

George Philip Bible Readings

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THE BOOK OF GENESIS

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Intro

This is the book of beginnings, recording the beginning of creation, mankind, sin and judgment. It reveals in the first eleven chapters the need of man for a Mediator and Saviour. In the first chapters God first deals with the whole world, and twice over we find the world of men failing, first in the Garden of Eden and then in the Flood. After this God turns from the world to one family in Abraham, that through the seed of Abraham He might bring to the world, not merely His word, but His salvation through the man Christ Jesus. Genesis is *not* a scientific text book, and we will not linger with controversy about the first chapters, save to say science seems to have discovered no facts in conflict with the record given in the Bible. All sorts of debates and even arguments go on regarding, for example, the meaning of “days” in the creation story, but that is not the area of our objective in these studies. Rather we seek in every passage a word from God for application to daily living.

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1:1

When these notes were first written in 1960 for use in the congregation we, and most other congregations, were still using the Authorised Version. The first four words of the Bible are simple, free from argument, and full of grandeur and glory. In the beginning God: God who know what He was doing and was able to do it with ease and confidence. None could question Him. None can question Him now, nor at the end, for He is God and there is none else. In Him we live and move and have our being. From Him we come; and to Him we go. Before His face we live every moment of life; and from Him we derive every breath we draw. He is a God with whom we have to do, and we must learn to allow God to be God in His own world. He owns and rules what He has made and will bring it to its appointed end in spite of men and devils. This is the confidence of the Christian. God is not dead! But you would think He was by the way we ignore Him. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom!

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1:1-5

The work begins and it is very quiet, free from ostentation and giving the impression of great ease. It was all so simple and the first thing is light; for God is light and in Him is no darkness at all (1 John 1: 5). Some say that between verses 1 and 2 there was a great catastrophe whereby the earth became without form and void and what we read here is really a story of re-creation. This terrible calamity is linked with Isaiah 14:12-17 which speaks of the fall of Lucifer and could explain the presence of the Serpent in the Garden of Eden. But the verses do not necessarily need this explanation. Of course, the Bible does not explain everything. Note how the work was done. The Spirit of God brooded over that which was empty, formless and dark; the word of God was spoken, and the light dispelled the darkness. Already we have a wondrous picture. Sovereign unchallengeable power linked with light that is gentle and good and so healthy. But, as the Bible says, men like the dark because their deeds are evil (John 3:19).

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1:6-19

We are now in the story of how the earth is brought from its original unformed condition into a well ordered coherent unity, each part carefully planned and hand made. It is all so smoothly accomplished, and the end product is pleasing to God. Trace very carefully the repetition of the words “and God”. Link all the instances together, then let the throb of the words: and God... and God... and God... register in your mind, heart and spirit till all doubt and fear departs and you thrill with the echo of the onward marching footsteps of God in the world and in your own life. When you begin to see the workmanship of God in your own life, you too will say, behold it is very good. Read the words of the Hymn “Lord of all being, throned afar,” then pray to the great God who is so near to you at this very moment. But be honest with Him. Remember He is light!

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1:20-25

How far have we come? First light; then order and control, then fruit and foliage after its kind, or in all its varieties (v.11), then light focused and set in rhythm and pattern giving times for labour and times for rest. But in measure all was yet still, although full of beauty and grandeur. Now He makes the living creatures in all their varieties, filling the earth with their colours and songs. What a mind God has, full of fascination and creativity. Life cannot be dull if you live with Him; there is too much to see and hear and enjoy. This is one of the things a real conversion does for you. It opens your eyes to see the beauties around you in things and people and gives you so much sheer delight your heart nearly bursts. How barren is a godless life, with everything reduced to monotonous grey. But this garden that God is preparing is for someone as we shall see tomorrow. God works very hard to make your life a thing of beauty and pleasure. Don't spoil it!

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1:26-31

God said, "Let *us*..." He had someone with Him, His own Son, and as they were together in holy satisfying and satisfied love, so were they together in desire and in work. Such was their love and life that they longed for others to share in it. Thus man was made with a capacity for thought, love, fellowship, response, decision and labour. He was made to be as the son of a king, to rule and to subdue, and to that end all was provided. God made man with a self-respect and dignity as part of his being, and some of that greatness and glory still remains unseen, like the ruins of a castle. You can see the lines and dimensions but the glory is departed. What went wrong? Well, God wanted men to be like His own Son, willingly submissive, gladly responsive, eagerly obedient in love and service. He had to make man real, not a tin soldier. But man loved himself rather than God with the result that man's life and pleasure were marred and God's heart broken. There is no pain like that of unrequited love. God knows it: that is why he can be a God of comfort.

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2:1-3

These verses finish off chapter 1 where, having made man, God blesses, commissions and provides. Now, God having finished what He set out to do, He rests; not because He is tired, but because He desires to have delight in and fellowship with that which He has made. God made us for Himself, and He blesses and sets apart the seventh day, making it distinct as a day upon which no work is to be done, in order that God might have man to Himself, and that man might find his true function by having both opportunity and means of drawing near to God. Never forget that in our lives the whole week flows from the Sunday. If we do not make use of it aright for meeting with God, and thereby getting our bearings on eternal things, we shall most certainly by the end of another week be even further astray and adrift. The sanctifying good of Sunday is often marred and undone by our activities after church services. Be careful how you spend your Sundays, lest it be the beginning of your backsliding. Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. That is a command from God (Exod.20:8).

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2:4-15

In the first chapter all the emphasis is on God Himself and His work. Now the focus is on man, telling us what he is and what he is for. He is made of the dust of the earth. Yet he is not merely physical body, his spirit is of the breath of God. In no sense is man his own master or his own property. He is made by God and for God, and is the object of all God's love and care as evidenced here in the garden prepared for him, in which were first, things of beauty to thrill him and draw out from him the highest and most sensitive response, then things of necessity for food. God also gives the dignity of work, necessary for our pleasure. There is nothing but misery in feeling you are no use, and have no real function or purpose in life. Dignity and purpose are given to Adam. All is ordered for him; the possibilities of his life are immense; and it is for him to make or mar the scheme of things. We are being prepared for the tragedy of chapter three, and there is no greater tragedy than that of God-given opportunity and potential being wasted. What are you doing with the life God has given you? Using it for yourself, or for God?

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2:4-17

Two verses in the reading are added to yesterday's passage because of its importance. Man is so made that there is the possibility of rising up to the heights or descending to the degradation of the dust. No good thing was withheld from him, even the tree of life in the midst of the garden was offered freely. But there was a restriction, as there must always be, for man is not God, and must be warned for his own good not to seek to be as God. The tree of the .knowledge of good and evil was a test of obedience as it was also a gracious but stern warning. There is a retribution that instantly attends our disobeying God and our stepping outwith the gracious limits He has set for our life and good. The death spoken of may not be seen immediately, and that makes it all the more frightening, for the inward spiritual decay will eat away the vitals of life, and then without warning the crash will come. Be sure you are right with God, walking in His ordered way, and make sure of each step before you take it. Afterwards is too late.

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2:18-25

We have seen Adam, God's instrument. We have seen Eden, God's provision for his need. Now we see God's care in bringing to Adam's side one to care for him and be a help to him in the work he was called to do. In beautiful and poetic language we have the story of the making of the woman, fashioned according to the tenderness of God's care, and with a capacity for love and loyalty that sets her in a category by herself. Here is the true dignity of woman - a sphere of service that she alone can fill. Note how Adam did not have to seek for his help-meet. God brought her to him. That is by far the safest way, for it excludes error. When God brought her, Adam knew at once that this was his God-given wife. Young people, trust this part of life to God also. Do not presume or snatch. God brings together unmistakably those he purposes for each other and such marriages, made in heaven, are blessed indeed. Note in v.24-25 the holy sanctity of human relationships. Guard them lest you do despite to the gifts of God.

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3:1-5

There is no argument in the Bible as to whether or not Satan exists. Nor are we given any explanation as to how he is found to be in the Garden of Eden. He is introduced here as working through the instrumentality of the serpent or shining one, and we find him at work right through the Bible until he is finally sealed in judgment in Revelation 20:10. Satan is not an ugly fiend and the base wrecks of humanity are his failures rather than successes. He can appear as an angel of light (2 Cor.11:14) and some of his great victories are seen in high and cultured persons who have no room for God or his Christ. Satan is not in Hell *yet*; it is prepared for him. He is, as Jesus called him, the Prince or ruler of this world order (John 12:31). Never mind where he came from, he is there and he goes about like a devouring beast seeking whom he may lure into his captivity. You will never cope with Christian life until you reckon upon the enemy. In personal life, church life and world life, we wrestle, not against flesh and blood (our own or other men's) but against spiritual hosts of wickedness led by the Enemy himself, and working according to well laid stratagems and plans. He is no haphazard worker like so many Christians. He means business; and we must reckon with him. Read the latter part of Ephesians (6:10ff.). Then remember this: the most important thing about the Devil is that Jesus Christ has conquered him.

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3:1-5

Think again of these verses: The word "serpent" here could read the "shining one". (cf. 2 Cor. 11:14). His very approach is a lie. Jesus said that very plainly in John 8:44. He is not what he seems; and in that he has many brothers and sisters. The woman is attracted even fascinated by his person, and thereby made open to the silky tones of suggestion. The first move is to instil the seed of doubt as to God's word. But God means what He says in the Bible *and* when He speaks to you in a sermon. He means it as radically as it sounds! Then Satan casts

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doubt on God's goodness, suggesting that God was withholding something good from them. The woman misquotes God in v.3 but reveals what she had taken from God's word. She knew her safety lay in keeping as far away from the tree as possible. Would that we would learn this and keep away from things and people that harm and hinder our Christian lives. Satan's last thrust is to deny plainly the consequences of sin (v.4). Then having prepared the way by suggestion and doubt, he finally appeals to the pride of her heart wherein there originates so much of the strife that blights a Christian fellowship. Better read the wise words in the hymn "Christian seek not yet repose" and note the repeated phrase "Watch and pray". Be on guard as Jesus exhorted His disciples (Matt.26:41). Or is it too late? Have you been beguiled already? Satan laughs at your discomfiture. You need Jesus!

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3:1-7

Now we complete the picture and see that Satan is evil and black in spite of all his craft and plausibility. God's highest gift to the man was the woman at his side and it was through her that Satan brought him down. Human relationships must be guarded very carefully. Perhaps Eve never meant to harm God's man or God's plans; but she did. Note how Satan directs her attention away from God to the tree with its attractiveness. It was fascinating because it was forbidden. She saw, desired and took. It was a slippery slope once her thoughts had begun to trifle with suggestion. But she did not stop. Nor do we. We need a companion in our wrong doing to make us feel a little more secure. She gave to her husband. This is the hellish thing about sin. We do not hurt only ourselves, but drag into the vortex of our error those nearest us, bringing to them as to ourselves the awareness of wrong and its accompanying shame. What an involved, complicated, chaotic mess! Better the restrictions, prohibitions and service of God, for therein is life. Satan's way is death. It is hell.

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3:1-8

Read the whole passage in the light of what has been said in these notes, adding what God has said to you privately as you have read them, and examine your Christian life. Are you in fellowship with God or have you been deluded and seduced away into paths of your own choosing by the suggestion and craft of Satan? How can you tell? Look at verse 8. Are you at peace in your soul, looking with open innocent face into the eyes of God and God's people? Or are you troubled with an uneasy conscience, secretive, hiding yourself away, and knowing that something has in fact died within your spirit? When you hear the voice of the Lord you will not thrill to it as before, but will retreat within your own thoughts, shut yourself up in unfriendly isolation (save for your companions in crime) and you will even be resentful at the voice that speaks to you. You have got lost. You are a prodigal and need to come to yourself before it is too late and humbly seek your Father's face and His restoration. Don't delay: Do it right now!

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3:7-13

If the first seven verses of the chapter tell of sin and its subjective consequence of misery and shame, these verses tell of the reckoning with God. Be sure your sin will find you out. You can never get off with it, for it is discovered to God, *and* to people. Note that they did not enjoy their sin. They tried to make a brave show of it and cover it up, and then they ran to hide from God. But God knew all was not well and He came calling for the son and servant he had lost. The one upon whom He had showered so many things, and for whose life He had planned so great service, had been lost to Him. When you think that God is the one most hurt by our sin it makes you feel a miserable heel, and rightly so. But God comes looking for us. Hallelujah! But He asks questions that have to be answered. In v.12 while it seems Adam is blaming the woman, he is really blaming God. Something of God's horror of sin is in the words (13) "what is this thou hast done?". Perhaps the woman meant that since God had allowed the serpent to be in the garden it was His fault all this happened. This is true to life. We impulsively make decisions, act on them, involve ourselves and others, and generally make a mess. Then we often say, "Oh, but I prayed about it", meaning that God should have kept us right. Did you pray, and

wait for guidance before you acted; or did you taste the forbidden fruit then pray for guidance? The latter is not much use!

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3:14-15

Now there begins God's word of judgment upon sin, and it deals first with the source and origin of all our sin and sorrow, Satan himself. The word to him is one of unqualified judgment and utter humiliation, together with the promise of one-to-come, born of a woman (Jesus), who would as a man, face him and conquer him. Be practical about this. Satan who engineered the fall of Adam is still set upon his work with all the craft at his disposal. When our hearts are most set on Christ, the evil one will hurl his black accusations and attractive temptations at us, or seek with subtle craft to distract us through self-pitying, self-gratifying thoughts. He is our sworn enemy; and the closer we are to Christ the more we shall taste the vitriolic hatred of the Devil. Such enmity was promised from the very beginning and shall be there to the end. Think it not strange if your Christian life is a battle (1 Pet.4:12-14). Remember, Jesus is stronger than Satan. That has been proved in a human life; and that same Jesus has given us the victory.

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3:14-19

Note in the progress of these verses how each person is dealt with individually. First Satan, the originator of the chaos; then the woman who was the instrument or intermediary; then the man who was the chosen servant of God. Remember also that God's word of mercy promising a Saviour was spoken before His word of judgment. But God teaches us here that there are temporal consequences following upon sin. There are rules, and if we break them, there is a price to pay in terms of present human unhappiness and struggle. The way of the transgressor is hard (Proverbs 13:15 AV). We should be glad it is so, that our soreness in sinning might be a reminder to us of the price of disobedience and a great deterrent when future temptation arises. When shall we learn that the way of holiness and obedience is the way of health and happiness in this present life as well as the next? Be sure of this: sin does not pay, and it always finds us out, sooner rather than later.

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3:20-21

It is time to read over this whole chapter from the beginning to see from the start the evil work of Satan whereby God's garden and God's man were defiled. Then we must see in v.21 how God, in His free and sovereign grace, by the death of some innocent sacrifice, made a covering for man to meet the issue of his sin. Already the Bible begins to point forward to the final sacrifice of the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world. The mercy of God and His forgiveness are so great they are almost unbelievable. Man's own efforts to meet his need as a sinner failed (v.7). God alone can save, and He has set forth His Son Jesus Christ to be the Saviour of all. To turn away from this Saviour whom God has given is greater sin than anything else in life (John 3: 18-19). To live without Christ is to die without Christ; and to return to the dust without hope, and that death is eternal. Better make sure of the basic things of life and of death. Now is the time to think hard!

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3:22-24

The Bible picture of man is complete. He is, because of sin, not only a creature marked by struggle, futility, and hunger for fulfilment. He is a creature under judgment, alienated from God, and facing His wrath. The Gospel we must preach is therefore first and foremost a message of salvation from sin and death and Hell; and only secondarily the story of the One who can satisfy the heart of man. The two go together, but must be kept in their right order. It is when the soul is saved that the whole of life begins to be saved and transformed, and man begins to find himself being drawn back into enjoyable fellowship with God in all the delights of paradise regained. This is the life and joy we forfeit when we sin. Is it worth it? Have you not found the pleasures of sin to be very highly priced and temporary (Heb.11:24-25;Rom.6:19-23).

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4:1-5

We are not finished with the subject of sin. Adam and Eve were only beginning to realise how great an issue of complication and involvement there is with sin, not only in their own lives but in those whom they would not naturally desire to hurt. Sin has consequences, not least in the fact that even the forgiveness of God cannot restore innocence! It can never be quite the same even though God's grace over-rules and brings good out of it. Sin remains sin and is never justified, never necessary. The story of the parents is repeated in that of the children, with the issue extending to murder. What a lesson to all who have the care of young people. It seems the two men had been taught by parents or by God concerning worship. There is only one way to worship and that is to come to God as He has ordained, facing the facts of sin and judgment and the need for a sacrifice for sin. Cain offered the fruits of his labours. Abel offered a lamb slain as the way of acceptance. One was accepted; the other rejected. Ponder the story of the tax collector and the Pharisee who both went to church, and with what result (Lk.18:9-14). How you come to worship will determine what you get and how you go home.

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4:6-8

Cain was a proud man who felt he was as good as other men, although that does not necessarily mean much! When his pride was offended we begin to see the real man, and the offence of the word God spoke to him is expressed in the murder of his brother. This was done on the way home from church and is repeated down the ages. The intensity of conflict between those who bow to God's word and those who do not is frightening, but not to be wondered at (cf. 3: 15). Then note in 4:6-7 how sin is spoken of first as a beast waiting to spring and devour, then as a person ("him"). You cannot separate sin and Satan, and the sooner we learn the danger of trifling with either, the better it will be for us. What darkness is here concealed behind a facade of religion. Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees which is hypocrisy (Lk.12:1-2).

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4:9-12

What have you done? A good thought for morning or evening; and a question God requires to be answered. Am I my brother's keeper? YES! That is why you may not live your life as you please; and also the reason why your life as a Christian will always be narrower than the full liberty God's grace has given to you. This story is a repeat of chapter three, and Cain's sin finds him out, brings him to the time of reckoning, and he hears the judgment of God telling that he will live with the consequences of his own misdeeds. He will labour without reward, wander without a place to rest, and with no peace to rest even if opportunity came. These are but the beginnings of the price of sin as

we see tomorrow. Note very carefully as you ponder this story that it was Cain's proud heart which would not bow to God's word that caused his life to go all wrong, and not vice-versa. If things are going wrong with you, examine your secret heart and life before God. If you wander there, the obvious crash will come sooner or later.

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4:13-16

Cain goes out and is now twice removed from the presence of God. He goes out to God's second best; to be a castaway, of no further use in service; to live a wasted life, unproductive and in fact destructive as the record of Scripture shows. All this began in the secret backsliding of his life, and that began in the pride of his heart. How terrible and how frightening! It could have been otherwise. God pleaded and gave opportunity of repentance in v.6-7, and again in v.9. In v.13 Cain is full of remorse; he is sorry for himself but is not repentant. He even seems to accuse God of being too hard on him. But God knows the havoc of sin in a human life too well to be soft with it. Perhaps at the outset of Christian life we need to be dealt with far more severely to give us a healthy fear of sin and pride. Better that, sore though it may be, than a life wasted. Even in rejection the mercy of God is

seen in the mark of protection on Cain. Before you pray read Wesley's hymn, "O Jesus, full of pardoning grace, more full of grace than I of sin."

(For reasons beyond me, modern hymn-books start the hymn, "Oh Jesus, full of truth and grace". But read Romans 5:20 AV)

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4:17-26

The tide of evil is rising and we have the beginnings of a civilisation built upon godlessness; a work set up in defiance of a rejected God. God was not in all their thoughts. Their glory was in man whom they thought was the master of things. Look at the world they made and liken it to our day. There was bigamy with its basic lust, and it was unrebuked. There was contempt of life and boasting of cruelty and killing (23-24) and there was no punishment in terms of retribution or correction. Even at that time people seem to have believed in allowing hooligans freedom to express themselves and then skulk in the protection of society that no longer has the virility and sensibility to see that rightful punishment is both necessary and justified. But this civilisation had the seeds of decay in it and in due time it reaped the harvest. But God had His people. He was not making as much noise as the godless but He was there and He was at work. He still has His people who call on His name. Fear not! The issue is not in doubt, nor is it out of control. Remember the story Jesus told of the weeds and the wheat, the good and the bad in Matt. 13:24-30). Let both grow together till the harvest which comes in due time.

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5:1-32

By man came death (1 Cor.15:21) and this whole chapter gives the lie to the word of the Devil in 3:4. Adam had a son, a sinner like himself, and so it was all along. No matter their achievements the last word is the same ... "and then he died". Dust thou art and to dust thou shalt return (3:19). Three-score years and ten is our allocation and it speeds away (Ps.90:10). How much of it is gone? What have you to show for it? How much of it has eternal lasting quality? The things that are seen are temporal, take that away and what have you left? Apart from Christ and the Gospel this is a picture of desolation. But we have here the godly line of Seth and this brings us within the grace of God. Even here there is among these names a variety of worth. There will be the unknown heroes who work all unseen and un-honoured by the world, yet known to God. There will be the saints who shine like beacon lights in darkness. There will be the wasted lives with nothing to show. Time flies. Make sure it is not wasted!

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5:18-24

Circumstances were not easy for Enoch, because the wickedness of the world was working towards the climax of judgment in the flood. Yet this man, a family man, walked with God. It was not always thus. At first the record says he lived like all the rest; then there was a change, and from the birth of his first son right to the end of his life he walked with God. There is something peaceful and unhurried about this picture: two persons side by side, keeping in step, conversing happily, and delightfully contented with each other's company. Enoch's will was swallowed up in God and he had no desire to rush ahead or lag behind. Enoch was no recluse; he was a preacher of righteousness (Jude 14-15); and he had this testimony that he pleased God (Heb.11:5). They walked together into the sunrise of a new day. The story is told of a child going home after Sunday School who was asked by her mother what the lesson had been about. She replied that it was about a man who went for walks with God, and one day they walked so far that God said to him, "You had better come in and stay". What an epitaph!

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5:25-32

Such a list of names as is found in this chapter teaches many lessons. When we see one life leading into and overlapping another we realise the truth of John 4:38. "Other men have laboured and you have entered into their labours." Methuselah, for all his long years, did not live to see the full fruit of his life, for it came two generations later in the person and work of Noah. The old man lived long enough to see his eldest son, Lamech, die. Perhaps his sorrow was tempered by the fact that he could discern in his grandson Noah the marks of a chosen vessel for God. Who can tell the influence of this man's life; what direction it gave to others; what encouragement and inspiration? We cannot tabulate the results of our work and prayers and influence. It is God who gives the increase. But if we are faithful, then in the world to come, if not in this one, our true worth will be seen by all, and the reward will be ours to enjoy for ever.

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6:1-4

This begins a new section in which we see the virus of sin spreading and bringing a harvest of evil marked by confusion and mystery. The phrase "sons of God" is very difficult. Some say it speaks of the men of the godly line of Seth foolishly and wilfully taking wives from among the rejected line of Cain, thereby losing their separation unto God and of course their usefulness. Their choice of life partner was based on appearance, a very risky thing! Perhaps having chosen in haste they repented in leisure! Others say the verses speak of some unholy union between spiritual beings and humans, resulting in issue that is extra-ordinary. Perhaps something of demon possession of human lives is suggested here. Consider 2 Peter 2: 4-5; Jude 6-7; Romans 1: 24-32. Whatever the explanation, it was man's doing and the issue was confusion and evil. Yet God gave them time to repent. The long-suffering of God is amazing; but never forget it has a limit set!

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6:5-8

Men boasted of their renown, and they had a reputation (4b). God saw wickedness. Note the words used, thoughts and imaginations and inclinations. These things are the source of action. There lies the heart of the battle of holiness (cf. Philippians 4: 8). The declaration in Gen.16:13, "You are the God who sees me" (Thou God seest me AV), is a word of great comfort, as it is meant to be, when your heart is true. But it is also a sobering thought to evil thinkers and secret evil speakers and doers. God saw, and knew such evil could not go unchecked or else it would corrupt a whole world. And God purposed and ordained judgment. But note what the passage tells us about God. This wrongdoing of the children whom He loved and blessed grieved Him at His heart. He was broken-hearted, and we must see a weeping God (cf. Luke 19:41). If we could but remember this we would sin less. When we transgress we drag our God and our blessed Jesus into the mire with us; we cause grief to the hearts that love us; we scorn the hands that have held and helped us; and we don't care. But God does. Isn't sin terrible! Why do we do it? Oh for soft, sensitive hearts to make us want to be good.

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6:9-14

Noah found grace (v.8 AV), favour in the eyes of the Lord. Or better, grace found Noah, for it was the grace of God alone that kept this man in the midst of such wickedness. It is by the grace of God that we are what we are, and if that grace were removed or withheld there is no saying where we would end. The grace of God was worked out in Noah's life in his walk with God, in his own character, and in his relationships with people. Such a man is the chosen instrument of God as the word and work of judgment become operative. But even as the voice of judgment speaks in v.13, the voice of mercy speaks to provide the way of escape in v.14. The judgment of God and its necessity lie at the basis of life itself and it is time we began seriously to prepare to meet God (Amos 4:12). Then when we fear before God, we are ready to see a cross where heaven's love and heaven's justice meet. God so loved the world. Can you plumb the depth of such a verse? Can you understand why so many see so little to be desired in it? That is their final condemnation.

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6:15-22

All through these verses it is God who speaks. It is His ark, not Noah's. God commands, instructs in exact detail, promises that the flood will be no accident but a deliberate, planned act of God. There is an amazing thoroughness about God's ways, something almost relentless. "Though the mills of God grind slowly, yet they grind exceeding small; Though with patience He stands waiting, with exactness grinds He all" (Longfellow). But always mingled with His judgments there is mercy, for God looks ahead to the new creation that will emerge from the floods of anguish. Note also that God does not remain detached from the dread horror of His ways. He is right there in the midst. His word to Noah is to *come* into the ark, *not go* into the ark. God is there. What a comfort in the dark days of discipline and trial. We may not see Him, nor even sense His nearness. But He is there. Trust Him. Read Job chapter 23. It will help you to fight on.

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7:1-6

The last verse of yesterday's reading and v.5 today mark out Noah's life. He obeyed God; and that without question. For one hundred years perhaps (cf.5:32 and 7:6) the ark was being built on dry land with no evidence of any possibility of it ever being floated. For all that time Noah, a solitary witness, preached righteousness (2 Pet.2:5) and a message of judgment to come. He warned a decadent race of the retribution that would be the consequence of their godless ways, and was laughed to scorn. How many thought Noah was a good fellow but went a bit too far, too extreme, in his preaching? They would not believe! But the judgment came and they all perished, save those in the safety of God's provided salvation. Now, Jesus said, "As it was in the days of Noah ... so shall it be". (Matt. 24:30-51). I believe in the judgment to come. If you do, live your life accordingly.

