever feel like you don’t pray enough? You don’t read your Bible enough. You don’t share your faith enough. Maybe you feel disqualified from serving God because of past mistakes, persistent bad habits or nagging temptations that make you feel as though you don’t measure up.

If you ever feel as though your Christian life is a jumbled mass of fits and starts, you’re in good company. Biblical people were unpredictable, an amalgam of faith and fear. There are no perfect Christians in Scripture. A perfect Christian would be considered an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms.

We’d like to think that one day we could come to the place where our spiritual life begins to flow effortlessly and free. I’ve been intentionally following Jesus for 40 years now, and it hasn’t happened yet.

Following Jesus is almost always messy. Church life is messy. Hang around in this or any other church community for any length of time and you’ll discover how messy interpersonal relationships can become. Life is messy!

If following Christ is messy, perhaps the life of Christian discipleship isn’t so inaccessible after all. God can write His story of redemption through the mess of our everyday lives.

Laurel and Hardy were a popular and critically acclaimed comedy act in the classic era of Hollywood from the 1930s. Ollie Hardy had a signature line whenever he and Stan Laurel got into a mess, “Well, here’s another nice mess you’ve gotten me into.” Jacob could have said that to his alter ego. Jacob made a mess of his life. He is born grabbing the heel of his twin brother. Jacob is
forever grabbing what belongs to his brother, Esau. He grabs his brother’s birthright and cons his father to receive the family blessing. His whole life has been predicated on striving. He is used to getting what he wants. Jacob finds it more blessed to get than to give.

Jacob’s conniving creates an enormous rupture in the Ben Isaac family. Esau resolves to get his revenge and Jacob is now, in our lesson, a man on the run. He is estranged from his brother and isolated from his family. Jacob is now, for the first time, utterly alone. This fugitive lies down on the dirt, with only a stone for a pillow.

There is no indication from the story that Jacob is particularly religious. He is simply doing what is expedient to keep from getting killed. God hasn’t played, heretofore, a prominent role in Jacob’s life. God appears to be working behind the scenes and off stage. It’s only when Jacob is asleep and lets his guard down that God steps into Jacob’s world. How often it happens when our unconscious is running the show that we come face-to-face with things we’ve been running away from all day long.

In Jacob’s dream, he imagines a stairway or ladder connecting heaven and earth. The old spiritual, “We are climbing Jacob’s ladder,” depicts this moment. Although the song specifies a ladder, I seriously doubt that Jacob envisions a large aluminum ladder; more likely he imagines a Mesopotamian ziggurat. The long, stone stairway leading to the temple shrine represents where gods resided. In Jacob’s dream, angels are ascending and descending on this stairway. Heaven is not a remote, self-contained realm. As the dream attests, heaven and earth are interconnected. There is interplay between heaven and earth. God is not simply enthroned in heaven. God has come to earth. God is standing next to Jacob and addresses him by name.

I would have expected God to speak strong words to offer Jacob following his deception. It wouldn’t have surprised me if God would have laid Jacob out for his hustling. Just who do you think you are, you lying little twit. Do you think that you can get away with all this deception? There’s not a single word of judgment about Jacob’s deception. Maybe what Jacob requires most in this moment is encouragement, not discipline.

Those of you who are parents are forced to make this judgment call time and again. There’s a fine line between discipline and mercy. Sometimes you need to play the heavy and exercise discipline. At other times, mercy is needed most. God rehearses the promises made to Jacob’s grandfather Abraham and his
father, Isaac, because it’s critical to Jacob’s future well-being. In his future wanderings, he will have to hang onto God’s promises when there’s nothing else to hang onto. God issues Jacob three promises in verses 13-15. First, God reminds Jacob of the promise of land: “The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring” (28:13). Second, there is the promise of descendants as numerous as the dust of the earth (28:14). Third, there is the promise of God’s continued presence: “Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go and will bring you back to the land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you” (28:15).

This dream serves as Jacob’s ah-ha moment: “Surely the Lord is in the place and I did not know it” (28:16). Jacob calls this deserted place Bethel, meaning “house of God” and anoints his rock pillow as a lasting memorial. Then he makes a vow to the Lord: “If God will be with me and [if God] will keep me in this way that I go and [if God] will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear so that I will come again to my father’s house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God” (28:20-21).

Earlier, God issued to Jacob one unconditional promise after another. Yet Jacob’s response is peppered with conditions. If you will be with me and keep me safe and provide food and clothing, then you’ll earn the right to be my God. God’s promises are unconditional; Jacob’s vows are strictly conditional.

Could it be that Jacob, ever the hustler, is now trying to hustle God? Jacob has some growing to do, like all of us. Which of us hasn’t, at some desperate moment, cried out to God, If you will get me out of this mess, I will serve you for the rest of my life?

Jacob is setting out on a journey to find his true self. His transformation won’t be instantaneous. He doesn’t yet have awareness into the depth of his own sin. His journey will become messy as he traverses from willfulness to willingness.

Jacob, as I’ve said before, is not the real hero in this story. God is the real hero of Scripture.

Jacob’s story is told to remind us there is hope for strivers like us. I trust you are beginning to see yourself in this story. In all our attempts to get what we want, can we trust God’s presence and mercy to prevail?

God keeps His promises! God honors His promises even to conniving, little twits like Jacob. If this is true for Jacob, there’s hope for us, too.

I was cutting the grass a few weeks ago following a rainstorm, and there was a rainbow stretching across the sky from one end to the other. God
created rainbows to remind Noah and his descendents of God’s covenantal love.

The promise given to Jacob, “Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go,” is everywhere in Scripture. Matthew begins his gospel by announcing the birth of Jesus. The name given to Jesus in Matthew’s gospel is Emmanuel, which is most often translated “God with us.” The precise translation of the Hebrew word Immanuel is instructive: Im (with) manu (us) El (God). Since with-us God is linguistically awkward, we more often speak of “God with us.”

The first thing Matthew tells us about this Messiah is that “they shall call him Emmanuel which means God with us” (1:23). If you fast forward to the last verse in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus announces to his disciples, “And, remember, I am with you always, even to the close of the age” (28:20), Matthew brackets his gospel with this “God with us” imagery. From beginning to end, God is with us.

Some of you harbor a considerable amount of cynicism about this Biblical claim that God is with us. You may feel as though God is largely absent from your life. You may regard God as something of a no-show.

Even when it seems like God is absent, God is present with us. Maybe you are experiencing a season of God’s apparent absence. This “with-us” God will not leave or forsake us. No matter what happens, God is with us.

God offers the wonderful invitation to be with us. So, it begs the question, what are we doing to be with him? That’s why we are urging you this fall to establish a spiritual growth plan.

The story of Jacob is turning out to be a remarkable story of grace. God decides this is not the time for harsh rebuke and stern judgment. God gives Jacob promises to take hold of and live into.

When John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, was on his death bed, the family joined in prayer around his bedside. Afterwards, John Wesley whispered, “The best of all, God is with us.” He then raised his feeble arms and reiterated in a loud voice, “The best of all, God is with us.”

John Wesley died with these words on his lips. My hope and prayer is that you might live with these words on your heart. The best of all, God is with us.

“The best of all, God is with us.”
- John Wesley