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7:7-15

Noah so believed the word God had spoken, that he entered the ark anticipating the waters of the flood *before* they were seen. Heb. 11:7 says they were not seen *as yet*. Be quite sure of this: unbelief shall yet be confounded by the acts of God. Think of the solemnity with which Noah and his family entered the ark, accompanied by the jeers of the godless worldlings so soon to perish. How heavy the godly man's heart must have been. Then in the ark they sat and waited. Did they have doubts? Perhaps they had for they were human. But, they had learned that when God had spoken their strength was to sit still. (Isa. 30: 7). It is a tremendous thing to realise that God *is* at work in the world. It increases in solemnity when you know that He marches on unhindered towards the day of final judgment. It becomes fearful when you are aware that your own person and life are involved. But oh how comforting it is when, in spite of failures and blunders, you know your heart and will are set on obeying God. It is then that you know the peace of His love; and there is no fear, because perfect love (God's love) casts out fear.

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7:16-24

Why should a Christian ever be afraid? He is totally secure, as Noah was, for God shut him in. It is not we who hold on to God; He holds us, with a grasp that will never slip. That is the comfort of the doctrine of predestination. No doubt Noah knew *he* was safe, but what were his thoughts as he watched the rising tides of judgment and saw the anguish of those who were perishing? One thing would be certain; he would be glad beyond measure that he had been so faithful and constant in his preaching. He was free from any guilt as to their death. We must not be too emotional about this. But being factual, we must recognise the urgency of the Gospel, and the responsibility that rests on each Christian to witness a good confession before all. Remember that all some people will ever hear or know of Christ is what they see in you at work or at home. Let your light shine. Do not cloud it. Be right from the heart out! (cf.Ezek.33:7-11; Acts 20: 26-27).

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7:16-24

Ponder this passage again for a gracious word for a Sunday. No matter the increase of the waters of judgment; no matter the sound and fury of the storm, Noah and family were safe. As the waters rose, so did the ark. It could not be overwhelmed. And, remember, God was in the ark: (6:18; 7:1) He never sends us out alone. His promised presence goes with us to give us rest and peace. When we pass through the waters, whatever they be, He is there, and His voice is able in a moment to hush the storm and bring calm. If you want the references (you should know them!) they are Exodus 33:14; Isaiah 43:2; Psalm 107:28-30; Matt.8:26. Ponder the end of v.23, and think of how right through the story it seems that the place of safety was to be by the side of God's man. There were so few. Are there few going to be saved? Strive as in an agony to enter, be in earnest about it. It is the only way. No casual person ever reached heaven. Read Luke 13: 22-30.

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8:1-5

What a glorious and marvellous God we have. What thrill of delight we miss because we do not know Him better. Before, during, and after the flood, God remembered Noah. God is pleased with us and proud of us when we are obedient children (Ps.147:11), and something of His pleasure is communicated to us. Do we call it joy? Is it not a comfort to know His eye never leaves us for a moment! Sometimes we wish He would look away for a little time, but it is best that He refuses. See our God here ruling over the surging restless waters, and when they have done His will, how He restrains and subdues them. But it was not a sudden switch from one extreme to the other. That is more the mark of the Evil One; although God can be startlingly speedy when He chooses. There was a slow, gradual, change, for time is one of God's servants (not His master) and in due season the ark rested on the mountains, and later in due season the land began to appear. During this time God was silent, and the wise man Noah sat still and waited with the thrill of expectation in his soul.

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8:6-14

These verses centre on Noah, and indicate a real measure of intelligent thought on his part. He knew God had a purpose beyond the flood and he makes tentative investigation to see what the situation is. But notice his great patience, spoken of in v.6, 10, 12. A period of about seven months is covered from the beginning of chapter 8 until verse 14, and all that time Noah had to possess his soul in patience. He went into the ark at the command of God, and he would come out only at a similar command. But God does ease our waiting by indications, if we have eyes to see them. First a raven, who came and went until carcasses began to be available in the reducing waters, then it returned no more. Then the dove was sent out, emblem of peace, and symbol of the Holy Spirit the Comforter. This bird came at length with tokens of a renewed earth. For Noah a new life was beginning, and God was there and again His voice is heard.

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8:15-22

After long silence God spoke and said "Come out of the ark", (God always goes first) and Noah went out. If we learn nothing more from the story, learn obedience; it is the way of service. But mere obedience is only part of a holy life, and instantly Noah builds an altar, the place of consecration, wherein he holds communion with his God and expresses his love and gratitude. There is a kind of Christian service that is icily cold and lacking in humanity. It keeps to the letter of the law; does all the required things and goes to all the prescribed meetings, but there is something lacking. The heart is missing, and it is only when the heart is opened that grace flows towards God and man. With this kind of life and service God is pleased. And to such people God pledges Himself and His provision. Give and it shall be given unto you. Withhold your true heart and self and you will find yourself bereft of true fellowship with God and friendship with other believers. To open your heart entails the risk of hurt. But the reward is rich. There are real friendships if you want them.

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9:1-7

God blessed Noah. His heart was set on this man, and the passage, humanly speaking, tells of God's hopes and expectations. This was a new beginning, and God does not send his servant out without first giving all that was necessary in providence and instruction. It is when we are being blessed by God (no matter what struggles we are having) that we are made of use to others (1). There is no overflow from a dry and barren life. In v. 2 we read of Promise. Then in v.3. Provision and in v.4. Prohibition. Man is not free, but a creature in dependence, and already we begin to be pointed to the blood of great value that was to be shed in the fulness of time v.4-5. Warning is given as to the sanctity of life before God. In v.6. justice is to be the basis of society. God's expectation is declared in v.7. And it is right that He should expect fruit from those to whom He has given such riches of supply. How much more should there be fruit in our lives who have been given the fulness of the blessing and victory of Christ. Little wonder we have the solemn words of Christ concerning fruitless lives. Read carefully Luke 13:6-9. Jesus' words about the fruitless fig tree are severe and searching, specially the words about using up the ground. But do not fail to see the patience and grace of God in the tree being given another chance, although a limited one. God's patience is a cause of wonder.

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9:8-17

We have so far spoken in much detail, now we look at the mighty sweep of these verses which speak of the covenant which God makes with Noah. It is not a contract but a covenant of grace, whereby the benefactor settles his gracious gift on the one of His choice. Look at the repetition of 'I' and 'My'. This is God's doing, and it is the source of all our hope and confidence. He has pledged His word, and in token gives the rainbow as a sign of re-assurance regarding the promise. But there is a greater sign, a Cross, and it too is all of God. God so loved the world. We can never plumb the depth of this truth nor exhaust its meaning. The remembrance of sin and even its presence cannot change God's love. The surging storms of distress and anguish do not deny His love. Trust Him; trace the rainbow through the rain and feel the promise is not vain that morn shall tearless be (Matheson). Fearful Christian, do you not realise that God really loves you and cares for you?

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9:18-23

What does this story mean? It tells of the terrible fall of a saint; but remember it is a saint. We dare not damn a man for one fall without remembering first the record of grace and victory and service of the past. "What's done we partly may commute; we know not what's resisted." (Burns) Let him that is without sin among you cast the first stone (John 8:2-11) . What does the story of Noah mean? The man on whom God's hopes were fastened; the man of instant obedience, victorious through great crisis, consecrated, blessed, and commissioned, now crashed in disaster and disgrace. The answer is not far to seek This is the work of Satan who waits for unguarded hours, and in the physical, emotional, and spiritual exhaustion after trial, hurls his power against the saint to bring him down. This is why you must pray much for the chosen servants of God. Take this story to ourselves and to our God-given work. Take heed lest we fall. Gird ourselves with the whole armour of God. Remember there is forgiveness and restoration with God and Noah is found spoken of in Hebrews 11 as a hero of the faith. God still loves Noah;. and Noah is still his servant.

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9:24-29

Why is it that even professing Christians find pleasure in the fall and shame of another and seek to make capital out of it? The fact that some are greatly taken up with others' sins, rooting out information and passing it on, is an indication of an unhealthy moral and spiritual nature. Perhaps they get vicarious enjoyment! When a truly spiritual person finds a brother who has fallen, his main concern will be to restore that one in a spirit of meekness, far removed from pity or patronage (Galatians 6: 1). Here two different attitudes are seen. Ham despised his father Noah and told his brothers about it, hoping perhaps to make capital out of the tragedy, and dishonour the servant of God for their own ends. Touch not the Lord's anointed! (1 Chron.16:22; Ps.105:15)!

Shem and Japheth are basically sorrowful and share Noah's grief. Honour your father and your mother (Exod.20:12), your spiritual parents too. Both sets of men received the recompense of their deeds. The two who were loyal found themselves blessed. The others found themselves against God. Ham was the father of Canaan, and the Old Testament testifies to what the Canaanites proved to be in relation to God's people and God's work.

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10:1-5

What we read here is the story of families rather than individuals, and is the preparation for what comes later. Note how the order of Noah's sons in v.1 is reversed from v.2 onward, for this is the record of redemption and not merely human history. Therefore the nations and families of men are spoken of before the story proceeds through Shem, to Abraham and then to Christ. There are no special lessons in these verses save to point out the use of the word "peoples" in v.5 is translated "Gentiles" in AV and "coastland peoples" in RSV. Right from the start there was to be no wrong exclusiveness in God's dealings with people. Spiritual privilege, while it is to be enjoyed, is always intended to be for service, cf. John 10: 16. "Other sheep have I which are not of this fold, them also must I bring." Lift up your eyes lest you be too pre-occupied with your own little situation and become too self-centred in your prayers.

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10:6-20

If you want to test a person as to integrity and worth, look at the fruit and issue of their lives. Did you think we were too hard on Ham? Note in the second half of the passage the sinister names here: Jebusite, Amorite, Babel or Babylon, Sodom and Gomorrah. By their fruits you shall know them, and the fruit of this weak and evil man is one long train of evil that was always found antagonistic to God. In Nimrod (8), mighty before men, we have the beginning of Babylon, which in the Bible speaks of the gathering together of all that is godless and anti-God. Sin and evil may have small, even insignificant, beginnings but it is malicious and multiplying, and when it has taken time to work itself out, it brings forth death (Jas.1:13-15). When will we learn?

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10:21-32

From Shem came Eber, and out of Eber we have the family of the Hebrews, from whom in the fulness of time was born Abraham the father of the faithful. From him one day would come, born of a woman, Jesus the promised seed, who for us and our salvation, faced and conquered the enemy who had accomplished our downfall. Follow the stream of history, which is His-story; see how it was tainted at the source and yet leads to such a glorious climax in the Cross, the full fruit of which triumph is yet to be seen. It takes a long time, and often it seems as if God had forgotten or been thwarted. Never fear. "The slow watches of the night not less to God belong "(Hymn, "Thy kingdom come" by Hosmer).

"Deep in unfathomable mines,
Of never-failing skill
He treasures up His bright designs,
And works His sovereign will!" (Cowper).

It pays to be on God's side, not only in future vindication, but in present pleasure, confidence, and peace.

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11:1-9

This is the story of Babel (Babylon) or confusion. It is evident that God was not in all their thoughts. Man was central and all important and for his advancement, increase in greatness, and prosperous well-being there was a confederacy, an alliance, and summit talks. But there was no intention of obedience to the command of ch. 9: 1

Their determination was to settle down and live for themselves. But God came down to see. He is neither dead nor far away, and seeing the danger of a confederacy of sinners He acted in providential judgment so that His wider purposes of Redemption should not be hindered. God saw that this proud human scheme was only the beginning. Perhaps the full plan and development of it was not yet clear in men's own eyes, but God saw it and dealt with it. In our present situation don't be too quick to condemn some course of action as being far too severe. Perhaps someone could see far into the issues and was so alarmed that they had to act in instant judgment. Think on these things!

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11:10-26

What's in a name? As a matter fact you never know, and many have entertained angels unawares (Heb.13:2). Be sure you value the right people. How many of these persons here named had any idea of the dimension of the world changing plans in which they were involved. Perhaps it is just as well that we do not know all that God is doing and planning in and through us. It would probably go to our heads and we would begin to think *we* were doing it all ourselves. But God's work goes on and we are privileged to have a share in it as we respond in obedience and submission to His call. We shall never be free agents, but always people under authority; yet that kind of slavery is perfect freedom. Does that make sense? It does to those who know God and thrill to the pulse of His glorious purposes. We find here the lives of men becoming shorter as to length of years, but fuller and more vital as to eternal worth. It all depends on what you live for.

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11:27-32

These verses serve as the prologue to all that follows. The characters are introduced and significant details such as v.30 are given. Why did this family move? We are told in Acts 7:2 that the God of Glory appeared to Abram. But what was the result? The whole family, led by Terah the father, left Ur of the Chaldees apparently doing the will of God. Yet they seemed to frustrate the plan of God, for they went so far and then stopped. Perhaps Terah took his family gods with him. Perhaps Abram would have gone further but allowed family ties to keep him back. We are not sure, but certainly three possibilities for life manifest themselves here. You can ignore the call of God and stay in Ur in comparative comfort and contentment. You can reckon on the call of God and go so far, then stop, feeling quite virtuous. Or you can go where God commands and refuse to stop short of full obedience. The last involves many journeyings and battles, but it is the life of purpose and is free from the blight of regrets.

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12:1-3

The name of Abraham features significantly in both Old and New Testaments. He is spoken of as a man who believed God (Rom. 4:3), not just that he believed in (or about) God but that he believed what God said and acted on it. He is described in Rom. 4:11 as the father of all who believe, even though they may at first be outside the traditional area of the sacraments. He is also spoken of as the friend of God (James 2:23), and these various descriptions mark him out as a man of significance in the outworking of the plan and purpose of God, and therefore a man whose life and character deserve close study by all who would be right with God in life and in service. In order to get the broad perspective of the story before studying it in detail, we do well to read first the summary of Abraham's faith in Heb. 11:8-19, noting that his faith led him into a distinctive pattern of life, in which his whole disposition was towards the future, which he believed was planned by God. His attitude was not in any sense "blind faith" although there were always things he did not understand at the time, nor even at the end of his life (Heb. 11:39). Abraham's faith was in answer to the God who had spoken, and that is the emphasis all through the stories of the men and women of faith listed in Hebrews 11 (cf. Heb. 1:1-2). Right through his life, when Abraham kept his mind and heart fixed on God and on what God had said and promised, then his faith governed, directed, enabled and protected his whole life and activity. But when faith became clouded, Abraham's life became confused and he landed himself in a variety of situations that caused

complication in his personal life and in the work of God. Abraham was a real man, not a superhuman spiritual machine programmed to do God's will. His failures remind us that God has chosen the weak things of the world (1 Cor. 1:27) and that is a comfort. His triumphs are an inspiration and challenge to us to believe God and to go with Him.

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12:1-3

In Acts 7:2-8 we are given a significant insight into today's verses in Genesis. It is made perfectly clear that the initiative in the whole story of Abraham lay with God. We do not know in what manner the God of glory appeared to Abraham, nor in what way He spoke to him. We tend to assume it would be in some marvellous way, as in the case of Saul of Tarsus on the Damascus road (Acts 9:3-5), or Moses at the burning bush (Exod. 3:1-6). But we must remember that God spoke to Elijah, not in the impressive earthquake, wind and fire, but in the still small voice of calm (1 Kings 19:9-13). Samuel was spoken to, ever so gently, as a young boy (1 Sam. 3:1-10). Jeremiah was told that he had been marked out for the prophetic ministry before he was conceived in the womb (Jer. 1:4-9). Isaiah was spoken to by God in an astonishing vision of God's glory (Isa. 6:1-8), and Saul and Barnabas were set apart for missionary service when God spoke to the congregation during worship (Acts 13:1-3). God speaks and acts in whatever way He chooses and it is important that we should always be attentive to what He is saying to us personally. But it is wise for us usually, if not always, to speak to others regarding what we believe God is saying to us, so that we will not be led astray by what may be an impulse. This does not mean we will never act in a way that our friends and colleagues disagree with. There are occasions when in heart and spirit we are quite sure that God is leading us, indeed commanding us, and we obey, no matter what anyone says. But if our guidance is from God the development of events will prove it to be so. God does not guide into mistakes. If we wait on God we will know His will and we will never be behind or ahead of God's schedule.

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12:1-3

Some translations read v.1, "The Lord *had* said to Abram" and this, linked with Acts 7:2-4, helps us to understand Gen. 11:31-32, where it seems that Abram's father was the one who took the decision to leave Mesopotamia. The call was to Abram and it came to him in the context of the culture and life of the great pagan city of Ur of the Chaldees. How did the God of Genesis chapters 1-11 speak to this man in the context of a fallen order of creation, in a society whose godlessness was symbolised by the Tower of Babel (11:1-9), and in a culture that was rich and developed? What influences operated to inspire and enable Abram to leave all that he had lived with for so long, in order to go to a place that he did not know? The only answer is the work of the Holy Spirit. We need to grasp this fact, because all too often we simply forget the free, sovereign, creative work of the Holy Spirit who is the active agent in all God's working. We must not in practice limit the work of the Holy Spirit to certain arbitrary and selective manifestations. It was by the Holy Spirit that Abram knew God was speaking to him, although he may not have had much clear knowledge of God. But again, we must not assume that in what we regard as pagan cultures there is no knowledge of God at all. The stories of Abel, Enoch and Noah would have been known at that time. Understanding and belief may have been minimal, but the seed of truth hidden in minds and hearts can be quickened into life by God's Spirit. That is an encouragement to parents and ministers alike as people grow up under the ministry of the Word and then seem to turn away from it all. Abram's apparently sudden "conversion" may have caused surprise and even consternation among his friends and colleagues, especially when he could not be specific about where he was going and what he was going for.

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12:1-3

There was a real and costly "separation" involved in Abram's responding to the call of God. There was also a real uncertainty, because the future developments were far from specific. But there was also a glorious certainty, because God had not only spoken, He had given His promise. Note very carefully how the main emphasis in

these verses is on God: God's Word, God's blessing, God's activity, God's purposes of grace and salvation, far beyond the confines of Abram's own family. It is best to read the end of v.3 as in AV and NIV:- all the people of the earth will find their blessing through Abram. The promises of God must have thrilled Abram's heart but the sheer dimension of God's intentions must have awed him, and made him wonder just what it was all going to involve. That he responded so quickly makes us ponder again just to what extent and for how long God had been speaking to Abram, preparing him for his life of significant service. Is it not true that many of us can look back and see *now*, in a way we did not see at the time, that God's gracious influences were at work in our lives? Read Addison's hymn, "When all Thy mercies, O my God, my rising soul surveys," and ponder the words about God's tender mercies to us, "Before my infant heart conceived from whom these comforts flowed." It is when we begin to see just how much we owe to God's grace, which always goes before us, that the response of gratitude begins to inspire and motivate our service. Note in v.3 the reference to "cursing" and recognise that in it there is the promise of God to stand with and to protect His servant, and to deal with those who lift up their hands against him. When we walk in obedience with God we have no need to answer the enemy, let alone to avenge ourselves. That is God's department (Rom. 12:17,19; 1 Pet. 2:20-23).

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12:4-8

There is a glorious simplicity in the first statement of v.4, especially when we realise that Abram was not a young man, but an established business and family-man who was getting on to the half-way stage of his life. Note the age in v.4 and compare Gen. 25:8. But we must note carefully what Abram went with. Granted he did not know exactly where he was being led, but in v.1-3 it is clear that God's presence would lead him, and clear that God's promise, protection and purpose for him were also his, to be both the foundation and inspiration of his life. Remember too that Abram was called, he did not volunteer, and the One who called accepted responsibility. The God who said, "Go!" also said repeatedly "I will". We cannot tell how much Abram knew of God at this stage, nor must we assume that his faith came to sudden fullness. There may well have been a great deal of heart-searching and even struggle before faith reached the place of obedience. It seems reasonable to assume that Abram spoke in some detail about his faith and his belief that God had called him and, as a result, a considerable company of people went with him. Many would have been his own household servants, but his nephew Lot chose to go with him, no doubt attracted by the lively faith of his uncle. This is an element in witness and evangelism that we tend to overlook. In Zech. 8:20-23 we are told of people wanting to go with the faithful, because it was so clear that God was with them, and in Acts 4:13 we are told that the apostles were recognised as those who had been with Jesus. But, being attracted to men and women of faith, does not necessarily mean people have faith themselves. That proved to be so with Lot. In the story of the Israelites at the time of the Exodus, a "mixed multitude" went with them from Egypt (Exod. 12:38 AV and RSV) and they may well have been the source of the murmuring, complaining and resistance to true spiritual obedience that became evident later. Think of how many congregations have been distracted by people *in* the church but without real faith.

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12:4-8

Abram set out on the main trade route, either because God indicated that way or because it was the natural route for a trader to take. Trace the route on a Bible map and see the distance Abram travelled: north-west to Haran, then turning south along the coast to the places of Shechem and Bethel. Even if, as we have suggested, the family first moved from Ur to Haran and dwelt there for a spell (11:31,32), and then travelled the next long stage, it was a massive migration that must have taken considerable time. This gives poignancy to the statement that, after a long costly journey, they came to Canaan and found the place occupied by an alien and no doubt unsympathetic people. It is the kind of thing that can happen to ministers or missionaries arriving at their first place of service and becoming aware of a deep, long lasting antipathy to the Gospel they are eager to preach. At that point, God appeared to Abram and reassured him of the promises in respect of the future. This affirmation of God's faithful promises awakened a response of worship and he built an altar. He confessed his faith in a way

that was public, and in a sense, he “planted the flag” for God, claiming the land for Him, and doing so in the face of the evil already in possession of the land. It seems that Abram felt the situation at Shechem to be untenable at that time and he moved on again, emphasising his pilgrim status and accepting it without complaint. Then when he came to Bethel and Ai, he pitched his tent. He did not build a house, but he again built an altar. Still he moved on. Was he simply giving way to difficult circumstances? Was he making decisions too quickly? Was he being carried on by his own momentum? Was there a restlessness of spirit that was preventing him from being aware of God's guidance? We cannot say with regard to Abram, but we can examine ourselves!

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12:9-20

Famine does not come suddenly and it may be that signs of possible famine made Abram continue on his southward journey. Then, on the basis of human and practical assessment of the situation, he went on down into Egypt, leaving the land of Canaan which God had promised to him. Sometimes we can make decisions which worldly friends and family regard as “sensible” but which are made without reference to God's will for us. Then we can find ourselves in a situation in which we are virtually trapped and, because we have left out God from our reckoning, we begin to handle everything on the basis of finding an immediate and practical solution to what threatens to be a difficult and dangerous situation. We can do this by committing ourselves to a business proposition without considering the effect on our Christian lives and witness. We can do the same when we get involved in a romantic relationship, hoping it will work out, glad to have the present enjoyment, but having no thought of long-term complications. It is so easy to go wrong, and so difficult, and at times so painful, to get our lives right with God again. Abram's recovery we will study tomorrow, but there is one further important factor to recognise, consider and learn from. We have been reading the thrilling story of how a man, called by God, responded in faith and set out on a life that was to have long-term spiritual significance in the plan and purpose of God for the blessing of the world. Can we not see here, although it is not specifically mentioned, the work of Satan in creating so subtly in the context of Abram's worship and commitment, a restlessness and an insensitivity of spirit that began to lead him away from God, from safety, from usefulness and from being a blessing to others. There are many applications of Jesus' words to Peter, “Satan has desired to have you” (Lk.22:31).

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12:9-20

Abram did “the reasonable thing” to guarantee food for his family. But very soon he became apprehensive, not about his spiritual condition because, after all, he would tell himself he was a man of God, but about his personal safety. His apprehension became fear and this led him to invent a scheme to guarantee that things would work out. We are not told what his poor wife thought of the plan, but we shall see that the memory of it lingered with her a long time. The plan involved a deliberate lie, and a lie persisted in, to the extent that Abram benefited socially and financially (14-16). Like many a wife, Sara could well have felt, “He does not care what happens to me so long as his business (or his congregation) prospers.” But God was not prepared to let this go on, for the work's sake as well as for Sara's sake. The Lord afflicted Pharaoh and it seems the pagan king realised there was some explanation that was spiritual rather than just human and he summoned Abram. How Pharaoh was able to grasp the significance of the situation we cannot tell, except, once again, to recognise the work of the Holy Spirit. God is never without the means of carrying out His will! Abram, man of God, called to spiritual service, was left in no doubt that he had lost the respect of Pharaoh and his court. Abram's witness was lost, and his actions had cast a shadow on the name and the honour of his God. It was a humbling experience for Abram to be sent back to the will of God by a powerful, worldly man who did not believe in God. Pharaoh could well have confiscated all Abram's cattle and servants, but he acted with dignity, the dignity of person that Abram had forfeited by his own lapse into worldly calculation. He had forgotten God. He had abandoned the faith that had started him on his journey and had brought him so far along the road of God's will.

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13:1-4

Humbled by his failure and as a result wiser because of his failure, Abram made his way back to the place where he had made his vows and built his altar between Bethel and Ai. He had begun to see that in order to be a useful servant for God he had to stay right in his walk with God and close to God, waiting on God rather than just reacting to the pressures of circumstances and the promptings of inclination. He was now a richer man than before and perhaps the community around Bethel would have been impressed. But Abram, his wife, his family and perhaps many of his servants knew of his failure and shame in Egypt. The memory of that would stay with Abram for a long time. Many Christians know well what that kind of memory is and what it does in terms of an abiding sense of guilt. It is the kind of memory that can not only steal our joy in Christ but can inhibit all future service, because we are so aware that we are not worthy. But keep in mind that, by the merciful providence and discipline of God, Abram had been brought back to the place of the altar. He was back at the place of forgiveness and that means the slate was clean, the guilt was put away, the relationship with God restored, and the sin of the past was forgiven and forgotten. We *must* learn the glory and wonder of God's forgiveness. Read Isa. 1:18; Ps. 32:1,5; and Jer. 31:33-34. God is not the One who drags up past sins to accuse and torment. That is the activity of the Devil, the arch-accuser, whose tactic is always to torment and distress us because of past sins. We must refuse his accusations and stand firm in the forgiveness and acceptance that is ours in Christ. We must believe in a radical way the words of 1 John 1:9 and Rom. 8:1. The best picture of the God who forgives so totally and restores so wonderfully is that of the Father of the Prodigal Son (Lk. 15:18-24). Never forget that even when he was a Prodigal, the foolish young man was still a son as far as the Father was concerned.

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13:5-13

Note in v.1 and again in v.5 the phrase, "Lot went with him." That had been Lot's story from the start (12:4). There is no mention of Lot having faith. Of course, there is a human attraction when real faith is manifest in an individual or a congregation and people are drawn because they find friendship, warmth and enthusiasm about the things of God. This should always be the case and if we repel people instead of attracting them there is something wrong. This does not mean in a church that we will like everything about everybody on every level. We do find some people unpleasant, abrasive, hard to get on with, but we need to remember that they may feel exactly the same about us. Even more importantly we need to remember just how wonderfully God has borne with us and all our complications and wrongs. If God loves us like that, we are under obligation to love others in the same way (1 John 4:9-11), making allowances and trying to understand what in their experience and personalities has made them what they are. So far we have not been told much about Lot nor about what Abram really thought about him. But now tension began to arise between the two lots of herdsmen and it seemed to be a purely practical matter regarding the management of pasture. But the comment on the Canaanites and Perizzites in v.7 indicates that there was an issue of witness involved and, because of his experience in Egypt, Abram was sensitive to such an issue. He did not want godless people to see men who claimed to belong to God arguing over material benefits. Abram was also aware that this situation, if allowed to remain, would create a great division among the people called to serve God and, sensing that reconciliation did not seem possible, he faced Lot with a choice. Note that Abram did not send Lot away, nor did he force him to go. Lot simply had to make a decision that was to influence the whole of his future life. That choice we consider tomorrow.

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13:4-13

The choices we make and the factors we take into account can reveal a great deal about our spiritual condition. There is no mention of Lot seeking the mind of God. He considered the view, the material factors for business, and the possibilities for housing and he made his choice on that basis. He separated himself from Abram with whom he had gone along since they lived together in Ur. Lot knew of Abram's altars, his faith in God, his obedience to God, and all he had experienced of the forgiveness and blessing of God. But Lot's heart had remained that of a worldly man. We cannot tell how much, if anything, Lot knew of the society in Sodom, of the atmosphere and moral attitudes, nor whether he considered how such matters would affect him and his

family. We are not told if he tried to find out *before* he made his decision. But what we are told in v.13 has an ominous sound with regard to Lot's spiritual safety in days to come. There are practical lessons here. In our day, very often people young and old have little choice as to *where* they have to work. That being decided for them, too many then make decisions about housing without any consideration of where they will worship and what kind of spiritual ministry will be available for themselves and their children. To live in a wealthy but worldly community can make it very difficult to maintain a truly Christian way of life, and that militates against the spiritual good of growing children. The rest of Lot's story, as we shall see in due course, was a sad one. In spiritual terms he lost out completely.

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13:14-18

The fact that God spoke again to Abram after his separation from Lot seems to indicate that the relationship between the two men and the two families had been a drag on Abram's spiritual life and a hindrance to his full availability for God's service. A good way to test a relationship is the effect it has on spiritual life, growth and service. Abram may not have been fully aware of the real reasons for breaking with Lot but he felt within his own soul that the time had come for this to happen. We must not assume that the decision was easy. Indeed, in human terms it may have been very costly and, the break having been made, Abram may have had reactions and questions in his mind about it. Perhaps that is why God, who so well understands our human nature, spoke to His servant so clearly, indicating the sheer dimension of the purposes he had for Abram's life and service. Abram was reminded that God's purposes are long-term and that the full significance of our service may not become visible until after we are dead and gone. Of course, in Christ we will not be dead, but alive in the glory of Heaven, knowing far more about what is going on on earth than we are aware of at present. Think of the story of the Transfiguration (Lk. 9:28-30), with Moses and Elijah discussing with Jesus the death He was to die on the Cross! We must see also in this passage that God's glorious purposes of blessing to Abram and through Abram were not just to be admired and meditated on. Abram was told to rise and to walk through the length and breadth of the land to see it, to experience it and to claim it for the Lord. There would be enemies to displace and work to establish and that would be done in the obedience of faith. It would not be done all at once, because the dimensions involved the four points of the compass. But Abram had to make a start to enter in and take possession of what God had given to him (v.17). In the same way we have to lay hold by faith on all that God has done for us and given to us in Christ (Eph. 1:3-8; 2 Pet. 1:3-4). Little wonder that Abram again built an altar, not an altar of sacrifice or atonement, but one of remembrance, so that he would not forget what God had said to him. Listening to God and believing what He says are the basis and inspiration of spiritual service.

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14:1-12

This passage that is complicated to read tells of the kind of eruption of wars among various small states that we still read about today. Conflicts erupt, kings and rulers take sides, usually in self-interest, sometimes in the hope of gain and sometimes in an attempt to keep the balance of power so that no kingdom gets to be too strong. It is the story of happenings in the real world, dangers that come in a totally unexpected way, and the conflict is recorded here to remind us of Lot, who made his choice of life in the way he thought would bring him most human benefit. Without any warning, the worldly Lot, who had really decided to live his life without God, found himself a prisoner-of-war with all his possessions taken from him. We cannot tell how long Lot had been in Sodom but we do know that the various satellite states had been in subjection for twelve years before they rebelled (4). Feelings were running high, and in that kind of situation there is little humanity shown, let alone mercy. Think of the present conflicts in the Russian states, in Eastern Europe and in parts of Africa with the carnage and streams of refugees. The first uprising was crushed (5) and another uprising came in v.8. In one sense Lot did not really belong to the conflict, but he was there and was caught up in it. We can imagine his wife and family saying bitterly, "Why did you bring us here?" They may have had no objection when all was going well, and so far there is no indication of Lot living a bad life. But he was there and he was involved. All of us need to be careful where we go and who and what we get involved with. Lot may have felt sorry for

himself, protesting that he had done no wrong. But he should never have been there in the first place. He was having to live with the result of his own choices.

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14:13-16

Here is a wonderful example of how a man, living his life separated from complications and committed to God, can be a significant help to others in their time of need. Abram did not take the attitude that it was Lot's own fault and it was up to him to sort out his life. It was, of course, Lot's own fault that he had landed in trouble but Abram remembered that it was his own fault that he had landed in trouble in Egypt. On that occasion, though he did not deserve it, God worked to deliver him and to bring him back to safety and service. Because God had so dealt with him, Abram decided without hesitation to go to Lot's help. How important it is in our dealings with others to remember just how kind, gracious and longsuffering God has been with us and how He has again and again rescued us from our own complications. We do well to ponder Rom. 15:1, where the strong are commanded to bear with the weak, and indeed to bear them up, carrying them if need be. The same message is found in Gal. 6:1-2, where we are commanded to restore the person who has obviously blundered and whose guilt is manifest. And we must do this in a spirit of gentleness, remembering that we are not without sin and may very well fall into the same temptation. It is always easier to knock down than to lift up. The sobering part of the story is that, having been rescued, Lot went back to Sodom. His heart and his wife's heart belonged there. Life with Abram and Abram's God did not appeal.

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14:17-24

Two kings are spoken of in this difficult and mysterious passage, the first being the king of Sodom who came out from wherever he had been hiding and went to visit Abram. Keep in mind the demands both human and spiritual on Abram: his separation from Lot; his disappointment in and concern for Lot; and then the battle to deliver Lot. Keep in mind also that those called to spiritual service will always be the subject of the Devil's attentions, especially after significant events. Now look at the proposition made by the king of Sodom (21). He spoke as if he had been a partner in the victory just won, and his bold words were, to say the least, patronising. If Abram had agreed, the public assessment of him would have been that he was a man out to increase his wealth and in order to do so was willing to be regarded as a colleague, if not a servant, of the great king of Sodom. There is something in this "offer" by the king of Sodom that reminds one of the words of the Devil spoken to the Lord Jesus: "All this will I give you if you worship me," (Lk. 4:5-8). Abram's response was instant and radical. He declared himself to be God's man, His glad and willing servant, and said that all his work he did for God and not for man. Nothing would be allowed to cloud his testimony, and nothing would be allowed even to suggest that Abram acknowledged that the "powers of the world" had any rights or authority over him. There was spiritual dignity about the man of God, which stemmed from his being right with God, and his setting a guard on his life. Think of Jesus' words in John 8:46; 14:30; and Paul's words in Acts 20:17-19; 1 Thess. 2:3-6; 2 Cor. 4:1-2. How we need to guard our involvements! They may not harm us personally, but they may hinder God's work.

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14:17-24

We have recognised the spiritual danger to Abram in the approach of the king of Sodom. The picture is then given of Melchizedek arriving and seemingly intervening, standing between Abram and the dangerous temptation coming to him. We have no introduction to this Melchizedek, who just appears on the scene and then departs. We are told in Heb. 6:19-7:3 that Melchizedek, king of righteousness and king of peace, is on the scene as a type or foreshadowing of the ministry of Jesus Christ, our great High Priest, the One who ever lives to make intercession for us (Heb. 7:25). That means we have to see this mysterious king, as coming to Abram from God, at a time of particular need, to minister to him. This "Priest" of the Most High God brought out bread and wine, and we must surely see in these "elements" more than just symbols of eastern courtesy and

hospitality. The picture is of God coming in His representative, with spiritual nourishment and blessing, to minister to His faithful servant for his present need and his preparation for the future. It was as if Melchizedek was saying to Abram, “Your God will supply all your need. He comes to you in blessing and power for life. He will always come to you.” Then Melchizedek used words in v.20 that focused the thoughts of Abram and everyone else on God who was the One who had won the victory. Abram recognised without hesitation that this mysterious king was in fact sent from God, with the authority of God, and he responded and gave a tenth of everything. In so doing Abram was testifying and saying, “All I have and all I am belongs to God by right.” How often have we discovered, in various circumstances of need, the truth of Jesus' words, “I will not leave you comfortless, I will come to you,” (John 14:18)?

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15:1-6

We must focus on the first two words of this passage, because they do not necessarily refer only to the immediate events and experiences of the previous chapter. Some ten years (cf. 12:4 and 16:16) had passed since Abram had responded to the call of God and the story has recorded his failure in Egypt, his restoration, the costly separation from associates who would have hindered, the rescue of Lot and then Abram's dignity of faith and integrity of testimony described in chapter 14. Abram was no longer a spiritual novice but what he had been through must have taken its toll on him physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually, whether or not he was fully aware of it. Now, of course, it is not wrong to be tired but we must recognise it if we are to cope and be able to go on in spiritual service. It is wonderfully reassuring and encouraging to be told that God is the first to recognise the condition and need of His servants and, taking the initiative, the Lord came to Abram. The nature of the vision we are not told and do not need to know. Some, if they knew, would want a similar experience, and it must be left to God to speak and guide as He chooses. What we are told is the two-fold message given. The first word was “Fear not!” and the second was that God Himself was His servant's shield for protection and reward. Both AV and NIV make plain that God, not something God would give, was the reward. The objective of God's words was to encourage Abram to fix his thoughts on God rather than on circumstances and people. The Lord does not say, “Fear not!” unless He is aware that His people are beginning to feel afraid. Fear can stir as the result of tiredness or strain as we have indicated. It can stir because of uncertainty about the future (as in John 14:1-4). Fear can break in suddenly and irrationally, a specific work of Satan as in 1 Sam. 27:1. Read Ps. 56:3-4 where the Psalmist seems to say, “when I am afraid . . . I will not fear.” That is worth thinking about.

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15:1-6

God was reassuring Abram that everything in his life was safe and secure in His hand. Something of the “reward” spoken of is expressed in Isa. 57:15. What a glorious companion to have in the ordinary business of life! Abram obviously felt “comfortable” with God, because he was prepared to tell God in detail about the things that bothered him and made him uncertain and apprehensive. The focus was on one particular issue that had become dominant in his thinking: the question of a son and heir. How could the promise of 12:2 be fulfilled if he remained childless? After all, ten years was a long time to wait! Note carefully the one-to-one, face-to-face nature of this conversation between Abram and God. We see here the beginning of the kind of relationship that led to the description of Abraham as the friend of God (Jas. 2:23). There was no rebuke from God, no suggestion that Abram was lacking in faith, but a plain word of reassurance that a son would be born. Not only did God affirm His promise, He gave His servant an astonishing illustration of the sheer dimension of the blessing and the service that God had planned for him (5). Abram believed God and he was “justified by faith”. Read the realistic expression of all of this in Rom. 4:17-25. Abram staked all on the integrity of the Word of God. It is amazing just how often the word we need from God is, “Fear not!” Fear is destructive; it distorts our thinking and torments our emotions. The great need is to be calmed, because only then can God speak to us and we can speak to God about what is really bothering us. Sometimes a whole lot of things worry us and we try to give the impression to ourselves and others that we are coping. We do not talk either to God or to a trusted

friend, and the result is that the pressure builds up and focuses on some thing or person that becomes an obsession. The real problem is lost sight of and remedy is virtually impossible.

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15:7-11

This passage introduces the rather mysterious events later in the chapter but it has clear instruction for us. The speech of both God and Abram is recorded. In v.7 Abram is made to focus on the person of God, and he is reminded not just that it was God who called him and God who gave promises to him, but that it was God who took full responsibility for him. The call out of Ur was a call with a specific objective. It was to lead Abram into a whole new way of life in a new area and territory which God had pledged to him. All of us need to be quite clear that God has His specific plans for us, for our lives and service, as well as for our eternal destiny. As with Abram, so with us, the intentions of God are far beyond what we think, and we must guard against the danger of limiting God's working by unbelief. Read such passages as Jer. 29:11; 1 Cor. 2:9 (AV); Eph. 3:20; 1 Pet. 5:10 and think just how great God's thoughts are. God knows what he is doing with us and all His dealings with us are in order to lead us into what He has prepared. Abram reacted in a very human way, wanting to be assured about the future. Note that it was possession of the land that he questioned. He accepted that he would have a son and heir, simply because God had said it. But if he had accepted by faith one seemingly impossible thing, why did he doubt about the other? Who are we to criticise? We do the very same thing. Even though we can look back and trace the story of God's grace and faithfulness, we still tend to doubt when some new situation presents itself, especially if we feel God is being rather slow in answering our prayers.

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15:12-21

The elements of the sacrifice were prescribed by God (9-10), but we do not know what significance to attach to the details and it is better not to speculate. Although the sacrifice was dedicated to God it was not free from the attack by the birds and they were resisted by Abram. We may be allowed to see in this the fact that every work of God will be attacked by its natural enemies. For example, unbelief will always be against faith. The objective in this "ritual" was that God should give assurance to His servant, and yet a dread and darkness encompassed Abram (12). If, in any sense, the significance of the birds had to do with the powers of evil (cf. Matt. 13:4,19), and Abram resisted them the whole long day, then it is not surprising that he fell asleep and that at the same time a feeling of dread encompassed him. But Abram was also deeply aware of being in the presence of God and that significant things were being said. Perhaps we can understand his experience best if we think of how in Gethsemane and at the Cross, times of great significance in the outworking of God's plan of salvation, there was in the experience of Jesus an ominous sense of awe, burden and perplexity, but yet a sense of assurance in God (Mk. 14:32-36; 15:33-34). Being drawn into the working of God is a profound experience, with consequences far exceeding what we can grasp, and it is not surprising that we should feel awe, solemnity, apprehension and even fear. Right after His baptism, at the start of His ministry, Jesus was led into the dark experience of the temptation in the wilderness, at the end of which He needed the ministry of angels (Matt. 4:11). When Moses was receiving God's Law he was drawn into the thick cloud of darkness where God was (Ex. 20:21). We begin to grasp the significance of being called to worship with reverence and godly fear (Heb. 12:28-29).

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15:12-21

In an atmosphere of solemnity God spoke to Abram and set his life and service into the context of the plan of redemption history. This is a concept that we tend to find difficult because we live in a generation preoccupied with the present and the immediate. God is not in a hurry, and already in the story of Genesis He had mapped out the route and the timetable for the coming of the Saviour. Then, when the fulness of the time had come, He would send His Son, born of the Virgin in Bethlehem, to die on the Cross as the promised Lamb of God in whom salvation and life would be found by sinners. Remember that Jesus said that Abraham, by faith, saw His day and was glad (John 8:56). But God made plain that the outworking of the plan of salvation would stretch far

beyond Abram's own lifetime, and this is something we must grasp and believe as we seek to understand our own experiences. Many things will not be clear until we look back on them from the light of eternity, then we will indeed "bless the hand that guided and bless the heart that planned". The span of God's plan is from eternity to eternity. Other people have laboured, we enter into their labours, and in due time we pass the work on to those who come after us (John 4:37-38). There is responsibility and yet great privilege, not least because, as we are being taught in this experience of Abram, God commits Himself to His people. The pattern of the sacrifice (9-11) would have been familiar to all present as the ritual adopted when two people were making a covenant. Normally both parties would walk between the two "lines" of the sacrifice, but in v.17 the smoke and the torch (think of the pillar of cloud and of fire in Exodus) were symbols of God's presence. He alone walked through the sacrifice. He is the one who takes the initiative and makes the covenant. God pledges Himself unconditionally to the people He has chosen and called. We have His Word, His promise and His presence. If God be for us ... (Rom. 8:28-31).

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15:12-21

There is one further important lesson to learn and it will help us to grasp why it often seems to us that God is being slow, both in working out His salvation and in bringing evil to judgment. In v.16 we are being taught that while evil and its working may be mysterious to us they are not so to God. He has full knowledge of evil in every aspect of its working and development. As the story of the Garden of Eden makes plain, God is immediately aware of the operation of evil and He addresses it and deals with it. Individuals and nations have to live with the consequences of their evil actions in their own lives and on through their descendants. There is an inheritance or entail of sin and the whole of Scripture and history testifies to the astonishing sovereign patience and forbearance of God in the face of evil. He is never quick to judge but He is sure in His judgments, as 2 Pet. 3:1-10 makes plain. God is never afraid of evil nor does He necessarily deal with evil when its activity first becomes evident, as Matt. 13:24-30 makes plain. At times in history the tide of evil reaches such a height that in a certain generation there is manifest judgment. Read Gen. 6:5-7 but note even in the pronouncing of judgment we are told of the grief of God's heart. Read also Matt. 23:29-39 where Jesus spoke of how the accumulated perversity and evil of past generations were about to crash in on the present generation. It is a solemn concept, and the tragedy of it is found in the words, "I would have gathered you but you would not." In the providence of God evil is allowed to operate so that it will expose itself for what it is, as being totally and utterly evil, and fully deserving the righteous judgment of God. These are solemn matters but we must be clear. God is not mocked. God is righteous. God forgives. God is the judge, who always does what is right (Gen. 18:25). This God is the rock and refuge of His people.

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16:1-6

The previous chapter ended with the sovereign purposes of God being spelled out to Abram and this chapter begins with complaining and scheming in the human situation. Understandably Sarai was vexed that after years of marriage she had no child and she seems to have blamed God for that situation. Of course, we do not know to what extent Abram shared with his wife the promises God had given him regarding a son and heir (15:4). It is a fact of experience that lack of communication and failure to share particularly on a spiritual level are the causes of many breakdowns in marriage. Two people who keep the deepest things of life to themselves can never be true friends let alone real partners. This scheme of Sarai was set in motion at a very significant time in the life and development of Abram, the servant of God. He had just had a profound spiritual experience in which God spoke to him about the future and the importance of his service. He had believed God, and he knew God was with him and that he was committed to God, even though he could not yet see how God could do all He planned through someone such as himself. After all, although he had already been used by God, he had failed in some significant ways. Then, just as Abram was beginning to move forward in faith, his partner in life reacted to her unhappy feelings, spoke unwise words and made suggestions that seem to have demolished Abram's faith and patience, causing him to give rash agreement to a plan that should never have been made. Having listened to the

scolding tones of his wife, Abram agreed to what was suggested and there was introduced into his family life and his service for God a whole long stream of complications. Human decisions are important. We need to watch and pray, because there is an enemy!

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16:1-6

It is easy to forget that in *all* areas of life we are involved with God, and that is why we need to learn to take our disappointments as well as our joys to God in prayer. It is instructive to compare the reaction of Hannah, the mother of Samuel, with that of Sarai (1 Sam.1:1-11). It would be easy to say that Sarai had not kept pace with her husband's spiritual development, but we must remember that patience is not easy when long waiting is involved and it is usually easier for a man to come to terms with childlessness than for a woman. In the culture of Abram's day it appears that the practice of "surrogacy" was accepted and the child of a servant girl could be recognised as the wife's own child. But even if society recognises and validates some patterns of behaviour, especially those involving sexual behaviour, that certainly does not mean that God approves. It is dangerous, on various levels, to assume that human methods are the right ways to carry out the will of God. Note that Sarai had no real assurance that what she was proposing was in accord with God's will, but she went ahead (2). We do not know how long Sarai may have been suggesting that Abram should take this course of action. We do not know if Abram had been aware of the attractive Egyptian maid who had been introduced to his household when he had been adrift from God in Egypt years earlier (12:16). Note that it was after ten years of God's faithful dealing with him that Abram made this grave error. Whatever he thought of the rights and wrongs of the issue, he agreed with his wife, perhaps to keep the peace. The plan went ahead. The child was conceived. The maid mocked her mistress, who may well have had a snobbish or superior attitude to the girl. Sarai blamed her husband for it all but Abram refused to accept responsibility, and because of cruelty the pregnant maid ran away. What a story this would have made in today's newspapers!

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16:7-15

Since we are tending to be easily critical of both Abram and Sarai in their lapse from faith and obedience, we had better read and ponder 1 Cor. 10:12 and Gal. 6:1. We should always remember that when tension and conflict between people introduce an element of confusion into the work of God, the fault seldom belongs to one party. As situations develop the original "flash-point" can often be forgotten and the "wrongs" can develop in all sorts of directions. Try to imagine the hurt feelings, the sense of guilt, and perhaps the sense of shame felt by Abram, Sarai and Hagar. It was God who took charge of things and none of the parties was allowed to run away. They had to live under God's providential grace and discipline with the situation they had created. That was the only real hope for them, humanly and spiritually. Down the years in a very real sense Hagar's son Ishmael was God's word of rebuke, a reminder to all who are called to serve God that they must learn to wait upon God and not to take situations into their own hands. Hagar, no doubt heading back to Egypt, was met by God and sent back to Sarai. This may indicate that her part in the scheme had not been without fault, and it may also have been to prevent scorn being poured on Abram's name when the Egyptians heard of what had happened. Hagar, being sent back, was no doubt a sore lesson to Sarai, a rebuke to her harshness and a humbling of her pride. Abram had to live with two women who were bitter and who would, for different reasons, hold him responsible for all that had gone wrong. What a problem God has with His people, and yet He does not despair of them. Hagar was given the child's name: Ishmael, which means "God hears" or "God has heard". That is something we need to remember! Ishmael was to be great, but there was no word of his being a blessing to others. If we think of the Arabs of today being in some way the descendants of Ishmael, and if we consider the conflict between the two peoples down the ages, we begin to see just how long-lasting have been the consequences of Sarai's and Abram's lapse from faith and obedience. We had better guard our decisions, and guard even more carefully our reactions to people, which all lead to complications. There is no running away. God sees to that. But never forget, there is forgiveness with God (Ps. 130:3-4; Is. 1:18).

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16:15-17:1

Yesterday's passage told us of the God who sees, hears and acts. Nothing is hidden from Him. There are no secrets as far as He is concerned (Heb. 4:11-13). But God's "seeing" can be a wonderful comfort when we feel we are struggling and making little progress against the winds of experience (Job. 23:8-10; Mk. 6:45-52). The AV translation of 16:13b is, "Thou, God, seest me." The NIV has Hagar saying, "I have now seen (or seen the back of) the One who sees me." She seems to have been amazed that God was taking such an interest in her and her situation, without her being struck dead. But there is no indication that Hagar came to faith. You can be closely involved in a congregation where God is working great salvation and blessing, and you can be thrilled by it, and even be aware of God (other people's God) without ever believing for yourself. In today's short verses we have to be aware of the long process of God's dealing with, discipline of, and encouragement of His servant Abram. A spell of thirteen years lies between the two chapters. There is nothing recorded in the divine narrative regarding these thirteen years. Perhaps we should not place too much emphasis on the silence, but we do well to consider how Abram must have pondered the apparent silence of God. After all, God had promised a son (15:3-4), and there was no sign of another child. Did Abram assume that this Ishmael was the son of promise, even though strictly speaking he was not his "own son", the son of his marriage? Think of Abram's feelings as the child grew to be a teenager. Would he gradually forget the sin of disobedience that led to the child being born? Had Abram forgotten God's words, "know for certain" (15:13) that had called for faith and trust? Had Abram forgotten God's words concerning the part he had to play in the development of God's planned purposes? Human feelings and human fulfilment can gradually dull the sensitiveness of our spirits and it can take a long time before we are "tuned in to God" so that we can hear Him speaking to us about the real purpose of our lives. It seems it took thirteen years in Abram's case.

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16:15-17:1

In spite of the seeming delay, Abram still had a significant spiritual future which had not been cancelled out by his failure. God is faithful (2 Tim. 2:13). Humanly speaking there was delay, but God's servant was being tested and strengthened in faith in preparation for the next stage of his service. The emphasis is on God, the God who was now speaking to Abram. God declared Himself to be "God Almighty", the "El Shaddai" God, the all-sufficient God, the "enough" God. The fact that the God of Abram is our God stands over against all our thoughts and feelings of regret, failure, doubt and fear; feelings that make us wonder if we have forfeited our opportunities for service. In Abram's situation over the past thirteen years he may have had a deep and disquieting feeling that he had lost his fellowship with God, his sense of God being with him, and the experiences of God speaking with him. It must have stirred Abram's soul when he heard once again the voice of God. But what did God's call really mean? It may have been a challenge to walk in the light with God, out in the open, with nothing to hide (1 John 1:5-7). It may have been a word of encouragement, saying to Abram to walk before God, looking to God and trusting God, when full of doubts, fears and uncertainties, and especially when there was an underlying sense of failure. Remember too that these thirteen years had taken Abram and Sarai beyond the possibility of a "natural" son and heir, or so they would have thought. Abram may even have been training Ishmael to be his successor and to take over the leadership of the work of God. Then God broke His silence because He judged that Abram was now ready to go forward. God is always ready. And God's word to Abram made plain that where sin had abounded, grace much more abounded (Rom. 5:20 AV). What a God we have!

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17:1-5

A whole new phase of Abram's life was about to begin and it was to be set in the context of the on-going, sovereign plan and purpose of God. The word "blameless" (1) cannot mean sinless, or perfect, for that is impossible for all of us. If we ever claim to be sinless we deceive *only* ourselves (1 John 1:8). In Gen. 6:9 Noah is referred to as righteous (in relation to men) and blameless (in relation to God). It seems God was asking Abram to be whole-hearted as opposed to just maintaining a distant relationship. It is as if God was saying, "If

you really want Me and want to be with Me, show it by trusting Me to fulfil in your life all My promises, and to fulfil them in My way and at My time.” Without waiting for an answer, God went on to confirm His covenant and promise with regard to future blessing. The initiative was with God and the commitment by God was not dependent on Abram's consent or otherwise. What was required of Abram was that he should walk with God, not run, not hold back, but keep in step, letting God set both the pace and the direction. That is a great way to live and it is echoed in Jesus' words about His yoke being easy (Matt. 11:28-30). Abram's immediate reaction to God's voice was to bow in worship and to listen to God (3). Of course heads bowed or knees bent in worship do not necessarily mean we are listening to God, or even listening to the minister. How many can truly say “Amen”, at the end of a pulpit prayer, affirming that the prayer was theirs as well as the minister's? God affirmed His covenant with Abram, outlined His purposed blessings for Abram and for his children after him, and committed Himself for time and for eternity (7-8). Go through the passage to see and to thrill to the repeated affirmation, “I will”.

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17:9-14

God had declared Himself to Abram and presented to him the covenant already signed, “God Almighty”. The sufficiency of God stood over against the frailty and limitation of His servant. Abram was given a new name, as if to signify that the past was in reality past, and the break was made by the God who makes all things new (Rev. 21:5; 2 Cor. 5:17). When God said in v.5 “I *have* made you a father of many nations”, He was signifying that His purposes cannot be frustrated and, although Abraham did not know it, within a year the promised child would be born. The covenant was made and signed but, as in a marriage ceremony, there had to be a response and some sign or symbol used to demonstrate that the commitment had been made. Circumcision was ordained as the sign and seal of God's covenant. This was to be the sign or indication that Abraham had responded in faith for himself and for his children after him. He was not to wait for the children to “decide for themselves”, as if everything in God's working depended on human decision. Abraham and his children were to be marked out as belonging to God, given the identity as covenant children, and be brought up in the knowledge and atmosphere of the covenant, which had at its heart the declaration of the undeserved grace of God. If in due time any of the children were to contract out of the “family covenant”, as Esau did (Heb. 12:15-17), it would be manifest that they had made a deliberate decision against God. Without entering into controversy, it is right to point out that if, under the Old Covenant, children who were not of an age to understand were to receive the mark of the covenant, it would be surprising if, under the New Covenant, children should not receive the mark of that new covenant in baptism. Neither in the Old or New Covenants does the “sign” work salvation, but to be brought up in the knowledge, nurture and example of the covenant is benefit indeed (Rom. 9:1-5). Think of how many children and young people today grow up with absolutely no knowledge of God or Jesus. We have not begun to take seriously this problem of evangelism in our generation.

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17:15-21

In giving Sarah her new name it seems that God was indicating that she took her rightful place in the plan in her own right and not just as the wife of Abraham. Then, as God began to spell out the details and the extent of the blessing He purposed, and the means whereby it was to be set in motion, Abraham reacted in two ways. He fell down before God in worship and he laughed inwardly at the seeming impossibility of what God was planning. It was almost too much to believe and Abraham began to suggest to God what seemed a more obvious way to proceed. After all, an officially adopted son already in position seemed a more likely channel of advance than the remote possibility that an aged couple would have a child. Abraham was having a struggle to believe, just as he had earlier in 15:8. In a very real sense Abraham was responding to God's announcement in a similar way to Mary in Luke 1:29-38. Humanly speaking it seemed impossible, but with God nothing is impossible (Lk.18:27). God was gently and graciously firm with Abraham, reassuring him in his faith, recognising his concern and prayers for Ishmael (20), and confirming that the plan would be worked out in exact detail in terms of both experience and timing (21). We have earlier referred to Paul's comment, by the Holy Spirit, on this situation,

affirming the realism of Abraham's faith (Rom. 4:17-21). Abraham believed God, and what God said took precedence over his feelings, fears and preferences. He believed that the God who speaks, calls, promises and begins, is the God who brings His work to completeness (Phil. 1:6). Read the hymn, "The God of Abraham praise," and think of the words, "Hail Abraham's God and mine!"

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17:22-27

This seems an unattractive passage with unnecessary medical detail. But the emphasis is not on the physical. It has to do with the practical obedience of faith. God brought the conversation and discussion to a close because all that was necessary had in fact been said. It would be good and beneficial if we could all learn this principle and not allow discussions to go on past their useful time, and certainly to curb the time committee meetings can devour if people come to them without having done any preparatory thinking. Keep in mind that the whole of this chapter records a significant personal meeting between God and Abraham. It was what we could call a "spiritual high". But the "appearance" (1) or vision was now over and the test of the authenticity of all "experiences" is whether or not they lead to actual obedience to God. In Abraham's case it certainly did and, believing God's promise and holding to it in faith, Abraham caused all the males of his household to be circumcised. In that way they were marked with the sign of God's covenant and thus claimed for God and marked out for God's service. This "mark of the covenant" also marked out the people as belonging *together* as God's people, and this is an immense privilege. But it also brings responsibility to live in a way that is worthy of those who bear God's name. The fact that all males were circumcised, all bearing the mark of the covenant, did not eliminate the need for faith nor did it automatically create faith. No "sacrament" can do this. And, in spite of all the privileges and benefits of belonging to God's covenant people, individuals can contract out in unbelief and deny the God whose grace has called them.

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18:1

What time gap there was between the last passage and this introductory verse we cannot tell, but a comparison of 17:21 and 18:10 suggests it was not long. Something significant was about to happen and Abraham had been prepared by God for it. We pause in our studies to remind ourselves that, right from chapter 12, the story has concerned God's choice of and commitment to Abraham; God's purposes through Abraham, and the developing relationship of faith and fellowship between God and His servant. Abraham had been learning faith, learning to trust God even when things seemed impossible, learning to wait on God, to wait for God and to be ready for God. We too do not know what any one day might bring to us or require of us (Prov. 27:1; Jas. 4:13-15; cf. Matt. 6:25-34). There is something very ordinary about the picture in this verse, something quiet and peaceful. We are not told what Abraham was thinking nor if he had any feeling or premonition that this was to prove a significant day in terms of spiritual service. He may simply have been resting. He was certainly quiet, and this is perhaps one of the lessons we need to learn. We need to take time to stop, to be quiet; not reviewing the past, nor planning for the future, not necessarily reading our Bibles or praying; just resting and relaxing, and in that way being sensitive to the approach of God. Sometimes we try to be too spiritual and we mistake our own thinking for the voice of God. Sometimes we are too busy and assume we are doing God's will. Too often, when we are needed for God's service, He finds us weary, jaded and uninspired. There is so much we have to learn about resting in the Lord (Ps. 37:3-7 AV).

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18:1-8

The drama now unfolding is profoundly spiritual and yet gloriously human. It makes clear that life lived in the obedience of faith is full of surprises, because we are never quite sure who or what may come our way. But faith that waits on God makes us ready, whether our visitors are angels (Heb. 13:2), or the Lord Himself (Matt. 25:35). Abraham seems to have recognised at once that this visitation was important and indeed significant, although he did not yet realise just how significant. At the start of his story we were told that the God of Glory

appeared to Abraham (Acts 7:2) and such a visitation can be quite overpowering, as Isa. 6:1-5; Dan. 10:2-9; and Rev. 1:12-18 make plain. But here it was three men who came, one of whom was manifestly a person recognisable as deserving to be addressed as Lord. If we consider 18:22 and 19:1 it seems clear that the significant visitor was the Lord Himself, accompanied by two angels. The timing of the visit was the mid-day siesta and therefore the least convenient time for unknown people to arrive and yet Abraham responded with typical eastern hospitality on a very respectful and generous scale. In v.3 Abraham regarded the visit as an honour and in v.5b he recognised that these visitors had come, not to linger with him, but to go further on with a specific purpose. Note also in v.8 that Abraham, a significant man in his own society, stood in attendance on his visitors, almost accepting that they had royal status. Such was the warmth and spontaneity of Abraham's welcome that the heavenly visitors were glad to stay. There is a parallel here with the story of the Road to Emmaus where the disciples prevailed on the Risen Jesus to come in and stay. That kind of attitude prepares people for the revelation of wonderful things from God.

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18:9-15

The question as to Sarah's whereabouts may have been the normal polite introduction to an expression of thanks for the meal. Kindness should never be taken for granted! The Lord did not need to ask where Sarah was, and the intention may have been to alert Sarah (who was in fact eavesdropping) to what was about to be affirmed. It is possible that Abraham had not in any clear way passed on to his wife the promise given him by God in 17:16,21, and we need to emphasise again the vital importance of communication between husbands and wives if the relationship is to be maintained and grow both humanly and spiritually. On the other hand it may have been that, knowing the promise and aware that her husband believed it, Sarah had persisted in unbelief, simply because humanly speaking it seemed too good to be true. Even when she heard the promise and affirmation from the Lord Himself (Did she recognise who was speaking?) she still did not accept it. She laughed to herself, perhaps a little wistfully, but her attitude was cynical. It must have been a shock to Sarah to hear the next words which made clear that her laughter of unbelief was known. It seems Sarah was drawn out of her hiding place in the tent, because the words of the Lord were addressed to her personally (15). She was being reminded that she had not been diligent to prepare herself for God's future plans for her life, her service, and the significant part she had to play as her husband's God-given partner. Note in v.12 Sarah's concern is *her* pleasure. But that is not the vital thing, whether in friendships or marriage. It is as the gifts of God are given back to Him gladly in dedication for service that human joy and fulfilment are found. Perhaps Sarah thought that God would not do such a wonderful thing for her but she was to discover what a generous God she had. Her unbelief and hesitation were rebuked but God's promise and purpose stood.

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18:16-21

These verses set the context for two great happenings from which there is much to learn: the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah and the intercessory prayer of Abraham. We see the man of faith playing a significant part in the outworking of both judgment and salvation. We see also the very personal way in which Abraham was drawn into this spiritual drama and we see the regard God had for His servant and the confidence and trust He placed in him (17-19). We do well to ask ourselves to what extent God can trust us with the stewardship of His Gospel and work, and with the shepherding of His people, especially at times of demand and crisis. We must not let this thought crush us because, as the RSV translation of 2 Tim. 1:11-12 emphasises, God is able to guard what He has committed to us, as well as guard what we have committed to Him. Ministers, elders and all believers are called to guard the Gospel (2 Tim. 1:13-14). All who have positions of responsibility are also called to guard the flock of God which is precious to Him and purchased at great cost (Acts 20:28). By the end of this month (Oct.1996) the Sandyford congregation will enter a spell without a settled minister. All who have been richly blessed by God (not by the minister) have a debt of gratitude to God and should have the sense of obligation that Paul expressed in Rom. 1:14. We have referred to the charge to the elders at Ephesus. Think of Jesus' words to Peter in John 21:15-17, words that made such an impact that later Peter emphasised them to

others (1 Pet. 5:1-4). It is both our duty and our privilege to care for one another, to bear each other's burdens and so to fulfil the law of Christ (Gal. 6:1-3).

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18:16-21

The last two verses of this passage are very solemn and searching and have a message that godless society needs to hear and to take notice of. The outcry against Sodom seems to speak of the whole of Heaven protesting against the evil in society. God is not blind, nor is He mocked. The eyes of the Lord see all there is to see throughout the whole earth (2 Chron. 16:9; Zech. 4:10; 1 Pet. 3:12) and that is comfort to the righteous, but a grave warning to all who do wrong. God is not indifferent to the evils of society, including the perversions of human behaviour that are indulged in and defended by so many. The time comes when God says, "Enough is enough." That was made clear at the time of the Flood when God's verdict was made plain (Gen. 6:5-8). But note in that story the grief and hurt of God's loving heart. Today's story may refer to the strident cry and clamour of evil in the world reaching the ears of Heaven and God coming down to see. When that happens a day of judgment is at hand. It is stated very clearly that God does not jump to conclusions nor does he listen to gossip about people and their actions. That is an example we do well to follow, because it will keep us from making situations worse. God investigates thoroughly. The picture is stark and alarming. It portrays God walking the streets, visiting homes and hostelrys, examining the books of businesses, observing people, relations and behaviour. God sees. God knows. God takes the initiative. He is indeed the God with whom we have to do. In a world situation like ours and like that of Abraham, God looks for people in whom He can confide, whom He can make His trusted servants and partners. Abraham was ready and available. We have pointed out that Abraham was God's friend and, because a friend, he was glad to be a servant. Jesus spoke of this kind of thing in John 15:12-17.

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18:22-33

The two angel messengers went on their mission of enquiry and the Lord and Abraham were left together. Neither made any move to separate. We could read v.22 in terms of the Lord standing looking at Abraham waiting for him to speak and ready to listen. That is a marvellous picture of the situation when we come to God in prayer. Something of the spiritual development of Abraham's life is shown in the fact that he stood before God, aware that there was something he had to do. He drew near to God and began to speak. Again we see to what extent Abraham had become a friend of God. He did not stay at a distance. He was confident that God was someone he could speak to, because he had discovered that God was someone who spoke to him. It is when we begin to know God that we begin to learn about prayer. As we study this prayer we see that Abraham was not over-confident, nor was he exactly sure what he should ask. In a sense we could refer to Abraham's conversation with God rather than using the word "prayer", and that may tell us more about real prayer than when we use the word to concentrate on what *we* are saying to God. There are two wonderful passages of encouragement regarding prayer in Heb. 4:14-16 and 10:19-23. Abraham had confidence to speak to God. He had confidence in the perfect righteousness and justice of God (23). In the end the issue was left with God and it was God who brought the time of prayer to an end (32-33). It is interesting, and it may be significant, that Abraham was alone with God in prayer. There is no mention of Sarah or anyone else. Was there no-one to share the burden of prayer? An evangelical minister reported that one week at the church Prayer Meeting there were only three people: himself, his wife and his daughter. Prayer is not the priority it should be in the lives of many Christians.

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18:22-33

There was no triumphalism in Abraham's prayer, no "claiming" an answer from God, but rather a spiritual travail. But as he prayed his faith and confidence seemed to grow. Why he began with mentioning fifty we simply cannot tell. Abraham certainly believed that even in a degenerate place like Sodom there could be

righteous and believing people. That teaches us that we should not “write off” places that do not seem fruitful areas for evangelism. As he prayed and God answered, Abraham reduced the number to ten, perhaps thinking of Lot, his wife, his two daughters and their husbands and a few more close friends or servants. We have suggested that, as he prayed, Abraham's faith increased and became more persistent, but on the other hand as he progressively reduced the numbers it may have been that his expectations grew less. It may also have been that, sensing the evil of Sodom and the imminent danger of judgment, Abraham became more specific and urgent regarding the salvation of his nephew and his family. We could ask why God did not make His intentions clear to His friend Abraham right from the start. Was it to encourage and develop Abraham's faith? When God finally ended the session of prayer without spelling out the answer, it was as if God was saying, “Here is a man I can trust without having to explain every detail.” Abraham returned to his place. The issue was in God's good, sure and sovereign hand and he was at peace. He would wait in faith to see the issue. Go on to 19:29 and see that it was the man separated unto God who was the vital human element in the situation. Lot, the involved and compromised man, could not help himself, and was a serious danger to his whole family. This prayer deserves deep study.

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18:22-33

Abraham's whole prayer was grounded in the character of God, along with a profound and realistic awareness and acceptance of his own unworthiness (23-25,27). There was also in Abraham a reverence and an awareness that he was indeed on holy ground, and that presumption was quite out of place (30). At the same time there was persistence in his praying until he reached v.32, when he knew he had to leave things with God. In this whole business of prayer we are taught in Rom. 8: 26-27 that the Holy Spirit helps and prompts us in our praying, because our knowledge, understanding and capacity are so limited. People sometimes urge us to ask great things from God and in a very real sense we must not limit God nor our expectations. But the Holy Spirit also checks us in our praying, as if to say, “Leave it there.” We must not fail to see the encouragement to pray in v.26. The whole godless city would be given another chance, another opportunity to repent, all because a man of faith prayed. There is a tremendous need for intercessors. Read Ezek. 22:29-30, where God looked for someone but found no-one to stand in the gap for the nation. It is easy to deplore, criticise and denounce the sins of society. It is much more costly to pray for salvation. That requires us to live our lives in the presence of God and separated to His service. But think of it this way. If we do not pray for the nation, who will? What if we leave our praying too late? That was the situation which faced Jeremiah (Jer. 7:16-20; 14:11-12). Is it not true that the fields are white unto harvest? But will it be a harvest of salvation or judgment? Right through this prayer there is emphasis on the activity of God. It was God who involved Abraham (17) and who stood waiting for him to speak (22). The prayers of God's people and the active working of God go together.

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19:1-11

The picture is vivid and the story dramatic. This was the last evening Sodom was to know and no one seemed aware of it or concerned. The life of the city was going on in its usual, godless, indulgent way but its day of reckoning had come, and the people were not ready (Lk. 17:26-29). We are at once introduced to Lot who, sitting at the gate of the city, was obviously a man of some importance. We are told in 2 Pet. 2:6-8 that Lot was a righteous man who was vexed by the atmosphere of the city and the actions of the people. But he had chosen to live there and to stay there even after he knew the kind of place it was. But at least he was disturbed by the evil of society, whereas *we* now seem to have become accustomed to even the most horrific stories we hear. If the description of Lot as “righteous” is to be taken to mean he was “justified by faith”, then this story indicates just how far he had strayed from his spiritual moorings. The use Peter makes of the story tells us that God watches over and delivers His people even when they have backslidden as far as Lot had done. That is a wonderful thought but we must remember the alarming nature of his deliverance, and be warned by what we shall read later about Lot's reluctance to be delivered and restored to God. When the angel visitors came, although in human form, Lot seemed to recognise them as good men and was alarmed at the thought of their

spending the night in the streets. But if Sodom was not a safe place for angels, who are not subject to carnal temptations, nor a safe place for men who were manifestly “good-living” men, it was certainly not a place for Lot to have settled down in. We need to be far more careful than we often are about the company we keep (1 Cor. 15:33). We are not nearly as strong as we think.

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19:1-11

When godly restraint goes, the degeneration of society is both deep and rapid (Rom. 1:21-32) and sin, far from being dormant, becomes active, predatory and ravenous. In Gen. 4:7 sin is spoken of as waiting to pounce, having already stalked its victim. Cf. 1 Pet. 5:8. We are not told Lot's reaction to the unwillingness of his visitors to stay the night, but we are told, in shocking terms, his reaction to the demands of the crowd that came to his door. He may have been expecting trouble, but not to the extent of the whole population. No matter how important he may have been in his official capacity in the city, he had neither the moral nor the spiritual authority, nor even influence, to restrain the wicked desires that were manifested. Lot's appeal in v.6-7 was ingratiating. He addressed the men as “brothers” and then he made the kind of “offer” or “deal” in v.8 that must shock everyone, especially fathers. The fact that Lot could even think of such a plan to “buy” peace makes it totally clear just how far he had departed from any real commitment to godliness. It seems impossible to reconcile this aspect of Lot's character with what we read of him yesterday in 2 Peter. Can a righteous man, a man who has claimed to be justified by faith, a man who has companied with godly people as Lot had companied with Abraham, really fall as low as this (2 Pet. 2:20-22)? There is a Devil, and few of us really know the deep flaws in our personalities. How we need the grace of God to keep us from falling (Jer. 17:9)! How we need the new heart God has promised (Ezek. 36:26-27) and how we need to nurture and build up the new life that is ours in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17). There is one gleam of light in the darkness of this sordid story. Lot's daughters were pure. They had boy-friends (14) and were engaged to be married, but there had been no sexual impropriety. Sex was being kept for marriage. If God can keep relationships like that in a city like Sodom and with a father who had compromised all his spiritual principles, then God can keep us in our godless society.

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19:1-11

If sin was allowed unfettered operation, the chaos would be terrible and destructive. Lot seems to have regarded a breach of society's polite hospitality as more important than a breach of God's moral laws and a denial of parental responsibility. But that is the pattern for many today. The men of Sodom swept Lot aside, showing their basic contempt for him as a man and as one who professed to live by principles set by God, the God in whom they simply did not believe. In v.9b we have the picture of the power and the people of sin seemingly about to break the last defence and to carry all before them. But that cannot be. The “men from heaven” intervened. They first rescued Lot, and that is the emphasis in 2 Pet. 2:7. Then they made Lot's safety or salvation sure by closing the door. Then they struck the powers of evil with blindness so that they were totally unable to carry out their desires. It is not hard for God to reduce evil to blind confusion and to show it in its helplessness. When evil men think they call the tune, God laughs and acts (Ps. 2:1-4). Think of how, in the story of Daniel, God made the fiery furnace ineffective and later closed the mouths of the lions. Think too of the story of Job which makes so clear that the Devil can operate *only* within the strict limits ordained by God (Job 1:12; 2:6). Of course, at times, it seems that God allows evil to have the victory. It seemed so when the Son of God was crucified but the resurrection showed it was otherwise. But keep in mind that when all this was happening in Sodom, Abraham was praying in the presence of God.

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19:12-14

Keep in mind that it was the arrival of messengers from Heaven in the persons of two men (angels) that aroused the hatred and opposition of the evil people of Sodom. Their being struck blind and therefore helpless, together with the clear statement and warning about impending judgment, seem to have stirred Lot into response. Of

course he may have been aware that after this incident his position, acceptance and even his safety in the city would be in danger. It seems that the future sons-in-law did not actually live in Lot's home so he went to warn and urge them to flee from the wrath that was about to come on the city. But they simply did not take him seriously. No doubt they had often been in Lot's home, seeing and sharing in the pattern of life and activity of the family, but they had not seen any sign that Lot took God seriously. To what extent are our homes like that? When people visit us and talk with us, do they get any sense that Christ is indeed the unseen but not unknown head of the house? This does not mean we should preach at people in our homes but rather that our lives should be so naturally set on Jesus Christ that everything about us and our homes should carry some "savour" of Him. When the young men who were going to marry his daughters heard Lot speaking earnestly about God, they thought it was a huge joke and simply refused to take him seriously. That is a devastating testimony as to how far this man had fallen away from God. We cannot help wondering just how many people Lot led astray and into deep spiritual danger when he made his business decision, on good statistical evidence, to take his family and servants to the lush area of Sodom. Our business life and practice, and indeed our social and leisure life, can have a counter-evangelistic effect. How many who know us well take seriously our claim to be Christian believers?

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19:15-23

Many people still laugh scornfully when we sing, "Rescue the perishing, . . . snatch them in pity from sin and the grave," but that is exactly what had to be done for Lot, his wife and his two daughters. The "spirit" of Sodom and the way of life they had lived had gripped them so firmly that they were reluctant to leave even in the face of immediate and final judgment. There would not have been much sleep, but plenty of time to think. Then, in the morning, when urged to flee, Lot lingered and the small group had to be gripped and dragged by the angels. Note in v.16b the clear statement that the Lord was merciful to them. In spite of all they had been and done, and in spite of their careless reaction to the messengers of mercy, God was kind, acting to save them. In v.17 there is a throb of great urgency because, after all, salvation is the great and eternal issue for all sinners. But Lot was no different from the men of Sodom and his two future sons-in-law. He did not take the message seriously. Perhaps he thought the message of judgment was simply meant to frighten but was something that God would not really do. Lot's words in v.18-20 were spurious, and yet they tell a lot about him. He was willing to go far enough to escape danger but wanted to stay near enough to be able to go back if the opportunity came. Many want to be Christian enough to escape hell and be sure of Heaven but do not really fancy the idea of commitment to God, a life of discipleship, and a leaving behind of the world and its ways.

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19:15-23

The long-suffering patience of God is seen in v.21 and His guardian power over His own, even when they are spiritually adrift, obtuse and disobedient, is seen in v.22. Perhaps we are baffled by God's agreeing to Lot's compromise request and certainly we should be exercised by it. God sometimes gives us what we plead for and in the mystery of His providence causes us to live with the consequences for our own and others' ultimate good. Psalm 106:13-15 AV reads that God granted their request but sent leanness to their soul. Keep in mind that earlier in the story Lot had ended up in a sore mess and, when rescued by Abraham, he chose to go back to Sodom (Gen. 14:16). That was where his real interests lay. Yes, he was vexed by the gross evils of that society and perhaps thought that a good "dose" of judgment might deal with the worst manifestations of human sin so that the rest of Sodom could be enjoyed. Perhaps he thought that, as a politician and judge in Sodom, he could get evil legalised and restricted to certain areas, so that the rest of society could shut its eyes to the badness and hope it would not intrude too much on their own lives. We could be describing society in our own day and we must recognise that many professing Christians are in fact accommodating their convictions and practices to the pattern of the day. We have still to see the effect on Lot's wife and daughters. It is dangerous to want the best of both worlds. We must not hesitate between two opinions (1 Kings 18:21), because if we do we will end up neither cold nor hot (Rev. 3:15-16). We must learn to abhor evil (Rom. 12:9) and, in order to hold fast to what

is good, we need to recognise that the spirit of the world is against God and godliness (1 John 2:15-17; 5:19). We emphasise again that godly Abraham was persisting in his prayers for his nephew, but it is doubtful if that crossed Lot's mind. Perhaps he would have resented it, and certainly he did not want to go back and join Abraham's company.

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19:24-29

The judgment came, and it was total. Contrast the attractive picture of Sodom in 13:10 with that in today's verses. We say it is all very solemn, and so it is. But consider what effect there would have been in the world if this cancer of sin had not been dealt with. When we hear of Legionnaire's Disease we agree that premises should be closed down lest it spread its dreaded germs. When we hear of evil incurable disease, so often (but not always) spread by human wrongdoing, care is urged and precautions taken, but so many refuse to change their life-style. There is a blindness and a perversity in human nature as a result of the Fall, but God is not mocked and what is sown will be reaped individually, socially and nationally (Gal. 6:7). Jesus told us to remember Lot's wife (Lk. 17:26-32) and we need to be clear that it was not a brief glance over her shoulder that cost her her life. In the very process of judgment, with the dark cloud over the city, she stood and looked and longed and hoped for her old life. Her heart was there and she did not want to leave. God granted her request and she perished in the judgment. Read the earnest words in Heb. 10:35-39. One last solemn lesson must be noted. Not even the earnest, persistent prayers of faith of the godly man Abraham could avert the judgment of the evil cities. Read Jer. 15:1; Ezek. 14:12-14. We can leave our praying too late to save the city and the nation. But we must pray on so that the next generation may have hope.

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19:30-37

This is a grim ending to a grim story. Lot, who had started off with flocks and herds and became important, ends up in a cave. Lot who had been taken to a place of safety and guaranteed that there he would come to no harm, left that place. Nothing seemed to cause him to seek after God in a spirit of repentance. He was the Prodigal Son who never came home. What spell of time elapsed between verses 29 and 31 we cannot tell. We have no desire to go into the ugly details and we should not read into the story what we are not actually told. There seems to have been no attempt by Lot to introduce his daughters to any of the wide family of Abraham. He seems to have tried to keep his girls away from the kind of contacts that would have defiled them (19:8) but that kind of protection is not necessarily the best way to prepare young people for life in the real world. The two girls may have been bitter and resentful because of the way their father had been prepared to sell them to the rabble in Sodom, and besides, their father's action now had deprived them of the men they had been going to marry. Their attitude to having children may have been to preserve the family name for future generations, or it may have been, as it can be today, that they felt they had the right to have a baby. Certainly God and the will of God did not feature in their thinking, nor in their specific method of deliberately making their father drunk so that they could carry out their plan. We must accept sadly that Lot no longer had any influence over his daughters, perhaps no respect from them. But that had evolved over a long spell of time. What we note finally are the names of the children who were born, because right through the Old Testament the Moabites and Ammonites were a danger to God's people and work. It could all have been so different if only Lot had at the start been willing to go with God.

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20:1-7

It is something of a relief to turn back to the story of Abraham, although it too has its solemn phases. We have seen in the story of Lot how far a man can drift from God even though in earlier years he was under good and gracious influence. We have seen how deeply Lot could sink into sin and what devastating influence he had on his family. We can be sure Lot never intended his life to work out like this, but successive choices he made on a totally worldly basis led him to a sad end. We do well to take seriously Jesus' words, "Watch and pray," lest we

enter into temptation. And, in the light of what we now read about Abraham, we need the earnest counsel of Paul in 1 Cor. 10:11-13 - "Let anyone who thinks he stands, take heed lest he fall." Keep in mind that we are reading of Abraham who was not only a mature servant of God but a man who was the trusted friend of God (18:17), and a man who was a mighty and prevailing intercessor (19:29). More than twenty years had passed since Abraham had obeyed the call of God and had left the city of Ur. There had been fears and failures but God had led him on in faith. He was no longer a spiritual novice and that makes it all the more sad and solemn to read here of the re-emergence of old sins. The situation here is virtually identical to that in 12:10ff. We must see here a specific attack by the Devil along the line of Abraham's personality weakness. Almost irrationally, beyond what circumstances indicated, he was gripped by fear and tried to escape by telling lies. It was a ploy that put his wife in great peril at a time when soon she was to conceive and bear the son who would be the significant figure in the onward development of God's plan of redemption. We must study this well if we are to discern and resist the Devil when he tries to introduce an element of confusion into God's work.

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20:1-7

We say that we believe in the Devil but we forget about him and fail to be ready for him. Whenever we make a significant spiritual step forward, the Devil will be there to counter-attack. Review Abraham's story. In chap. 12, after the victory of faith and obedience, Abraham was drawn away into Egypt. In chapters 14-15, after a great victory in battle followed by a new experience of God and a new commitment in faith, Abraham was tempted and nagged into an involvement with Hagar. In chapters 18-19 we saw Abraham in the front line of spiritual warfare in prevailing prayer, and now we see him in a state of reaction in which unbelief has gripped him and he seeks to handle his situation on a totally worldly and deceitful basis. If we are to go on long-term in Christian service, we must learn that one of the most dangerous times is when we have engaged successfully in costly spiritual battles, rising to the heights of faith and obedience. Think of Peter being rebuked after his great confession in Matt. 16:13-28. Think of Elijah in his depression and escapism after the great confrontation on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 19:1-4). Did Abraham not recall his earlier failure in Egypt? What made him move to Gerar? His prayers for Lot had prevailed and, while the evil cities had been brought to judgment, there was no sign of Lot returning to spiritual pilgrimage. Had this made Abraham disappointed and restless? Had his expectations been unreal, his own thoughts and imaginings rather than assurances from God? Why had Abraham assumed that there would be neither faith nor moral integrity in Gerar? Had he no thought of or consideration for his wife in this scheme? Where was his faith? Where was his clear vision of God and the promises God had given and which he had believed? All was clouded. This is the work of the Devil.

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20:1-7

When we seek to expose the Devil and his workings, we must see to it that we do not forget God. If we did, that would be a great victory for the enemy. Today we must grasp firmly, and indeed gloriously, the two words "But God" (3). Leave God out and the situation becomes disastrous. With God there is creative hope. We are dealing here with the good and sure providence of God operating on two levels: in preserving Abraham and Sarah for future service, and in dealing graciously with a heathen king who had been led into sin and danger by the duplicity of both Abraham and Sarah. Note carefully that it was to the unbeliever that God spoke, and Abimelech recognised that it was God who was speaking. This pagan king was an honourable man and God recognised his integrity. God also made plain that it was He who had kept the king from becoming embroiled in sin. Then God called on Abimelech to set the situation right, with a warning of dire consequences if he failed to do so. This story should make us look back over our own lives, especially but not exclusively to the years before we became Christians. Do we not see now, in a way that we did not see then, that the good hand of God was on our lives, and the good providence of God guarded and kept us from situations that could well have marred our lives and prevented our useful Christian service? How we need to view, ponder and give thanks for all the mercies of God that have kept us! How many of us can sing by way of testimony,

"When in the slippery paths of youth

With heedless steps I ran,
Thine arm, unseen, conveyed me safe,
And brought me up to man.” (Addison)

Keep clearly in mind that we are being taught about God being at work among unbelievers in the interest of a believer who had gone astray.

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20:8-18

We must see in this whole story that God did not in any way disown, devalue or discredit His servant Abraham, even though he had done such wrong. In v.7 God declared that Abraham was a prophet and an intercessor and that Abimelech would soon need that man's prayers. God's words to Abimelech caused him and his servants to be afraid (8). They took God seriously, always a wise thing to do. The king next called Abraham and, in the face of the assembled company, rebuked him. In our language, Abimelech, an unbeliever, said, “That is no way to behave if you are a Christian!” The question in v.10 was a searching one. It probed Abraham's motives. He was thinking only of himself, not of how his actions would affect other people. Abraham certainly was not thinking of how a friend and servant of God should behave nor how he should deal with people who were manifestly decent and honourable. It is not clear in Abraham's answer (11-13) whether he was explaining or just trying to excuse or justify his actions. There is just a suggestion in v.13 that Abraham was blaming God for all his difficulties, describing his life of faith as a long, hard dangerous way. Abimelech cannot have been impressed when Abraham indicated that this had not been the first time that he had used this “scheme” to guarantee his personal safety by putting his wife in danger. Abraham must have felt shame when Abimelech treated Sarah with such respect, making sure that her personal reputation was not left with a stain or shadow. Do not forget that, but for the protecting providence of God, Sarah could have been with child by Abimelech and that would have introduced confusion and no doubt further delay in the outworking of God's purposes. Abraham, sent back by an unbeliever to the way of obedience, is seen at the end of the chapter in his true light: God's servant, being used for the blessing of others.

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21:1-7

The faithfulness of God stands in spite of the faithlessness and failures of His servants (2 Tim. 2:13). Of course, the years were passing. Abraham was one hundred years old. Twenty-five years had gone since he first set out in faith in obedience to God, and a further seventy-five years remained for his life and service (12:4; 25:7). But now, in spite of delays that made the birth of a child seem more and more impossible, and in spite of lapses of faith and all the works of the Devil, God did what He said He would do and the promised child was born in the old age of his parents. God is a God to be trusted. Read Heb. 6:13-20; 10:23-25; 11:8-16. All who live by faith must go on, even though they do not receive the full reward of their faith in this world. Faith holds fast even when everything seems to be breaking up in the storms of life. Read Acts 27:13-25, especially v.25, and note how one man's faith speaks out and becomes the channel of hope and assurance to a great many others. Faith stands firm even in the face of death, as Job 19:25a and 1 Cor. 15:54-57 make plain. Abraham, so recently a prodigal father (and husband), was mindful of God's goodness and God's covenant in the midst of his human fulfilment and the child was circumcised. The sign or mark of the covenant of grace was set on the child's body. Father and son alike were marked out for God. Sarah's laughter is related to and grounded in God and His promise. She could scarcely believe that God had given her such joyous fulfilment. She had discovered that God can and does do exceeding abundantly above all we ask or think (Eph. 3:20). We can imagine Sarah saying inwardly, just as we do, “Why did I doubt God?”

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21:8-21

This story must be read with care in order to understand it. Abraham was one hundred years old when Isaac was born and at that time Ishmael was fourteen years old (16:16) and in that culture would have been thought of as

being on the threshold of manhood. Isaac may have been between two and three years old before he was weaned and that means Ishmael would have been about sixteen, certainly not a “child” as in v.16 (RSV), nor even a “boy” (NIV). The temperament, personality and disposition of Ishmael would have begun to be clear and it was Sarah who saw where this would lead. In v.9 Ishmael was not “playing” but “mocking” (NIV). It seems he was mocking the idea of Isaac being the son of promise and the significant heir to all the promises of God. This is the interpretation given in Gal. 4:22, 23, 29 where the word “persecuted” is used to describe Ishmael's attitude. One son had been born as the result of unbelief, when both Abraham and Sarah had acted on impulse. The other son was born as the result of faith, when Abraham believed God. The picture is of the emerging conflict between faith and unbelief; between what is of God and what is not of God. These two cannot live in harmony in anyone's life because unbelief and faith, flesh and spirit will always fight with each other (Gal. 5:17). Sarah may have acted partly in motherly resentment but when she demanded that Ishmael be cast out she was the instrument of God to guard the future. Abraham too reacted in a natural and human way in v.11. He had watched Ishmael growing up. He may even have thought it was good he had Ishmael in case anything happened to Isaac. But that was not an attitude of faith that trusted God and in the next chapter we find Abraham being put to the test, so that his faith would be in God and in God alone (22:1-2).

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21:8-21

The presence of unbelief in our lives, in whatever form it takes, be it a person, relationship or activity, will always fight against faith, obedience and usefulness to God. What Abraham was being asked to do was not easy, and in his human hesitation, God spoke to him reassuringly (12), pointing him back to His promise and forward to its on-going fulfilment. But Abraham was not to go forward with half his trust in God and half in his own accomplishments. He had to begin to recognise that humanly Ishmael seemed to be a stronger personality than Isaac and that consequently the son of promise would be in danger as long as Ishmael was there. Already in Ishmael's mocking the basic conflict between the two sons indicated how the future would develop. One indication of that future is vividly expressed in Ps. 83:1-6. In v.12b God made plain that Ishmael had no positive part to play in the plan of salvation. He must not be allowed to hold on to what he thought of as his rightful place in Abraham's family. He had to go! If not, he would resist and hinder the development of the plan. In v.13 Abraham was told that this son he fathered in unbelief would become a great nation, but it was doubtful if Abraham realised just what a problem that nation would be down the ages of history opposing and persecuting the people of promise. In v.14 we are shown again Abraham's obedience of faith, doing what God commanded, no matter how costly in human terms. But there was no harshness in Abraham's spiritual obedience, and that is not always the case with the obedience of Christian believers. Bread and water, the basic needs for life and continuance, were provided for Hagar and her son, and she departed. Keep in mind that Ishmael was a grown lad, not a little child.

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21:8-21

Keep in mind that Ishmael was a teenager, not a child to be carried. The reference to wandering in v.14 does not necessarily mean aimlessness. The natural thing for Hagar to do would be to head in the general direction of Egypt. Keep in mind also that both mother and son may well have had the same proud ambition to be significant in God's plan for Abraham, without sharing Abraham's faith. For them both, all their ambitions had gone wrong and the tiredness and despair which led to exhaustion would have had an element of angry frustration in them. It may have been in v.15 that the son was blaming the mother, but both were at the end of their tether. The various translations of v.16b, 17 do not make it clear whether it was Hagar or her son who cried, nor whether the cry was weeping or praying. Wenham in the New Bible Commentary suggests Ishmael may have been regretting his earlier attitude of contempt towards Isaac and towards the spiritual issues of God's promises. Whatever the interpretation of the cry, God heard it and answered. To what extent the cry of mother and son expressed true repentance in relation to God or simply self-pitying remorse we cannot tell. Read 2 Cor. 7:8-11 and keep that truth in mind when we begin to live with the results of our own foolish actions. God called

Hagar and her son to stand before him, making them aware that he was the one they had to deal with and relate to. Then God opened their eyes, which may have been closed by their resentment against Abraham and against God, and they saw what had been there all the time, a well of water to meet their need. The future of Ishmael is spoken of in v.20-21, emphasising that God would handle his life. At the same time we are shown the natural direction of his life in his marrying an Egyptian. In spite of their contact with God and the things of God, some people always belong to the “world”. But do not forget the important lesson in v.19. Our attitude to and our resentment at situations and the people in these situations can make us blind to God's presence, provision and guidance.

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21:22-34

It seems Abraham was still in the area of Gerar and Abimelech is the king we read about in 20:1-3ff. It is difficult to say if this incident came after 20:18, 21:7 or 21:21. But it is clear that, in spite of Abraham's manifest fall from grace in chapter 20, Abimelech recognised quite clearly that God was with this man. He may have become aware of the basic godliness of Abraham when he saw Abraham's reaction to his spiritual failure. Our reaction to our sins and failures, how we respond to God's discipline and rebuke, and how we handle both ourselves and our situation tell a great deal about us. This, by the gracious working of the Holy Spirit, can prove to be a powerful and effective witness to God and the Gospel. Abimelech knew Abraham was not perfect but he could see that God's good hand was on His servant and on his life. As a result, Abimelech wanted to have a right relationship with Abraham, not least so that he would not find himself at cross-purposes with God, as had been the case in chapter 20. Then, just at that time, another cause of friction arose (25). It was dealt with simply and effectively but only when Abraham spoke about it. This is the mistake we often make. We refuse to speak about things and, as a result, misunderstanding arises, issues become magnified, feelings get hurt, others get involved and a whole fellowship can be torn apart. Abraham and Abimelech brought everything out into the open so that all could see that right prevailed and friendship was real. But of course, Abraham was a man who was on friendly terms with God, a man who trusted God, and a man whose concern was to glorify God.

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21:22-34

Think of all that Abraham had been through over many years, not least the costly events of the past two chapters. “Under the terms of the treaty Abraham secured a guaranteed supply of water for his flocks. He acquired a legal title to this well and this was his first foothold in the land.” (Wenham) The tree planted was something of a memorial to the occasion but the really important fact is that Abraham called on the name of the Lord. God is referred to as the Everlasting God and we must think about Abraham's God and our God. Read Ps. 90:1-2 with the affirmation that from everlasting to everlasting He is God. Read Isa. 40:10-12, 21-23, 28-31. He is the everlasting God of power and tenderness, who never wearies of His people. What a God He is! The God of eternity, high and lofty, and of purer eyes than to look on iniquity (Habak. 1:13). He is the God most high (Gen. 14:19); the God who sees (Gen. 16:13); the all-sufficient God (Gen. 17:1). He is the everlasting, unchanging and unchangeable God (Jas. 1:17), great in His faithfulness (Lam. 3:23), God of love (1 John 4:8). He is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who spared not even His own Son but gave Him up for us all (Rom. 8:32). He is the God of our salvation. Little wonder we sing, “The God of Abram praise, who reigns enthroned above,” a God to be worshipped, trusted and adored. Yes, we sing rightly, “All my hope on God is founded, He doth still my trust renew.” Read Ps. 91:1 AV. “He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.” For Sunday worship read or sing the hymn based on Psalm 90, “O God our help in ages past, our hope for years to come.”

“Under the shadow of Thy throne
Thy saints have dwelt secure;
Sufficient is Thine arm alone,
And our defence is sure.”

(Watts)

What a way to live! What peace! What assurance! What hope!

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22:1-14

We read this whole story and will study it for several days. Try to sense the drama of it and the intensity of thought and emotion that must have been involved. At the same time we must see that there is a tremendous spirit of peace and assurance right through the whole episode. In most Bibles the heading of the chapter refers to God testing Abraham, but God did not need this kind of proof regarding His servant's faith. Abraham was to be the beneficiary of this testing, his faith being confirmed in such a way that he learned he could trust his God even in the most baffling of experiences. Another great saint and servant of God said, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him," (Job 13:15 AV). But for a father to slay his own son points to an even deeper cost. We must also see in the story the testing of Isaac, because he was by now a young adult and unless he had given willing co-operation he could never have been bound to the altar. We have to see the absolute trust and agreement between father and son, and simply to use such words leads our thoughts to God the Father, who spared not even His own Son (Rom. 8:32). In many ways we should think of this action as the greatest thing Abraham ever did. Isaac, grown to manhood, was the symbol of and the assurance of all God's promises for the future. Isaac was the living proof that all the costly battles had been well worth while. And now God asked Abraham to give him up in a total sacrifice that could not be recalled. This is exactly what Abraham did, and the comment on his action is found in Heb. 11:17-19. He believed that God could and would raise the dead. What faith!

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22:1-14

Note how the story begins "After these things"(AV), "Some time later" (NIV). That could refer to all that had gone before, right from the call to leave Ur (12:1). It could also simply refer to the end of the previous chapter which records a considerable spell during which Abraham lived in quiet ordinariness, getting on with life, and enjoying his fellowship with God. If that is so, then God's call must have come with shattering unexpectedness. None of us know what any day will bring nor in what form the "testing" may come. But the testing of faith is an essential part of Christian life in order that our faith may be confirmed to *ourselves* and that we should grow in spiritual maturity. James 1:2-4 (especially in J B Phillips' translation), 1 Pet. 1:3-9 and 2 Pet. 1:3-11 are passages that we should ponder well. Without doubt it is through our handling both the spells of quietness and the spells of turmoil and testing that we learn faith and get our priorities right. The story begins in a very blunt way, with no explanation to Abraham as to why this act was necessary, and with a reference to Abraham's love for Isaac that must have pierced the father's heart. Abraham responded in the obedience of faith, without hesitation, and seemingly without any explanation to Isaac. That the son responded without question is a great testimony to the relationship between father and son, one of love and trust. There is no mention of Sarah. If she knew what was planned she made no protest. Did all three of them recognise beyond any shadow of doubt that it was God who was speaking? Even if they did, they would not understand why God was asking this of them. But they could look back and see in their own lives proof of the sureness, integrity, faithfulness and love of their God.

“When darkness seems to veil His face,
I rest on His unchanging grace,
In every high and stormy gale,
My anchor holds within the veil.”

(Mote)

We have a God who can be trusted, especially in the dark when we do not understand what He is doing with us.

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22:1-14

Who can tell the thoughts of father and son during the days of journey? It was only on the third day that God told Abraham clearly the specific place for the sacrifice. Tradition believes that the place was Mount Moriah, the present Temple Mount in Jerusalem. There is something almost matter of fact in the narrative in v.5-6, but we must note clearly Abraham's reference to his return with Isaac. Did he think that God would never really ask him to sacrifice his son? Did he think God was simply wanting to see how far he would go in obedience and that there was really no drama in the situation? But if the servants were told this later, would they not think of God as rather fickle, and not to be taken seriously? Abraham made everything ready for a real sacrifice. The wood laid on Isaac to carry to the appointed place makes us think of Jesus carrying His Cross to that other hill. When Isaac spoke the word "Father," what did Abraham feel? We cannot but think of the one great sacrifice on the Cross and how Jesus in Gethsemane also said "Father, if it be possible let this cup pass, nevertheless, not my will but thine be done" (Lk. 22:41-42). Abraham said with great simplicity, without knowing how it would be done, that God Himself would provide the lamb. God did on Mount Moriah, and He did on Mount Calvary. God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, and the Son gave Himself in sweet, unquestioning but costly love to the Father. In our story, father and son went forward together to the place of sacrifice.

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22:1-14

The scene described in v.9-14 almost defies exposition. We will never really understand the feelings of the father and of the son. The words of God in v.12 testify to the radical commitment of Abraham, whose heart must have cried in agony, "Why ... Why ... Why?" His faith in God's ability to raise his son from the dead (Heb. 11:17-19) may have had an element of desperation in it. He could not see how God could keep His promise regarding the future unless He did something as miraculous as raising Isaac from the dead. Abraham, like all of us, faced the mystery and seeming finality of death, and death is an enemy according to 1 Cor. 15:26. We know now that Jesus Christ has conquered death but that was not known to Abraham, even although Jesus did say that Abraham saw His day and was glad (John 8:56). We could compare the situation of Martha and Mary in the face of the seeming victory of death and Jesus' great affirmation in John 11:17-27. The culmination of the story, in the providing of the ram for sacrifice as Abraham had said God would do (8), makes plain that God Himself had watched over and had been involved in every development of this drama. Abraham called the name of the place "Jehovah-jireh" which means, "The Lord will provide". The various translations of the last part of v.14 read, "On the mount of the Lord it will be provided" or "... it will be seen to" or "... it will come clear." Faith believes that the explanation will come clear in due time, but we grasp the explanation only on the mount of obedience. We have spoken before of some of the names of God and they are all instructive. Jehovah-nissi (Ex. 17:15): the Lord our banner, and His banner over us is love. Jehovah-shalom (Judges 6:24): the Lord our peace. Jehovah -tsidkenu (Jer. 23:6): the Lord our righteousness. Jehovah-shammah (Ezek. 48:35): the Lord is there. He is always there. And, of course, that same Lord is our Shepherd, the Good Shepherd, who cares and is always to be trusted.

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22:15-24

Immediately after this profound spiritual experience, in which Abraham expressed the obedience of faith, God spoke again, and spoke with great assurance regarding the future. Abraham could well have been emotionally exhausted by his experience and he could have been in great danger from the Devil with temptations to pride because of the "success" of his faith. But God was right there standing guard, and taking on Himself the ministry of encouragement. God repeated His promise to His servant and reaffirmed His commitment to His servant, and such facts should cause us to pause in wonder and worship. We speak often about *our* commitment to God, emphasising usually the cost rather than the privilege, but we do not think as often as we should about the commitment of the faithful God to us His servants. God was saying to Abraham here that his future life and service were guaranteed. God would do in him, for him and through him to future generations, exactly what He had promised. This is the source of great peace as well as hope, and is something we can rest in. After all, do we

really want anything that is not in God's good purpose to give to us? God's word to Abraham was that his future would be far greater, more expansive and more significant than anything he had expected when first he answered God's call in his homeland of Ur. Is it not also true that God has done for us, and enriched our lives, far more than we expected or prayed for (Eph. 3:20)? In the last verses (20-24) Abraham was told that already his family-circle was expanding, a token of all that was yet to be given him.

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23:1-4

At the end of the last chapter (22:19) Abraham returned from his “mountain-top” experience, with all its cost and promise, back to the ordinariness of family life and work. In some ways that was as much a test of his faith as the crisis of the sacrifice of Isaac, because it was on-going, day after day, week after week, with perhaps nothing much to excite or inspire. Of course it is faith and prayer cultivated in the ordinary spells that fit us for the crises of life. This is wonderfully shown in the story of Daniel (Dan. 6:6-10). Abraham had proved himself to be a man of faith and spiritual stature but he now faced a further testing experience, the death of his wife. Perhaps only those who have lost their life-partner, after a few or many years, will know just how deep a valley this is to travel. Those who have lost loved ones, whether babies, youngsters, teenagers or older people, will also know the grief that comes, grips and lasts a long time. Abraham and Sarah had been married over sixty years, and perhaps the last years had been the happiest, in the birth and growth of their son Isaac. If we compare 22:19 with 23:2 it seems the family were away from home when Sarah died. Hebron is near Mamre, where some of Abraham's great experiences took place (13:18; 18:1), but even though aware of his God Abraham, being a truly human person, wept and mourned in the loss of his wife. Now, we know that death has been conquered and that believers do not sorrow in the same way as others who have no hope (1 Cor. 15:51-57; 1 Thess. 4:13-18). But we do sorrow and it has to be expressed. It is a necessary part of the grieving process, which if not allowed to operate at the time can cause many psychological and spiritual problems later. There were times when Jesus wept, with real aching of heart (Jn. 11:35; Lk. 19:41) and we can be sure that He both understands and shares our sorrows.

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23:1-4

Take time to consider Abraham's family life. If we compare 17:17 with 23:1, we realise that Isaac was now thirty-seven years old. Something like twenty years had elapsed since the events of chapter 22, during which time everything seems to have been “ordinary” years of consolidation, with the river of life slowing and broadening. Already, almost in passing, the name of Rebekah has been mentioned and in due time she would be Isaac's wife. The story of that is in the next chapter and we may well think of marriages made in heaven. In the will of God is certainly the place for good, healthy and happy relationships. One translation of Prov. 31:10-12 affirms that “a good wife is a great find” and the heart of her husband can safely trust in her. Sarah had not always been a spiritual help and encouragement to her husband, nor had Abraham always been a good husband. In Heb. 11:11 Sarah is honoured for her faith and in 1 Pet. 3:1-6 she is spoken of as an example to wives. (Not the kind of passage that appeals to feminists!) For Sarah, her days on earth were over and it was as what she had become over the years that she passed over into the world of eternity. None of us will suddenly become saints simply by dying. We are told in Rev. 14:13 that those who die “in the Lord” are blessed and their works follow them. We must not waste the precious years granted to us, but we must always remember that God forgives, and that He can and does restore the years that have been stolen from Him and from us by “locusts” of various kinds (Joel 2:25).

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23:5-20

This passage, dealing with the arrangements for Sarah's burial, was introduced by Abraham's confession that he was a stranger and a sojourner. This world was not really his permanent home and he had no desire to go back to the way of life he once had in Ur. Read the statement of this in Heb. 11:8-10, 13-16. At the beginning of the

story, God had promised to give the land to Abraham's descendants and Abraham believed the promise. But the land was occupied by others and in Acts 7:5 it is acknowledged that Abraham in fact took possession of no more than a plot for a grave. Today's story makes plain that Abraham could have had that plot free because of the apparently generous offer of the Hittites. But that would not only have left Abraham beholden to unbelieving men, it would have left him with no legal title to the plot, and therefore no permanent foothold in that land. Abraham stood his ground against all the clever pleading, and moved the discussion from the group in v.5-6 to one individual in v.10. Ephron spoke as if a mere four hundred shekels was not worth bargaining about between two great men but Abraham knew what he was doing. He paid the price in full and in v.17-18 a full, detailed legal contract was signed. The buying of that plot of land was a bit like explorers planting the flag and claiming the territory for the king. Whatever would happen in years to come that plot of land would be a reminder that the promise of God had been believed and claimed and would be held to even when Abraham died. This was Abraham's testimony that he had believed God and that he lived and would die standing on the promise of God. The plot of ground was a reminder that the future belonged to God. In the same way the Communion Table is a visible reminder that God is the God of our salvation. As we leave the passage, do not fail to note the quiet but firm graciousness of Abraham in all the discussions. His whole manner commended his God to those who did not know God.

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24:1-9

There is a wealth of information in the first verse. Abraham was old and well advanced in years, but it depends what that means. He was 75 when he was called by God (12:4). He was 100 when Isaac was born and Sarah was 90 (17:17). That means Isaac was now 37 and Abraham 137 (23:1). According to 25:20 Isaac married when he was 40, three years after his mother's death. A further twenty years passed before Isaac had his two sons and if we keep in mind that Abraham lived until he was 175 then he lived to see grandchildren born and grow to be young teenagers. We must recognise that the reference to Abraham's death in 25:7 is not given in strict time sequence. We mention these facts because Abraham himself had to wait many years for a son and heir and so had Isaac, and we can imagine the old man telling his son to trust God saying, "Believe God's promise. I had to wait. God is faithful. Trust, trust, trust. God will do what He has said, but we have to be ready." We have grounds for saying these things because it is recorded that the Lord had blessed Abraham in all things, and Abraham knew it. It was God in His grace that had brought him thus far. It was God who had made him a man of faith and given him all that he had. The work of these many past years was not Abraham's but God's and, as we shall see, Abraham's main concern at this point was the future of that work. There was to be no casual easing off into retirement just because he was getting old. In actual fact he had another 37 years to go. Without arguing about these dates and figures, we must see that in God's on-going work our children and our children's children are involved and all we mean by family life is set in the context of the developing purposes of God. That is quite a thought and it means we must prepare, as far as we are able, our children and grandchildren for a spiritual future.

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24:1-9

The pattern in the story is that of arranged marriages according to the culture of the time. Abraham, as a good father, wanted to make sure his son would not marry someone who did not recognise his spiritual identity and destiny, because that would be both a contradiction and a hindrance. This same principle is expounded in the New Testament; making it plain a Christian believer should not marry an unbeliever (2 Cor. 6:14-18). All that Abraham said here was very much in the presence of God and with confidence in God, as the reference to the angel of God in v.7 makes plain. In bringing this matter into the presence of God, Abraham was really praying: praying for the right wife for his son, not just to make his son happy but to make him and keep him useful to God. Perhaps, as this story develops, we should think of the prayers of the old man, persevering in and through a variety of stages until finally in faith, holding on to God's promise for his son and grandsons and God's purposes for them, he finally died. Those who have known God's blessing through many years should have the

confidence in God to pray for the future of the work in faith not fear. In this first stage of the process of finding a wife for Isaac we would hope that Abraham had discussed the matter with his son and had received his glad agreement. A man of faith *would* do that and would never try to make his son's decisions for him. But the bonds of trust and mutual respect must begin to be made right from the start, and that takes a lot of love and patience, especially from the parents.

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24:10-14

The character, trustworthiness and faith of the servant tell a lot about the grace of Abraham's home life. Here is a man who had been brought to faith, grounded in faith and prepared for significant spiritual service in his ordinary working life by the influence and example of a godly man. It is clear from the developing story that Abraham's trust in his servant was well founded. The man was wise, and went to the well where he knew the women would gather to draw water. But there was to be no mere speculation or judgment according to appearance, for the man committed the whole issue to God in prayer. He asked for and looked for simple but clear guidance in respect of a decision that was to have far-reaching consequences. His prayer was based on and inspired by a real confidence in God's love and there is a lesson for all of us here. So often in our struggles for guidance and in our speculation and experimentation with relationships we act as if God was grudging us the fulfilment of our hearts. Do we not believe that in love He wants for us and plans for us the very best that can be? Do we not read in the beginning of human relationships that, with simplicity, clarity and considered decision, God brought the woman to the man, and both recognised at once that they were for each other (Gen. 2:18, 22-24)? We know that the relationship very soon was spoiled by human wilfulness and stupidity that listened to the Devil rather than to God. Had they but trusted their relationship to God, believing that His will for them was life in its fullness, things would have been very different. Keep in mind very clearly that in this story it was neither Abraham, nor the servant, nor even Isaac who was making the vital decision. It was God!

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24:15-27

We must be impressed with both the spirituality and humility of this servant. If he is the Eliezer mentioned in 15:2-3 he is the man displaced from the prospect of being Abraham's heir. But he is still the willing and devoted servant of his master, willing to yield his rights without any bitterness. Right through to the end of this story we see Eliezer as a man of prayer and worship (12, 26, 42, 52). To have this kind of older person praying for you in relation to your romance and marriage is a blessing indeed. The servant's great concern was to be right in the centre of God's will, and every step of the way he looked to God and waited on God. That is the way to be sure! We must not forget Abraham at home because he too would be praying. But what of Isaac in this saga of an arranged marriage? If he had learned to be a spiritually minded man then he too would have been placing this whole matter into the good hand of God, especially since he would have known that there was mapped out for him by God a future of service in the work of God. This bringing of the romantic relationship area of life into the open, seeking the mind and will of God, is so different from the way many Christians handle this part of their lives. Too many young men and women start a relationship and *then* seek for God's guidance. That can be the way of confusion and hurt. What of Rebekah? For her it was just an ordinary day of hard, inglorious work with the camels. Did she perhaps have some "feeling" that it was to be a significant day? She was a girl who was being kept for someone (16). She was good looking and gracious (18-20), and not afraid of hard work. In all probability there was a group of young women but Rebekah was the only one who was an answer to v.14. The servant must have been aware that God was answering his prayer but he did not jump to conclusions (21). There was no need for haste, because if this was God's partner for Isaac she would be kept for him.

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24:28-49

There is no lack of romance in this story. Look back to v.22-23 and think how Rebekah must have been surprised and excited by the significant gifts given to her and the question about hospitality. We can only

speculate if the servant's prayer (26-27) was overheard by the girl. It was a prayer of thanksgiving to God, rejoicing with Abraham in having such a faithful God, and thanksgiving for the sure way God had led him in such an important task. Of course Eliezer had wanted to be guided and that may be the heart of the whole matter of guidance. Do we really want God's will and are we willing to wait in faith, not impatience, until that will is made clear to us? In the AV verse 27b reads: "I being in the way, the Lord led me." Eliezer had been going on in the way of obedience and it is in that context and disposition of life that God guides. Guidance is not something just for a crisis or for certain selected areas of life. The story develops and the scene changes to the girl's home, where her brother seems to be the head of the family. There is a slight suggestion that Laban was unduly influenced by the gold ring and bracelets, but on the other hand he may simply have recognised that this was a formal approach regarding a possible marriage arrangement. While Rebekah explained the situation, the servant stood waiting quietly. This quiet waiting on God and looking to God and trusting God is a significant note right through the whole chapter and it may be teaching us what real faith should be like. Laban gave Eliezer the natural eastern welcome and Eliezer accepted that the animals should be attended to in the right way. But then, before eating the meal prepared, which could have taken a long time and which might have proved a great distraction, he insisted on bringing his spiritual task right to the front. The setting of priorities in our lives is yet another indication of what authentic faith should do.

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24:28-49

Right through the speech of the servant there is no trace of exaggeration, flattery, pressure or presumption. Everything was proceeding very smoothly, but that in itself does not confirm guidance. For example, in the story of Jonah, when he was running away from God, a boat was there just when he needed it and that led him further away (Jonah 1:1-3). Again, in the story of Paul's second missionary journey it was only after a series of frustrations and blocked paths that God's clear way ahead became apparent (Acts 16:6-10). Eliezer, having recited the facts of the situation with simplicity and accuracy, and having done so in a spirit of worship and trust, finally spoke the words in v.49. The time had come for others to make a decision and the final confirmation of guidance would come with the consent of the family and the willingness of the girl. If the answer was negative, then the servant knew he would press on with his God-given search. We must note carefully that in this intended marriage far more than the desire and consent of the man and the woman was looked for. Others who were truly part of the situation would give or withhold their agreement. When a romance begins and those in the fellowship recognise almost at once that this is of God, what a confirmation this should be to the two people. When trusted and mature spiritual friends express hesitation that is an indication for caution. Of course, no-one should speak and act in a way that would put young people under pressure, assuming that a fresh friendship between boy and girl is necessarily a romance. People can be immensely stupid at times! We should pray more and care more (and interfere less) for young people at this decisive stage in their lives.

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24:50-61

At the point of v.49 the servant of Abraham seems to have taken charge of the situation. He was so aware of being under orders from God that he was not awed by the older, wealthy man. He was an ambassador of the great Abraham. We, who believe, are also ambassadors for Christ (2 Cor. 5:20), and we must manifest the same grace and dignity as Eliezer did. With Laban taking the lead in the negotiations, the mention of Bethuel here seems to suggest he was old and glad to be in the background. Whether or not Laban actually believed it, he made the clear statement (50) that summed up the whole situation accurately. This situation was of God's making and therefore people had to be very careful lest they be found interfering with and even contradicting God's will. It is important here to make the point that marriage is a gift from God, not a right, and it is given to some and withheld from others in the mystery of the will of God who Himself is love. The situation had reached the stage when father and brother gave their consent to the marriage. So far, Rebekah had not been consulted, although in her own thinking and feeling she may have been very much involved. It is not unknown that a future

bride is persuaded she is to marry a certain man before the man is really aware of his own feelings and intentions. Of course a love and marriage that begins in the presence and under the shadow of the God of all grace is one that has sure potential. In v.52 we see again how the servant at every development of the story bowed in worship before God. There followed all the accepted ceremonial of gifts to the bride that sealed the arrangement and then came the pre-wedding reception.

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24:50-61

The reception left Abraham's servant restless and he wanted to get on with doing his master's will. Celebrations were not going to be allowed to be a distraction. It is not clear why Laban and his mother tried to persuade the servant to stay, although they seemed to suggest that it was to give Rebekah time to get used to the idea of leaving home. From what we are told later in the story it may have been that Laban was very interested in the obvious signs of wealth brought by the servant. But Eliezer again shows his spiritual commitment in v.56. Because God had been good to him, he would respond in glad obedience. He was a great servant who spoke only about and on behalf of his master, to plead his master's cause and to do his master's will. Self was not allowed to intrude. What a pattern for all Christians to follow! Rebekah was faced with a colossal decision. She had been impressed by the servant but she knew nothing about Isaac to whom she was to be married. Of course in a life commitment in marriage there is always an unknown element. Will the relationship develop and work out in blessing? Will two people hold together in terms of being helpmeets to each other (Gen. 2:18), enabling and inspiring each other to be and to become all that God intends them to be? This is why it is so important that God should be at the heart of the relationship right from the start and then all the way through. At weddings in Sandyford, Psalm 16:8-9a is usually quoted as being the secret of a happy marriage. In our story we would like to think that, when the words of v.50 were spoken, Rebekah knew in her heart that they were true.

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24:62-67

We have seen Isaac in his earlier years responding to parental faith, teaching and guidance, and reaching a peak point of spiritual willingness and commitment at Mt. Moriah (22:1-2,7-9). We are told nothing of his life in the next twenty years and now, at the age of forty, we find him apparently living apart from his father Abraham, not because of any breach, but simply carving out his own life. Isaac seems to have lived down toward the Egyptian border, a place associated with Hagar, and he may have had memories of Hagar's stories about life in Egypt. There is a suggestion that he was lonely in an isolated part of the country and that he was still thinking back wistfully to the death of his mother, some three years previously. We are told that Isaac was meditating, but we are not told what he was meditating about. The focus could have been the majesty of God and His wonderful works, as in Psalm 145:5. It could have been how little God had given him after his great willingness on Mt. Moriah. He could, of course, have simply been thinking about himself and perhaps his own spirituality. On the other hand, knowing something of his father's plans for his marriage, he may have been praying and pondering the will of God for his life. If we were to study the life of Isaac we would find that there was always something negative about his attitude to life and to spiritual service and this may have been caused by having too powerful a father and too possessive a mother. But here we seem to have a story of love at first sight. This was indeed a marriage "made in heaven", as we have seen. It was a right marriage, but it went wrong. To begin with it was happy and a blessing but, as the years went past, God, and the priority of God's purposes and submission to God, were all clouded by self-will and self-indulgence. The possibilities were never realised and yet God's purposes were in fact carried forward. But was God honoured in these two lives? That is the question.

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25:1-18

When we preached on this section of Genesis the title to the series of studies was "The Life of Abraham" but already we seem to be involved in the life of Isaac. This is not a digression from the main story but simply a reminder that God's work and purposes go on from generation to generation and we need to be aware that all of

us are in fact working for the future. We may not see the full expression of our work before we die and this fact is emphasised in Heb. 11:13, 39, 40. Of course there was work done *before* we came on the scene and we entered into that work, as Jesus told His disciples (John 4:37,38). We often say rather tritely that God buries His servants but carries on His work, and that is clear and plain in Joshua 1:1-2ff. Apart from anything else this should make us aware of the sheer dimension of God's work in the world and should cause us to see by faith (although there are always evidences) the future beginning to form and emerge while we are still here. In today's passage there are a great many names, and such lists can be wearisome to read. But we must not think them irrelevant. They cause us to lift up our eyes beyond Abraham's immediate family and beyond his life-time so that we begin to see a work spreading far and wide, involving multitudes of people. This is important, because all too often we allow ourselves to be disheartened because we assess the fruit of our work only in terms of what we see before our eyes on any given Sunday. But the seed of God's Word sown in hearts and lives, and these lives in turn "scattered" far and wide, in due time bears fruit to the glory of God. And, if God is glorified, what does it matter if we are never recognised or vindicated in this world? The truth will be known in Heaven, and then we will not be too concerned about praise but will cast whatever crowns we have at Jesus' feet. Perhaps we should read more often than we do Psalm 126:6.

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25:1-18

The wording of v.1 seems to suggest that Abraham married again after the death of Sarah, but the verse could read, "Abraham *had* taken another wife." This could have been done quite a number of years previously while Sarah was still alive. We do not go into the details but it seems that Keturah was more a concubine than a wife, and she is so referred to in 1 Chron. 1:32. No doubt it was the accepted practice of Abraham's day that a man should take "extra" wives, but there is nothing in Scripture to suggest that God ever approved such a practice. The story set in the Garden of Eden is that of one man and one woman, married for life. That is God's pattern and no additions or adjustments thought up by men and women are needed. Indeed they are intrusions and complications. God does not *need* human wrongs to work out His will (Jas. 1:13), but the whole story of Scripture makes plain that God works in and through all sorts of human sins and failures, because He is a God of grace and forgiveness. But sin is never justified. It always brings complications to the on-going development of God's people and work. The birth of Ishmael, the son of Hagar, led to problems and, in the list of the six sons mentioned here, we need think only of Midian, and how the Midianites were a constant source of trouble. Even Abraham seemed to recognise these facts because, as the time of his death drew near, he provided for them, accepting his parental responsibility, and then sent them away from Isaac. But it is not always easy or effective when we try to guard the work of God against the complications we ourselves have introduced.

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25:1-18

Note how, at the end of his life, Abraham affirmed his faith and obedience by making quite clear that Isaac was the one to inherit the leadership of God's work (5). Note also the phrase "while he was still living" because, linked with what we said in yesterday's note about Abraham still having a number of years to live, it shows us that the man of God had been looking to and preparing for the future long before the end of his days. On many levels of life it is unwise and indeed wrong to leave things to the last minute. All too often in the life of the church, we do not think of effective successors nor of their preparation, until some leading office-bearer dies or until some minister decides to retire. Jesus' words about taking no thought for the morrow (Matt. 5:25-34) are a corrective to fretful worry that is simply lack of trust, but they do not cancel out the call to "prepare the way of the Lord" (Isa. 40:3). The recording of the death of Abraham at this point follows the Jewish pattern of summarising a man's life when the focus of the story moves on to the next leader raised by God. However richly and fruitfully Abraham had lived and served, the people had now to look ahead. They should not devalue the service of Abraham, but they must not get "stuck" with him, as if God's work would never be the same again. There is a right and a wrong way to honour God's servants, and that was made plain in the story of Samuel. He had to be rebuked by God because he would not leave the past behind, but kept on wishing that Saul was still in

his leadership position (1 Sam. 16:1). On many occasions the exhortation has to be that, forgetting the things that are past, we must press on to the mark for the prize of our high calling in Christ (Phil. 3:13-14).

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25:19-26

There is a great testimony to the faithfulness of God in v.11. God had promised to bless Isaac and God kept His word, as He always does. Abraham, an old man, would see the evidences of God's blessing and his heart would rejoice. The new stage of the work begins at this point. The marriage arranged by God had gone on for many years but we are not told much about it, except that it was childless. To what extent Abraham was able to encourage Isaac and Rebekah to trust God and to wait for His promise to be fulfilled we cannot say. Perhaps some young married couples feel they are wiser than their parents, especially about children. We are told that Isaac prayed to the Lord about their childless marriage. Perhaps it took him a long time to get round to this, and he may have been so benefited himself by his marriage (24:67) that he was not really aware of his wife's feelings. That is a very common situation, even among Christians, and can occur in ministers' homes. There may also have been a real lack of communication between husband and wife, and this could have led to the tragic split in the attitudes of the parents to their two boys (28). After long waiting Rebekah was troubled and perplexed about her pregnancy and she prayed to God for an explanation. That explanation was given, but it was a lot to grasp. The pattern of life for the children would be a contradiction of what was expected, because the elder would be subservient to the younger. Later in the story, we shall see that Rebekah took it upon *herself* to work out God's plan. She was going to make sure that what God had said would take place and *she* set about it by human cunning and deceit. The prospect is frightening. Do we see how important it is that we should be right with God? If not, we are a danger to all we come in contact with.

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25:27-34

We have already seen how the story of Abraham gives way to and develops into the story of Isaac, and already we have been made to think of Isaac's sons, Esau and Jacob. This not only emphasises the ongoing, ever-developing nature of the purposes of God in the world, but shows us the legacy from each generation that is inherited by the next generation. Of course each generation and each individual has responsibility from God to respond to opportunity, to handle their situation in faith and obedience, and so pass on to those who follow a workable and creative legacy. Parents, human and spiritual, must see to it by the grace of God that they prepare their children to be God's servants in their own generation. This must be done, as our baptismal vows make plain, by prayer, precept and example, and should be done in such a way that children grow up in an atmosphere of truth and grace so that, almost without their knowing it, they are being guided and prepared for God's future. Today's verses make plain that Isaac's home fell far short of what it should have been. The twin sons were very different in personality and character. The parents seem rightly to have allowed their children to be themselves, and to develop in their own way. After all, it is really cruel for parents to say to one child, "You don't do as well as your brother," or "Why don't you go for a career like your sister?" Children, as they grow to adulthood, must be allowed and indeed encouraged to make their own decisions and not be constantly bullied and criticised by their parents. But sadly, Isaac's family life was far from what it should have been. There was favouritism and that, whether in family or congregation, is a bad thing, regardless of whether or not someone is more "gifted" than another.

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25:27-34

The two boys did not suddenly become what they were in adulthood: their personality characteristics must have emerged gradually. Why the parents had preferences is not fully clear but it seems that Isaac loved Esau, not primarily because of his son's virile, active, physical life-style, but rather because the product of Esau's activity meant a varied and satisfying menu. Isaac seems to have succumbed to a life-style motivated by human pleasure and satisfaction. That is a great temptation for young Christians when there are so many things and people to

enjoy. But when an older man, especially one who has known great heights of spiritual commitment and obedience (22:7-10), slips into a life-style where pleasure and enjoyment of human things take precedence that is sad and solemn, and may be tragic. There is no doubt, as we shall see, that Esau so loved the sporty, active life that his interest in and evaluation of spiritual issues and service ceased to play a significant part in his life's choices. In the end, as Hebrews 12:12-17 makes plain, Esau wished very deeply that his life was marked by and carried with it the blessing of God. But he had missed out, and the mistake was made when he was a young man. We are told that Rebekah loved Jacob and we see that there was an unhealthy division in the family. Why the mother preferred Jacob we are not actually told but it may have been because of what had been said by God before the twins were born (25:23). Perhaps Rebekah, being fearful that Jacob might be deprived of his "rights", became over-protective of Jacob. Perhaps she dominated her son in a way that never allowed him to develop and led him to be a manipulator in his adult life. Perhaps Jacob always felt inferior to and envious of his stronger, more extrovert brother. But he had to learn that when God calls God also enables. God does indeed choose the weak of the world to do His will (1 Cor. 1:26-29). Rebekah had to learn that to act in fear is a contradiction of faith. There is much to learn in these stories.

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25:27-34

Esau may well have pitied his brother or even had contempt for him when he found him in the kitchen cooking stew. Was it the "bossy" mother who gave her son what was regarded then as woman's work to do? The bright and confident Esau barged into the kitchen with the request, "Let's have some of that. I'm starving." Jacob's response indicates that he was well aware of the issues at stake and that he was indeed a crafty man. No doubt he had been told by his mother about his spiritual calling and significance. His thoughts about "spiritual" issues may not have been on any higher level than Esau's but if there was something to be had that would give him place and priority, then he was greedy for it. Jacob may not have known at this stage just how much his mother was scheming to see to it that her younger son would inherit the blessing promised from God. What we see here in Jacob is his capacity to see and to grasp an opportunity that would benefit himself. Such an attitude played a great part in his life and brought so many complications into his experience. How we need to be aware that being "gifted" can be a blessing *or* a curse! All our capacities need to be given over to God for safe keeping. Only in that way can they be channelled into good for ourselves and others. In each of the four persons in this family we see self-interest and self-pleasing at work; self-will and self-advancement; and a managing of life that simply leaves out God. Love of money, love of pleasures and love of the world and its ways are all matters to be pondered carefully in the light of Scripture (1 Tim. 6:6-10; 2 Tim. 3:1-5; Matt. 6:24). Apart from the grace of God Jacob's whole life could have been a disaster. Little wonder the Psalmist says, "Blessed is the man who has the God of Jacob for his help" (Ps. 146:5 AV).

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26:1-5

Certain elements in the story of Isaac, which are apt to be overlooked, are brought to our attention. The reference to Abraham in v.1 distinguishes the earlier famine from the one beginning to put pressure on Isaac's circumstances. We have already noted Isaac's love of good food. There are further references to Abraham in v.5, 15, 18 and they remind us that Isaac was born into and grew up in the context of a spiritual work already established. In spiritual terms that can be a blessing but it can also cause a spirit of complacency which ignores both the privilege and responsibility such a situation brings. In terms of church life, those who had to fight to establish a ministry of the Word and prayer tend to have a different attitude to work and to loyalty from those who come into the work later. There is always the temptation to enjoy the blessings rather than to work for the future. Against this background we must see the famine, which no doubt would be explained in terms of climate and rainfall, as being one of God's methods to awaken the whole family of Isaac to their need to get their lives right with God. God was meeting with His servant Isaac and speaking to him in and through circumstances of adversity. God would rather speak in tenderness but if His people are insensitive and are not listening then He must speak more loudly. We all know from our own experience that adversity, difficulty and disappointment all

make us draw nearer to God and make us pray more earnestly. Consider Ps. 119:67; Rom. 5:3-4; Jas. 1:2-4. It is love that rebukes and chastises, the love of the God who knows best what is for the good of His children and the usefulness of His servants. Of course, as the story of the Prodigal Son makes plain, love sometimes has to allow the loved one to stray for a long, long time until the grace of repentance is awakened.

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26:1-5

It is difficult to tell if this incident followed soon after the story in the previous chapter or if it refers to an earlier stage in Isaac's life. It is also hard to tell whether Isaac was moving in the general direction of Egypt (where there was food) or whether he was moving away from Egypt towards Philistine territory. What is important is that in Isaac's immediate circumstances God appeared to him, spoke to him, guided him, and reaffirmed His promises regarding both the present and the future. In terms of guidance we generally ask God to make plain what we should do but, as in this story, we need to be told what not to do, where we should not go, and in what company we should remain. These verses give a great picture of God being right there in Isaac's actual situation, standing guard over His servant when the pressures were assailing him at his most vulnerable point. The thought of deprivation, the loss of human comforts and the consequent disturbance of his comfortable way of life were not easy for Isaac to cope with. Read the passage carefully and see that God encouraged His servant by urging him to look to his God, and to God's promises and faithfulness, rather than at the circumstances surrounding him and his reactions to them. Mark clearly the repetition of "I will". Isaac was made to look back to the faith of Abraham, and to take that as his example and encouragement. The obedience of faith is the way to cope with and to handle life in all its various stages. Perhaps God was urging Isaac to look back to his own faith and trust when he willingly yielded to God's mysterious command on Mount Moriah.

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26:6-11

Look back to v.5 and do not fail to see the significance of the word "because". It indicates that Isaac in his generation was experiencing the blessing of God because of the faith and obedience of those who had gone before. We should always remember and give thanks to God for those who prayed for us in faith when we were neither willing nor able to pray for ourselves. We should also remember when we are experiencing God's blessing on our own Christian service that we may be reaping the fruit of those who laboured hard and at great cost before us, perhaps seeing little clear fruit for their labours (John 4:37-38). Now look at v.6. Isaac responded to God's guidance in faith. He stayed where he was, because God had said not to go any further. But almost at once Isaac's faith was assailed by and mixed with fear, and these two are always in conflict. There are times, of course, when there is real danger and in these situations God's word is always, "Fear not". That is a command, not just pious advice. Let not your heart be troubled, because you believe in God: the God who is there and who is active and who, in all things, is busy furthering His good purposes for our lives. But Isaac gave way to fear, just as many more of God's servants in Scripture have done. We must see in this a specific work of Satan, even though Satan is not mentioned. The great enemy of our lives and service does not go in for advance publicity but works with great subtlety and persistence. The Devil does not necessarily tempt to great moral wrong, possibly knowing we would recognise the wrongness and resist the temptation. The enemy's devices are subtle and therefore dangerous. We think more of this tomorrow.

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26:6-11

"O what a tangled web we weave, when first we practise to deceive". (Scott) A complicated minister (not in any sense an evangelical) who had created all sorts of terrible problems for himself and others said, "I have stopped telling lies, because I forget what lies I have already told". In many different situations we need to be recalled to the Ten Commandments and the injunction, "You shall not bear false witness." Note that Isaac's deception of Abimelech lasted a long time (8), during which his behaviour in public had to be very different from that in private. Of course, God sees and knows, because nothing is hid from Him (Heb. 4:12,-13). In due time Isaac's

sin (and duplicity is sin) found him out (Num.32:23). This exposing of Isaac could be regarded as unfortunate or accidental, but it could also be that in the interest of Isaac's own spiritual safety and of the future of God's work that God simply exposed the man in such a way that his wrong-doing became public. Abimelech, a man who could not be thought of in any way as a believer, administered a firm but gracious rebuke to the man of God, making plain that Isaac's wrong life could have caused serious spiritual and moral damage to other people. Think of how in our own day, not least in the realm of sport, prominent and famous people are charged with bringing the game into disrepute. This man of God brought the name of God and the testimony of the work of God into disrepute and possibly caused a shadow to fall on the work for some time to come. We are not told of Isaac's reaction to the rebuke but certainly he was made to recognise that his fears, and his doubt of God's willingness and capacity to keep him safe, had been quite unfounded.

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26:12-16

It is interesting to note that Abimelech did not require Isaac to leave his territory and that may indicate that there was some grace in the king's heart. He recognised the sin and failure of the man of God but he did not take an attitude of condemnation in the way that some Christians condemn other Christians, sometimes on the basis of rumour rather than fact. We need to guard against an unforgiving spirit, especially in view of the searching words of the Lord Jesus Christ (Matt. 6:14-15; 18:23-35). We must assume that some real degree of repentance was in Isaac's heart because, true to His promise in v.3-4, God blessed His servant. As a man of God and a servant of God, Isaac was not "finished" even though he had signally fallen from grace. Perhaps some of his own household regarded Isaac as a failure and may have despised him. But our failures are not an insuperable barrier to God. If our hearts condemn us, God is greater than our hearts (1 John 3:20). Where sin abounded grace much more abounded (Rom. 5:20 AV). Think how God has declared His willingness to heal the backslidings of His people (Hos. 14:4 AV) and so to restore them that it will be as if the wasted years of the locust had not happened (Joel 2:25). Why are we so unwilling to give the sinning believer another chance? Why do we not encourage and help the wanderer back to the narrow way? Are we like those who pass by on the other side and leave the battered traveller to his fate (Lk. 10:29-37)? It is quite thrilling to read here how richly God blessed His penitent, restored servant. What a God we have! But remember: there is an enemy.

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26:12-16

Isaac prospered in human terms because of God's blessing and he became very rich. Now, there is nothing wrong in being rich, especially if it is the result of labour as we live and work in God's good will. But there is a danger. Worldly prosperity can have a devastating effect on the essential pilgrim spirit of authentic Christian life. Riches can create greed rather than contentment and spiritual life is affected because of the necessary preoccupation with worldly business. Consider Luke 12:13-21; 1 Tim. 6:8-10; Heb. 13:5-6; Prov. 30:7-9. It is so easy to be anchored to this world, its ways, its demands and its distractions. It seems that Isaac, who was always susceptible to human comfort, was beginning to settle down as a business farmer and to forget his high and holy calling to be the means of blessing to others. He would have been aware of the stopping up of the wells which Abraham had dug but they were out in the wilderness and he was comfortable and provided for in the city. But then public opinion began to turn against him because of his prosperity and soon he was being sent on his way by the same Abimelech who had been so gracious and forgiving towards him when his behaviour had been despicable. There are two lessons here. The first is that we must see God's methods in getting Isaac on his way as a pilgrim, teaching him to live by faith. The other lesson is that we should see here, as in the story of Gadara in Mark 5:14-17, how some people, when they see clear evidences of God's power and grace unto salvation, life and blessing, not only have no desire to seek after God for themselves, but actually ask God to leave them and their territory. Perhaps another lesson is to see how persistently, patiently and accurately God watched over, led, guided and encouraged His uncertain servant.

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26:17-22

The story tells of the continuing efforts of the Philistines to hassle Isaac, trying to prevent him from becoming stronger. It would not have been easy for Isaac but these “trials” are the very things that make us all look to God. Read Psalm 119:67 and James 1:2-4 (in J B Phillips' translation if possible). Isaac knew the past history of God's dealings with his father and dug again the wells of Abraham which had been filled up with debris by the Philistines. There is a parable here of what has to be done in many a congregation where the spiritual life and witness of the church have been blocked by years of worldliness. In an age where there is an increasing demand for evangelical novelty, (anything that is new to kindle interest is grasped), it is a good thing to look to the past, to days when God's power was known in the land, and to ask and to seek for the old paths (Jer. 6.16). Some “methods” have been proved to have lasting fruit and others proved to be shallow and ineffective. In following the pattern of the mighty man of God who had carved out the way, Isaac was doing right (Heb. 13:7). Of course Isaac met opposition (20) and it seems that again and again Isaac gave ground, yielded what he had worked for, and moved on to start again. Was this Isaac's natural disposition to take the easy way out of a situation rather than standing his ground? Or was this faith operating in the sense of trusting that God would provide and bring a peaceful solution through what seems to have been compromise? Evangelical Christians tend to abhor “compromise” but we must learn to recognise the difference between what is desirable and what is possible at any given stage of the on-going work of God. Of course, to do this, we need to maintain a close walk with God.

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26:23-33

Keep in mind that Isaac was neither a pioneer nor a fighter but essentially a consolidator. That is not a criticism but simply a recognition of facts. We are all different and we create problems for ourselves and others when we try to copy others and to be what we cannot be and were not meant to be. God takes us as we are, with our capacities and limitations, and uses us in our lives in the places He sets us, to do the work allocated to us. We have the privilege and responsibility of being servants and must always acknowledge that apart from God we can do nothing (John 15:1-5; 1 Cor. 3:4-9). Of course, God is always working with us to fashion us and make us ever more useful and more pleasing in His sight (Jer. 18:1-4). That is evident in the life of Isaac, although we shall soon see the sad side of the story, a story that highlights the meaning of Paul's words about receiving the grace of God in vain (2 Cor. 6:1). In today's passage (23-25) we see one of the great gleams of spiritual response and calibre in Isaac. We see also the amazing grace of God because, just at the right time, when assurance and encouragement were needed, God appeared to Isaac and spoke to him wonderful words. Isaac was assured that the God of Abraham was his God too. And He is our God, the faithful, covenant-keeping God. We need to let our hearts thrill to God's words: “Fear not. I am with you. I will bless you.” God means what he says and He is always in the process of carrying out what He has promised. Isaac's awareness of God and his response to God were expressed in his building an altar and his calling on the name of his God. Here is a man who sees and knows that his God is good; that God is love; that God is a God to be worshipped, trusted, adored and served. Think well. Are our hearts towards God? Are our lives surrendered.

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26:23-33

Note how the spiritual emphasis of this passage is set firmly in the context of the on-going activities of ordinary practical work-a-day life. In v.25 and again in v.32 there is the emphasis on the necessary activity of digging wells. This is important, because there is a spurious kind of spirituality that neglects and even ignores the practical things that have to be done to make the life of a home, and the life of a congregation, both effective and bearable. There is a time to pray and a time to work; a time to read the Bible and a time to look after the family; a time to pray for people and a time to speak to them, to visit them, and to help them with inglorious work. Read Micah 6:6-8; Jas. 1:22-27. Whatever Isaac's reaction was when Abimelech and his deputation arrived, the story tells how wisely he handled the situation. His words were plain but restrained and his soft answer was fully effective (Prov. 14:35; 17:27). Isaac's question in v.27 was plain and justified and was spoken with some courage. Abimelech's answer in v.28 was factual and a recognition of spiritual truth, but the claim in

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v.29 may have been spoken with tongue in cheek. Isaac certainly took the higher ground, accepted the Philistines at their word, and treated them with courtesy. They signed a treaty of peaceful co-existence and Isaac sent them on their way. That was far better than a confrontation, because some confrontations, even though the battle is won, are not productive. We may feel satisfied that we won, but must ask if in the long term the work of God was advanced. We need wisdom from above. We also need the grace to acknowledge that sometimes we have been wrong.

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26:34-27:4

The brief but vivid summary of Esau's attitude to life and to his parents is the light that exposes the folly, stubbornness and spiritual confusion of Isaac, especially in relation to the work and purposes of God. No matter how much Isaac was attracted to Esau's strong, physical personality, he must have recognised in his son's deliberate choice of pagan women as his wives, that Esau had little interest in the spiritual issues and standards of life. This has already been made plain in the story in 25:29-34 where it is made totally clear that Esau despised, set little or no value on, the spiritual possibility and potential of his life. For him, a healthy body was paramount, not least in terms of interesting and stimulating activity. Read and ponder 1 Tim. 4:7b-9. Many people have great concern about their bodies, their diet and health but give little attention to the health and well-being of their souls. Of course, when we live in that way the truth about us will become evident when the time comes for us to die, and we know that time has come. Isaac was aware that he did not have very long to live and we are told his eyes were dim. His spiritual vision was defective as well as his human eyesight and, although he was on the edge of eternity, there was very little sign of spiritual awareness, nor of the fact that all of us must in due time give account to God of the stewardship of our lives. This is a subject greatly neglected. Read God's summary of one man's life in Dan. 5:23b. Read another man's sad confession, sad because he had no time or opportunity to remedy things (1 Sam. 26:21). Read also Rom. 14:10-12; 1 Cor. 3:10-15; 2 Cor. 5:6-10; 1 Cor. 4:2. Remember, our lives are not our own. We have been brought with a price (1 Cor. 6:19-20).

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26:34-27:4

Consider how different this whole incident might have been if Isaac, aware that he was soon to die, and aware that there was such a thing as God's blessing to be given, had first dealt with the spiritual issue and then moved on to a celebratory meal. There is nothing wrong with enjoying food and nothing wrong with a healthy, active, sporting life. But it is a matter of setting priorities. That is where so many go wrong and, when priorities are wrongly set when people are young, the pattern of life becomes established so that change in later life is, if not impossible, then accomplished only with great cost and stern personal discipline. Eccles. 12:1 is wise counsel, as are the words of Prov. 22:6. Such verses should cause us to pray more than we do for the whole system of education in our schools, because children are sometimes being indoctrinated in unbelief, lawlessness and self-will even in Primary Schools. It is not the government, nor the education system that must provide the answer, but parents and churches. The teaching of God's Word and the example of the lives of Christians are the creative influences backed, of course, by prayer. And we must pray in faith not fear. Isaac may have been vague about many things but he was clear and determined that Esau would carry the blessing into the future. We are not sure if Isaac knew of the incident of the selling of the birthright. Esau certainly kept quiet about it at this time. We assume Isaac knew of God's affirmation that Jacob would carry the blessing. It seems likely Rebekah would have told her husband about it, and perhaps also about the trading of the birthright. If Rebekah did so, because of the unhappy atmosphere of the marriage, it seems to have made Isaac even more determined that his favourite would be the one to be blessed. That seems to be clear in v.29. How sad it is when our reaction to, and our liking for, people influences our spiritual decisions and we refuse to see or to bow to God's will.

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27:5-17

Rebekah was a very strong-willed woman who was determined to run the lives of other members of the family. She had no thought of being in submission to her husband as head of the family. Of course, true “headship” calls for spiritual character and grace and a very high standard of love as Eph. 5:21-25 makes plain. Isaac seems to have been determined to keep his plan secret from his wife, but his wife was an expert at spying on her husband and this may not have been the first time that she had anticipated and countermanded a plan of her husband's. There is little sign here of husband and wife being heirs *together* of the grace of life. When relationships are being formed we need to ask, “How much have we in common in our aims, capacities and desires in relation to God's will?” Sometimes people have great potential to be good friends but do not have the personality or capacity to be husband and wife. Think how sad it must be for two Christians to look back on their life together and have to confess that they have not been “helpmeets”; they have not enabled and encouraged each other to be all they could have been for God and for service. Note in the story that there is no indication that Rebekah thought of speaking to her husband about this very important matter in relation to the will and work of God. Communication is so important in relationships. Of course, if Rebekah had broached the subject in a way that was challenge, rebuke, accusation or denunciation, it would simply have confirmed Isaac in his determination. On so many occasions it is vital that our speech should be with grace, seasoned with salt (Col. 4.6). There is so much here for us to learn, not least to curb our natural wilfulness.

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27:5-17

Rebekah was not an easy person to live with. She felt it was her right, even her duty, to be in charge. We cannot but feel sorry for Jacob as his mother ordered him around. Rebekah was so sure about her objectives (God had told her Jacob would be the one to receive the blessing) and about her methods that she did not seem to realise she was taking the place of God and administering His affairs. Did she think that God was unable to bring about His will, simply because a stubborn old man was trying to thwart it? Rebekah was making the mistake many of us make far too often. She was over influenced by appearances and circumstances and, as a result, fear displaced faith. Believing that Jacob had been promised the significant place in the future development of God's covenant promise, she saw herself as working for God. But she was doing so on a carnal, fleshly level that involved cunning, deceit, manipulation and lying, and that is not the way to do God's will. God is light, and everything to do with His will and work should be able to bear the scrutiny of light (I John 1:5-7). At first Jacob was hesitant about his mother's scheme but his concern seems to have had more to do with being found out rather than with the wrongness of the plan. But when his mother said, “Trust me,” he went along with her and submitted to the whole scheme of deception. When we come to v.19 we find Jacob acting out the part with great confidence. Neither father, mother or son is to be admired, but they all in due time had to live with the consequences of their own actions. All of us do well to consider very carefully the influences we exert on other people. It is a terrible thing to live with the thought that we led someone away from God's way of faith and obedience.

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27:18-29

In his commentary, Derek Kidner observes that “These rival stratagems only succeed in doing ‘whatsoever (God's) hand . . . and counsel fore ordained’ (Acts 4:28).” We do well to ponder more often than we do the sure and sovereign providence of God. In and through all the machinations of men, women and devils, God works His will and furthers His work. This is fact, whether or not it seems to be so, and whether or not we believe it to be so. Today's story is full of lies. The old man was suspicious but his spiritual hesitation was overcome by the enticing smell of the savoury meat prepared. We should be slow to criticise, because we are often swayed against our better judgment by people's flattering words and by our own human preferences. It is so easy to be taken in when people speak spiritual words with apparent confidence and sincerity. Rebekah's scheme was “successful” but it was not really needed, because God had already “ordained” Jacob in terms of both blessing and future service. We must learn from this story that “string pulling”, or getting people “to put in a word for

us”, in terms of some object or application are not really needed if our desire is to yield to God's good, perfect and acceptable will for our lives (Rom. 12:1-2). Isaac's words in v.27-29 were gloriously spiritual, the words of a man who says he delights in his God and who sees the blessing of God as the source of fruitfulness in life and service. Isaac knew all the right “doctrines” but the tragedy is that he believed he was speaking these words to Esau. He had no desire to bless Jacob like this. How sad it is to be at cross-purposes with God! How sad it is to be as spiritually blind as Isaac was!

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27:30-40

As the story unfolds and as we see the actions of various people, keep in mind the wise words of Prov. 19:21. Keep in mind also that in contemporary terms we are reading the story of a senior man appointing a younger man to a position of leadership in God's work. Isaac must have known that Esau was basically a worldly-minded man and therefore unfitted for spiritual service. And yet he would have “ordained” him, hoping perhaps that responsibility would bring out and develop the spiritual side of his personality. Over against that superficial attitude, consider Paul's clear advice to Timothy regarding the stewardship of God's Word and work (2 Tim. 2:1-7). There is a real sense of drama in v.30. Jacob, pleased with his success and possibly without any sense of shame at having deceived his old, frail father, left the presence of Isaac, feeling everything was settled in his favour. In one sense it was, but the immediate arrival of Esau (did the brothers pass each other?) signified that the consequences of what had been done had still to be lived with. Jacob's and his mother's wrongdoing were to be found out and exposed very quickly and we will have to consider the reactions of all the parties. But first, think of Esau. He readily agreed with his father's request in v.1-4, even though he knew full well that he had already sold and sworn away God's blessing (25:29-34). But Esau's word counted for nothing. As far as he was concerned what belonged to God could be taken up or thrown down, depending on his feelings and his immediate situation. But that cannot be! There are decisions that are binding and there are opportunities that can be forfeited and never recovered. Consider well Heb. 2:1-3a; 4:1-2; 10:32-39; 12:15-17. Read also 1 Cor. 9:24-27, where Paul speaks of being disqualified from service (not from salvation). How solemn, to be laid aside as of no further use in holy service.

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27:30-40

When he realised what had happened, Isaac was shaken to the core of his being and his words, “Yes, and he shall be blessed,” were an acknowledgment that God had over-ruled his shallow but determined desire to bless Esau. Isaac was also shaken by the thought that he had in fact been fighting against God. He submitted to God and to circumstances and, in a sense, by faith he accepted defeat. Think of the comment in Heb. 11:20. The reference seems to be to submissive faith rather than triumphant faith. Esau's reaction was typical of those who sit lightly to spiritual responsibility and commitment and then resent it bitterly when they are not able or even allowed to share in God's blessing. Some Christians choose to stay on the edge of a fellowship and its work, especially holding back from the Prayer Meeting, and then complain that they have no share in the deep and sweet life of the fellowship. In v.35- 36 Isaac blamed Jacob, when he should have said to his son that God had over-ruled and prevented a great error. Esau blamed Jacob, recognising Jacob's duplicity in the present incident but at the same time making out that he himself had had no responsibility on the earlier occasion when so casually and with contempt he had, by his own decision, sold his birthright. Ever since the Garden of Eden, people have looked for someone to blame for their spiritual misfortune (Gen. 3:12). There was no sign of Esau being moved by this experience to humble himself under God's mighty hand (1 Pet. 5:6). That would have involved recognising Jacob as the promised “seed”, having God-given priority and leadership. That he would not do. Esau's future was already taking shape.

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27:41-45

Look back to the blessing pronounced on Esau in v.39-40. Some versions read, away from the fatness . . . and away from the dew of heaven . Note the contrast with v.28, spoken to Jacob. Isaac pronounces over Esau the appropriate destiny of the "profane person: the freedom to live unblest (39) and untamed (40)." On the human level it is not hard to see why Esau hated Jacob, although hatred is usually blind to its own faults and responsibilities. The focus of the on-going story moves now from Isaac to Jacob, but we must not assume from v.41 that Isaac's death was imminent. His death is not recorded until 35:28-29 when he was 180 years old. It is usually very difficult to calculate dates and ages in the Old Testament but it may be that Isaac's continuing life held in check Esau's plan for revenge. In v.42 we have another example of the unhappy atmosphere of the home of Isaac and Rebekah. Everyone seems to have been suspicious of everyone else, and someone was always looking for opportunity to further their own position by passing on bits of information. This is the kind of thing that can disturb and sometimes destroy a Christian fellowship. We need to be clear: gossip is sin, always destructive and never helpful. We need to remember the Commandment about bearing false witness. Rebekah, true to type, at once took charge of the situation and, in order to keep Jacob in the long run, she now had to send him away. In fact she lost him permanently, because it was twenty years before Jacob returned to his home territory. Note in v.45 that Rebekah still regarded herself as the one in charge of the situation and she was planning long-term for her son. Some people take a long time before they realise just how irrelevant they really are in the outworking of God's purposes. Note also in v.45b that Rebekah realised that she had lost any respect or regard that Esau ever had for her. She must have known that her husband, realising or suspecting the part she had played in his deception, would also have no trust in her. It is a sad family story.

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27:46-28:5

Rebekah was a woman whose thinking was a strange mixture of the spiritual and the carnal. Knowing that Jacob was marked out by God for future service, she did not want him to leave home as a fugitive, because that could cast a shadow on his character. " Her broaching the subject of Jacob's marriage was a masterstroke: it played equally on Isaac's self-interest and his principles. The prospect of a third Hittite daughter-in-law and a distracted wife would have unmanned even an Abraham." (Kidner) We are not actually told what Isaac's thoughts were as he spoke to Jacob and sent him away to choose a wife from the family of Laban. His motive may have been to pacify his wife, or to keep Jacob and Esau apart. On the other hand, having been shaken deeply by God (27:33), it may have been that something of Isaac's earlier spiritual awareness and commitment began to emerge again and he accepted his responsibility in relation to God's on-going purposes. If Jacob was to serve God then he needed the right kind of wife. In pronouncing his blessing on Jacob, Isaac was also warning Esau in a significant way not to interfere. In blessing his son, Isaac spoke in the name of God Almighty, the El Shaddai, the all-sufficient God, the faithful God of the covenant-promise given to Abraham (17:1). Jacob, now set free from the influence and manipulation of his home, was made aware that he would not go alone, but in the company of and under the shadow of the Almighty (Ps. 90:1-2; 91:1), the God of purpose, power, providence and blessing. Jacob's pilgrimage had started with God, but attitudes of craft and duplicity he had learned at home remained with him to complicate his life and his service.

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28:6-22

The focus of the whole narrative is now on Jacob. There is only a passing comment on Esau in v.6-9 which seem to suggest that it was to spite his father that he married into the family of Ishmael. In v.10 we have the beginning of a spell of many years of wandering and difficulty for Jacob. We have already seen the unpleasant side of his character, for he was double-tongued and double-dealing, yet he was destined to become Israel, a Prince with God. Right from the start he was marked out as a man who was to play a significant part in God's purposes but that alone did not make him a man of faith, reverence and obedience. He was a wilful man. He had to learn. He had to be fashioned. And it was not until God finally broke him that he was ready for use. In many ways he wrestled with and struggled against God most of his life but God persevered in grace and made him a

vessel fit and ready to be used (Jer. 18:1-4). Although we may criticise Jacob we must remember that he did not have a good start in life. His father was a backslider, his mother domineering, possessive and manipulative, and his brother was profane. Perhaps it is little wonder Jacob was complicated. But all of us have a history that we have to learn to live with, and by faith to conquer what we are in ourselves, and the situations we have created by our own actions. We must also learn to live with God and with his providential dealing with us which is always for our good, our blessing and our usefulness to others. At this stage in the story Jacob is on his way to Haran to stay with his uncle. He was also looking for a wife (whom he found after a struggle). He was also looking forward to returning home, which did not happen for twenty years. God is never in a hurry, but never slow. Right now this was a man marked out for God and yet adrift from God. In fact Jacob was on the run from home and from God. It will be a fascinating story.

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28:10-22

We may run away from God but we cannot get away from Him. The Psalmist discovered that (Ps 139: 7-12). Having settled for the night and feeling no particular spiritual urgency Jacob slept, and he dreamed. The ladder and angels he saw reminded him forcibly that the agents of heaven were actively involved in the affairs of earth. Perhaps even in his dream Jacob became aware that he was leaving God out of his reckoning and out of his handling of life. Both the eye of the Lord and the angels of God run to and fro through all the earth (Zech. 1:7-11; 4:10). It may have been that Jacob was being reminded of his needs being taken to God and of God's gracious answers being brought to him. What is clear is that God spoke to Jacob. It was not an interview sought by Jacob. The God of glory appeared to him as He had done to Abraham (Acts 7:2) and the same faithful God declared His purposes of grace in a glorious statement (13-15). The God of Abraham (whom Jacob would have admired), and the God of Isaac (and Jacob had scant respect for his father) was pledged to be Jacob's God, to give him a future of purpose, blessing and service. The promise in v.15 has blessed more people than could ever be counted but it is not quite clear what it meant to Jacob. It seems he may have taken it to mean that you can count on God's blessing even when you are going your own self-willed way. Perhaps it does mean that, because the gifts and calling of God are without change of mind (Rom. 11:29). But blessing may not work out in practice quite how we expect, because God's ways are past finding out. All things do work together for good (Rom. 8:28) but the process can be painful. We must consider Jacob's reactions more closely.

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28:10-22

When Jacob awoke he was immediately practical facing the implications of what had happened. That God had come near to him he had no doubt. But he was unsure of what it meant and equally unsure of his own reactions. He had not expected to have to deal with God away from home, and many a person away from home has had this kind of surprise. Everything is open to the God with whom we have to do (Heb. 4:13). Jacob was disturbed (17) and there is a suggestion in v.16 that if he had known God was in that place he would not have spent the night there. That is why some people will not go to church and are even more unwilling to go to a prayer meeting. They are afraid they may actually meet God and they are neither willing nor in a condition for that. The fact that God was there did not make the place holy nor did it make it right for Jacob to be there. After all, God was in Sodom and so was Lot! Jacob called the place Bethel, House of God, and he built an altar but he did not change his plans. This shows how a person can be deeply moved by a sermon or an "experience" without ever coming to God or yielding to God, It also shows how you can have dealings with God, knowing it is God, yet still hold on to things, plans and people that God cannot and will not bless. It makes plain how we can recognise God and agree with God and yet refuse to change or to become what God can make us. In fact, Jacob argued with God for the next twenty years. The amazing thing is that the faithful God of grace persisted with him. Put the lesson vividly. Jacob sang a hymn of consecration, made a vow, did it with all reverence as appropriate to the occasion, and then went his own way.

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29:1-14

Without contradicting any of the lessons we emphasised in the last chapter, we still recognise what happened at Bethel as a significant element in Jacob's spiritual pilgrimage. The Spirit of God was at work in this man's life. How could it be otherwise? He was a chosen man; and no doubt he meant his vow in 28: 20-22, including the totally voluntary tithe, even though he seems to have postponed the significant operation of it until well into the future. Even if Jacob was not clear about the future God was and he was preparing His servant for service, Consider this in relation to Paul in 1 Cor. 9:24-27; and 2 Cor. 12:7-10. Of course it is not always evident what God is doing. Sometimes He hides Himself (Isa. 45:15; Job 23:1-5, 8-10), so much so that we are tempted to think God has forgotten (Isa, 49:14-16). But it is not so. His providence is often unseen and unknown but it is never unsure, and sometimes God gives us intimations or indications of His intentions as He did to Jacob when he saw the ladder and the angels. It is doubtful if Jacob thought much about God when he saw the beautiful Rachel. It seems to have been love at first sight and very emotional. We know from the story that this was indeed the girl for Jacob but his brash barging in and his manifest self-confidence make plain that he was not aware of his being adrift from God. And when you are adrift from God that is not the time to be making emotional commitments, no matter how romantic the situation. Read Prov. 3:1-8 and Ps. 37:3-7a and then look back to the story of how a wife was found for Isaac and how the servant waited so trustingly for God's clear guidance (Gen. 24:10-21,34-49). When we learn that God is the perfect match-maker we will trust Him with our romances. This is evidence of faith.

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29:15-30

Jacob begins to learn that it is not easy to get life the way you want it apart from God. He discovers you cannot get rid of the past by moving to new territory (v.1). Jacob discovered that a man reaps what he sows (Gal. 6:7) and that God sees to it that we get paid in our own coin. Jesus said, "With what measure you mete it will be measured to you...." (Luke 6:37-38 AV) and we read here how Jacob, who had earlier deceived his father and his brother (and possibly had forgotten all about it) finds himself deceived by Laban. God certainly knows how to deal with people. Jacob had fallen for Rachel in a big way, he declared his love, and he made it plain he was in earnest and not willing to risk a refusal by the father (18). But just as Jacob had seen and exploited Esau's earnest eagerness in Ch.25:29-34, so Laban spotted his chance to get the better of Jacob, Of course, in his eagerness Jacob ignored totally the accepted convention of the East, that the elder daughter should be married first. People say that love is blind and it can certainly be totally selfish, ignoring all other considerations in order to get what it wants. Of course, the selfish element in that kind of love has to be purged out else there is little hope for the marriage. Sometimes when a person says, "I love you", it really means, "I love me, and want you". It does seem from the story that Rachel was the more glamorous of the two girls. Perhaps she was aware of it, too aware of it, and it takes a deeper attractiveness than just appearance or even personality to make a girl a true partner for a man who is called of God for significant service. If you are looking for a partner make sure you are looking for the right things. The real thing lasts.

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29:15-30

Several interpretations of v.20 are possible. It may simply signify how totally Jacob had fallen in love with Rachel. Far from feeling it a long time to wait Jacob seems to have considered this a trifling price to pay for such a bride. The verse may also signify that for this spell of time Jacob behaved with total propriety, signifying that his intentions were totally honourable. It is always a good thing when relationships are so kept in the presence of God that there is never anything to hide or to feel ashamed of. In v.21 Jacob was obviously meaning Rachel and, having been honourable for a spell, he assumed that Laban would also be honourable. But, since no name was mentioned, Laban acted on the basis of custom and gave the elder daughter. The feast was magnificent and, according to custom and in the interest of modesty, the bride was heavily veiled. It was not until morning that the deceiver discovered he had been deceived both by Laban and by Leah who must have been party to the plan. Jacob's protest in v.25 reveals the total self-centredness of the man. He would deceive

anyone if it was to his advantage. He had publicly insulted Leah by insisting that her younger sister be married before her. Jacob never thought of anyone else's feelings, and there are many people like him. Of course, Laban should have spoken (v.26) earlier, but then he would not have had Jacob's service free of charge for seven years. Laban made light of it all but, with clever calculation he enticed Jacob into another seven years' service. Note that there is no suggestion that Jacob paused to consider what God was saying in all this. The complications had only started!

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29:31-35

The deceiver had been deceived but his stubbornness got him what he wanted. After only a week with Leah he married Rachel (with Laban's agreement) but that meant he had two wives. Could God bless that? Should Jacob have submitted to the over-ruling of God and been content with Leah as his wife? Were his feelings so dominant that all spiritual consideration left him? Jacob should have been asking, "Why is all this happening in this way? What is God saying to me?" Instead, being resentful at Laban's manipulation Jacob took it out on Leah. How cruel it is to react to life's hurts and disappointments by being vengeful to others! We must be careful lest we do this unconsciously. Jacob did it deliberately and made his rejection of Leah very obvious, to the terrible hurt of the girl, as v.32 makes plain. Of course, God knew and cared, and it seems that Leah's heart had been turned to the Lord in measure by the hurts and disappointments of her romance and marriage. Right from the start, by his attitudes and actions, Jacob sowed the seeds of discord in his family. As the story goes on we shall see this tension manifested right to Jacob's old age. This short passage tells of how much the human heart craves for love and acceptance. It tells also of how understanding and caring God is and how He is involved personally in dealing with the situations that cause us so much hurt. We see tomorrow how God begins to deal with the one who causes the hurt. Whatever age we are, whether single or married, in all our relationships see to it that we do not selfishly manipulate the feelings of another or take advantage of a person's manifest feeling for us. Do not be hasty in starting a love relationship. Trust God with it. He plans good for His children. And, in a relationship, do not be slow to show and express love in a God-honouring way.

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30:1-8

Reuben, Simeon, Levi and Judah were already born to Leah, and the despised wife was mother of the kingly and priestly tribes. Now consider the bitterness and envy that are at the heart of this family. Rachel envied Leah and blamed Jacob, so Jacob was wildly angry and blamed God. The glamorous wife was proving not too easy to live with, and in spite of knowing the story of Abraham and the complications of his impetuosity (Gen. 12:10ff), Jacob fell in with his wife's suggestion and took Bilhah as an "extra" wife. We may say this was the custom of these days, but custom is not necessarily God's will in the sexual and moral realm. Many things are accepted custom today but they are contrary to God's commands, and it is sad that many Christians seem to forget this. When the maid bore a son, Rachel was quick to say that God had judged or vindicated her. But that was not for Rachel to say. It was far too soon to be making value judgments. The story was only begun. When the next son was born Rachel again celebrated, considering that she had won the struggle with her sister. Of course, life is the gift of God and not the automatic fruit of a marriage union. All the people in this story seem to have forgotten God, and God does seem to be strangely absent, or at least un-noticed because inconspicuous. But the truth is that God was setting the scene and preparing the circumstances which were to be the instruments to bring Jacob to the place and to the frame of mind and heart that would lead to the sorting out of his personality, his religious life, and his spiritual usefulness. All things do work together for good. The process may be painful and take a long time, and one of the necessary elements in this is that we learn to recognise that many of the sore things in life have been introduced by ourselves.

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30:9-24

How sad it is when God's blessing to one person awakens envy and resentment in another. Neither wife was now childless, although Leah's children were her own in a way that Rachel's were not having been borne by her servant. But it was Leah who set the next phase of competition in motion and a further two sons were born taking the total to eight. Then we come to v.14ff. and the story of the mandrakes which were considered to be something of a fertility drug. The bitterness of the two women is very obvious and neither seems to have been aware that they were trading in things that should be beyond trading (15, 16). But God is not mocked. Rachel got the mandrakes but Leah got the babies, her capacity to conceive being restored by God. There is a suggestion in v.17 that Leah had in some measure turned to God in her barren years but we must not read too much into this. Neither must we ever conclude that God's blessing in one area of our life excuses or justifies the wrongs in another area. Leah seems to regard her action concerning her maid as having been virtuous, possibly in respect of helping God to fulfil the promise of many sons to Jacob (28:14). But God does not need human wrongs in order to fulfil His promises. Yet another child, a first daughter, was born to Jacob and Leah. Then God remembered Rachel, but not in the sense that He had forgotten about her. It is more that God reminded Rachel that the issues of life were in His hand and it seems that Rachel's attitude in v.23 is somewhat more humble and Godward than it had been. It even seems that a measure of faith is present in her petition in v.24, believing that God would yet grant her greater blessing. Matthew Henry's commentary suggests that Rachel scarcely knew how to be grateful for God's blessing without being wrongly greedy for more. Godliness with contentment is much to be desired (1 Tim. 6:6).

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30:25-31a

Eleven sons and one daughter have been born to Jacob and in view of the domestic tensions in which these children grew up we will not be surprised when we read of personality complications in years to come. How sad it is when children have to grow up in a strained atmosphere caused by their parents being adrift from God. But we must not underestimate the gracious and powerful working of God by His Holy Spirit. That is the explanation of Jacob's request to Laban. He had become aware that it was time to move on. To what extent he was aware that God was in this we simply cannot say. Laban, being a calculating man who had no trust in Jacob, seems very gracious and in v.27 he asks Jacob to stay on. He states that he has learned by divination (by experience AV) that he has been blessed and prospered because of Jacob's presence in his home. Jacob, never strong on humility, is swift to agree with Laban (29-33). But can a backslider be a blessing to anyone? Can a man so out of God's will and so confused in his home and family life be a means of grace to another? In the over-ruling providence of God it can be so, but that does not excuse the backsliding. Indeed it should make us think what blessing *could* have come if the man had been right with God. Never forget that God is working on a long term plan with Jacob and his spiritual calibre is not to be judged by the immediate blessings of a temporary stage of his life. The whole situation seems very above-board, honourable and reasonable, as the two men give their official reasons for their actions. But the story goes on to reveal that they were in fact jockeying for advantage, both seeking to "pull a fast one" on the other. But God was dealing with both men, even though they did not think so.

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30:31b-43

On the face of it this is a competition between two breeders of cattle, sheep and goats and of how they tried to cheat each other. We are not going to discuss the various aspects of and superstitions about the process of breeding. It is obvious that Jacob was expert in selective breeding (40-42) and the result was success and prosperity. He was an important and wealthy man. No doubt it all took time, but God has plenty time and plenty patience. On one level we must see that both Jacob and Laban were rogues, weighing each other up and making their moves decisively. Laban was quick in v.35-36, obviously not too impressed by Jacob's protestation about honesty in v.33. There is no sign of Jacob resenting this crafty move. He simply set himself with determination to prove he was the stronger and more clever, and he succeeded. What are we to learn from all this? It is very

practical. When we find ourselves seemingly entangled with, manipulated and threatened by, the scheming of men who seem to operate without thought or fear of God, we are to look to God, remembering that all the issues and all their various stages of development are in God's sovereign control. Read Prov. 16:9; 19:21; 28:10; and Ps. 9:15-16. God is not mocked (Rom. 12:19; Gal. 6:7-8). If we look ahead to 31:41 we shall see that this spell of Jacob's life lasted six years. All sorts of people were learning lessons, or they *should* have been learning. We shall see soon that beautiful, bad-tempered Rachel was a much more shallow person than we may have realised (31:19). Prosperity as well as deprivation tends to reveal just what we are spiritually. Judge nothing before the time (1 Cor. 4:1-5) and be careful not to be taken in.

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31:1-16

Jacob's story develops but it has taken the whole of twenty years (31:41) to turn his mind and heart back to his homeland. This should make us think of the patience of God or even the slowness of God who is more concerned to mould and fashion character than to overwhelm and compel. Consider Ps.103:9-14 and Rom. 2:4 and always remember that God's dealings with us are marked by love and integrity. He is not perverse. We cannot but wonder what Jacob's story might have been if he had not been so driven on by ambition and by the need to prove himself better and more clever than others. How important it is that we should always be listening to what God is saying to us. It is even more important that we should respond to God when He speaks. Already in 30:25 Jacob's thoughts are about going home but because of various considerations he hesitates. Now, in 31:1-2 the pressure of circumstances is beginning to compel him to take action. God sometimes has to make life uncomfortable before we take notice of what He is saying. If Jacob's home life and business life had been more congenial he might well have settled down again. But God got him on the move. Now read through today's passage and note how, all of a sudden, Jacob and his wives are talking about God. Of course, they needed God now. They needed His inspiration and assurance and they seem to have had no sense of embarrassment at becoming so spiritual so suddenly. But if we read these verses carefully we see that human considerations were still paramount in the thinking of both Jacob and his wives (v.1-2, 14-16). Without doubt God was in all this, but none of the people concerned realised just how significant a change was about to take place.

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31:1-16

The only key to the understanding of Jacob's story is God. This was a man destined for significant service and therefore everything about his circumstances has significance. We must emphasise the activity of God who was furthering His purposes with deliberate intent, accurate methods and perfect timing. But we must not forget the activity of the Devil who seems to have been able to introduce all manner of distractions into Jacob's life through his natural self-centred, self-willed propensities. Go back to 27:43-45 and see how human considerations had got Jacob on the run from home and from Esau. Now human considerations have him going in the right direction again, but there was still Esau to face. What is more, God was saying to Jacob to go back to the place and atmosphere of his former failure, and that must have been a deep challenge. Note how Jacob called his wives out to the fields, almost as if he trusted no-one. Note also how he introduced into his speech the words, "But God" (v.5, 24, 29, 42). All the characters begin to be aware that God, whom they had forgotten or ignored, had been in their situation all along. Think of how much misery is being referred to in v.5-6. Note the absence of any sense of self-blame in the very spiritual words of v.11-12 and note how Jacob claims assurance from God that Laban has been the bad character. Of course it is true that God sees all that people do to us, whether we are walking in His will or backsliding, and God is the one who deals with all according to their just deserts. Even though He uses the wickedness of men as a fire to refine His servants, He has no part in their wickedness and will judge them for it. No-one should presume. God is just.

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31:1-16

Along with this now familiar passage read Gen. 28:15; Rom. 3: 3-4; 11:29; 2 Tim. 2:13, and consider the faithfulness of God. Then read Gen.27:43 and 31:21 to emphasise that in this whole spell of twenty years Jacob was on the run. In all that time God never wearied, nor did He consider giving up Jacob. Having once pledged His love, God is true to His promise. This kindles great hope for the future, but also a real sense of shame because of our lovelessness, In today's passage Jacob refers to the God of Bethel, the God who cannot lie (Heb. 6:18) and who means what He says. It seems that Jacob had at some time told his family about the experience at Bethel and it is the memory of this that motivated him, whereas it seems to have been property and prospects that influenced his wives (v.14-16). At long last God is taking His man back to a significant crisis point in the past where Jacob had made a vow. This is a necessary spiritual exercise at times and it does us good to be reminded of a significant day when we pledged ourselves to God, and we meant it. We remind ourselves of whose we are and whom we are called to serve. We accept with fresh grace that we are not our own in any sense at all (1 Cor. 6:19-20). We belong to God and if there is anything good in us at all, anything of promise, or fruitfulness, or service, it is the work of His grace (1 Cor. 4:6-7) by the Holy Spirit within us.

"And every virtue we possess,
And every victory won,
And every thought of holiness,
Are His alone." (Auber).

This is the stage Jacob is at and the story is of the pilgrimage of the returning backslider, He returns to the faithful God who has never forgotten him and who has watched over him. It is the God who promises to restore the years the locust has eaten (Joel 2:24-27 AV) and to make the future greater than the past. Blessed is the man who has the God of Jacob for his help (Ps. 146:5).

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31:17-35

The narrative moves on quickly and we must note how fear was very much mixed with what ever faith Jacob had at this stage of his life. There is no dignity in his departure from Laban's territory even though Jacob was now a rich and seemingly powerful man. Of course, it is only as we are right with God and know ourselves to be so that we can lift up our heads and stand tall. We note the shallow superstition in Rachel in v.19 and, while we may criticise the lack of spirituality in Jacob's pretty wife, we must remember that the example of her husband had not helped her to grow in grace. Jacob outwitted Laban and fled (20-21). What a scheming scurrying life this man had, always restlessly on the move, always up to something. He had not learned to rest in the Lord (Ps. 37:3-7). How could he? He insisted on being in the driving seat. Laban was not prepared to let things go. The Devil never is. It is dangerous for the Devil when backsliders return to God. But God is in charge of this whole movement and Laban got the shock of his life when he was warned to keep his hands off Jacob (24). That did not prevent him telling Jacob what he thought of him, making plain that he had little respect for him. Of course, we must see that Laban was still the total hypocrite in his plausible words in v.26-28. He was wrong, and he knew he was wrong, in saying he had power to harm Jacob. But he was trying to frighten Jacob, to unsettle him, to make him insecure and vulnerable. He gave a scornful challenge to Jacob's new found spirituality by the question about his household idols (30). It is devastating when the enemy sees and pierces the flaws in our spiritual armour. Jacob admitted his fears but denied the charge about the idols. He meant it. But he did not know the truth.

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31:36-42

There are three main lessons here. Note yet again the deceit of Rachel towards both her husband and her father. She played on her father's love to conceal her sin, and she played on her husband's trust to conceal her spiritual shallowness. Jacob had not been an ideal husband but he had loved and trusted her. The second lesson is to see a new (albeit angry) positiveness in Jacob, not only standing up to Laban instead of running away, but bearing testimony to the hardships of his past service in Laban's household. It had not been a romantic story. Everything

Jacob possessed had been hard earned, not only in toil and sweat but in personal humiliation. Ten times, or repeatedly, his wages had been changed; that is, the terms of the contract had been manipulated, thereby heaping insult on injury. Jacob was aware that his own weakness was as much a contributory factor as Laban's ruthlessness and he may well have been recalling in his humiliation that both his father and grandfather had likewise been treated and rebuked by unworthy men (Gen. 12:17-20; 20:8-11; 26:6-11). Sin brings shame. Sin steals our dignity. Sin devalues us in the sight of others as well as in our own eyes. Why, oh why, do we ever listen to the Devil when he entices us away from our close walk with God? This was an important day for Jacob and it may well be so for those who read these notes. Read Hosea 14:1-7.

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31:36-42

The third of the lessons mentioned yesterday is found in Jacob's confession in v.42, Along with this passage read Isa. 54:7-8, 11, 13, 17. We cannot be sure to what extent Jacob's words were a radical statement of faith or just the beginnings of an awakening to the spiritual realities of his life. Certainly there were coming to the forefront of his mind and moving his heart, things he had learned many years previously, things he had been taught as the great priorities of life. He seems to have been becoming aware of his true identity and destiny, and this is a great moment for anyone. There was still a great deal of human pride and self-confidence to be dealt with, but when a man at last gets face to face with God the possibilities are immense. Jacob confessed that but for the grace of God he would have been an impoverished disaster and he was beginning to be amazed that he, having had such a miserable and complicated start to his life, should now be what and where he was. He speaks of God as the God of Abraham and he takes his stand in the line of God's covenant. The God of Abraham was El Shaddai, the all-sufficient God. Jacob speaks of God as the Fear of Isaac and this may simply signify the God whom Isaac feared in the sense of worshipped. Jacob may have been recalling Isaac's alarm when he realised he had been tricked in respect of the blessing (27:20, 28-29, 33) or he may have been thinking of Isaac's earlier faith and walk with God. Jacob may also be placing the authentic fear of the Lord over against his own human and carnal fear and realising that there is a fear that is totally healthy and indeed necessary for a true life of faith. Would God that we all learned to take God seriously: Consider Ps.19:9; Prov. 1:7; 9:10; 14:26-27; Isa.8:13; Heb.11:7 as a very few examples of the fear of the Lord. "Fear Him, ye saints, and you will then have nothing else to fear".

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31:43-55

It is a great story when God is in it. But we need to remember that God is in every story, seen or unseen, welcome or not, because He is the God with whom we have to do (Heb. 4:13). The fearful Jacob may have been surprised by Laban's willingness to part on the friendly terms of a covenant. He may have wished he had stood up to Laban earlier, He may have realised that, being willing to take his stand in faith, God was ready and willing to bless, keep and vindicate him. Hopefully the lessons would be learned deeply so that they would be an inspiration and help on future occasions of trial, one of which would soon meet him in the next chapter. There is no real indication that Laban was a changed man but at least he and Jacob were to part on reasonably amicable terms, and that is better than to part in bitterness, because bitterness tends to poison the spirit. The details of the ceremony do not need to concern us much. The names of the two places in Aramaic and Hebrew mean the same. – "the heap of witness". Both men seemed to commit their future actions to the God who witnesses and judges all things (cf. 1 Pet. 4:19). Laban charged Jacob by the God of Abraham but then added reference to the God of Nahor (53). Laban also set a standard for Jacob in the very area where he had made Jacob to sin, namely in the matter of taking two wives (50). He was not the first nor is he the last man to condemn in another the sin most glaring in his own life. At the same time Laban does remind us that when people play fast and loose with the marriage-bond the whole of society degenerates. He also reminds us that God sees and judges. The chapter ends with the two men parting on friendly terms, at least on the surface. But, their ways prove very different. Laban disappears from the main stream of the story of God's purposes. Jacob

goes forward to high destiny. Where are *we* heading? Does there need to be an ending to certain associations? God is witness.

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32:1-2

Jacob had reached a crisis point in his life and he may well have had some awareness of this. In many ways he was a man haunted by fear (28:17; 31:2,20,31; 32:7). Some of this was no doubt a personality complication but without doubt the Devil played on it so that Jacob feared when there was no need to fear. This calls for faith of the kind expressed by the Psalmist (Ps. 27:1; 56:3-4). Now the dangerous thing about fear is that it not only torments us (1 John 4:18) and brings confusion, it obliterates God from our thinking and our awareness. The cleverness of the Devil is seen in that he can almost terrorise us with thoughts of fear lest we go out of God's will. But God has not given us a spirit of fear (2 Tim. 1:7) and His Son Jesus was the one who said, "Let not your heart be troubled...My peace I give to you...." (John 14:1, 27). Apply all this to the account of Jacob going on his way into a new area and realm of service in God's will. He was aware, as we shall see, that there was Esau to meet and cope with, and he was still aware of the tensions of his last encounter with Laban. The man would have been less than human if he had not been deeply apprehensive, and it is a token of the grace, love, mercy and consideration of God that when he needed encouragement most the angels of God met him. Note that it was as Jacob went forward in a new obedience (an obedience almost forced on him by God's providential ordering of circumstances) that Jacob met the angels. He had met them at Bethel twenty years previously (28:12) and he had not been too sure about wanting their company. Now, after years of meeting people who had vexed and humiliated him, he was more disposed for heavenly visitors. It is always a good sign when we want God. But it sometimes takes a lot of effort on God's part to get us to that stage.

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32:1-2

It was God who arranged this journey and Jacob had to deal with God in a new spirit of faith and submission before he could cope with the future with all its possibilities. When he saw the angels he recognised at once that he was dealing with God, and when he spoke of "God's army" (RSV) or "God's camp" (NIV) he called the place Mahanaim, which means "two camps". He was aware he was not on his own as he went forward to meet Esau's camp. This is a great assurance. Think of the story of Elisha and his servant in 2 Kings 6:15-17.

"The hosts of God encamp around
The dwellings of the just."

Read Ps.34:1-7 and also Heb.1:14 where the angels are spoken of as ministering to the heirs of salvation. We are foolish indeed if we do not believe in guardian angels (Ps. 91:1-6, 11-13). Now consider this comment by Kidner: "In Jacob's pilgrimage, the way to the heights now led through a valley of humiliation which he made no attempt to skirt. Geographically the call to Bethel would take him nowhere near Esau, ensconced in the far South at Mount Seir; spiritually he could reach Bethel no other way.... to meet God he must 'first be reconciled to his brother.' The sequence of chapters 32, 33, culminating in 35:1-15, acts out powerfully the principles of Matthew 5:23-25a." All sorts of things were in the process of being put right in Jacob's life and God, having arranged the circumstances, now manifests His gracious and immediate and recognisable help. What a God He is.

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32:3-8

Life never stands still. In the good providence of God we are always being moved forward whether or not we are aware of it. To what extent Jacob was aware of the significance of the crisis about to meet him we cannot say for sure. If the previous verses assured Jacob of the good angels who were working on his behalf they did not make him forget that he had left behind him in the homeland many enemies, not least his angry brother Esau. Now, Jacob could have avoided the meeting. It was not necessary for him to go that particular way, as we pointed out in an earlier note. But there was a new realism in this man called to God's service. He did not seek

to evade the wrongs of the past. His approach was wise, and in measure humble, even though he made plain by reference to his possessions that he was not in any sense a failure. However, there is a real note of deference in Jacob's language, referring to Esau as lord, and himself as servant. There is no hint at all of a claim to precedence because of the birthright. We could consider Eccles.10:4b and Prov. 15:1-2 in this connection. It may have been that Jacob, knowing Esau's materialistic spirit, was seeking to impress his brother with his success in worldly terms, as if to say that he was no longer the weak, characterless person he had been in his younger days. But worldly success and advance do not necessarily mean we have grown spiritually. Sometimes it simply means we have given priority to our careers and devoted our best time and attention to our own prosperity, as Jacob had in fact done for twenty years. There does not seem to have been in Jacob anything of the spirit of the prodigal son who said, "I am not worthy." (Lk.15: 18-21). That conscious response came when he got news of Esau.

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32:9-12

Esau had not forgotten the past. Esau was angry; at least Jacob assumed he was (but compare 33:4). Jacob's past wrongs were catching up on him, or so he thought. But the rest of this chapter tells of the most momentous step forward in his spiritual life and service. Why then should there be so much fear? It was the work of the Devil seeking to undermine confidence and to dispel hope in God. But it had this effect: it made Jacob turn to God in a realism of prayer that he had not manifested for a very long time. Still, as v.7-8 show, Jacob remained very practical in his provision for his family. There may have been an element of mere human calculation and planning in this, but that is not necessarily a denial of faith. Certainly in today's verses we see a man face to face with God. What a prayer this is! It begins with the covenant God of salvation, the God of Abraham and Isaac. It is grounded in the promise and command of God (9b): the word of the God that cannot lie (Heb. 6:18). It is full of acknowledgment of Jacob's own total unworthiness and recognises that all he has and all he has become are the result of God's good and gracious providence (10). How much we need to reach this stage of marvelling at God's goodness to us, His wonderful kindness, and His manifold mercies. Read Psalm 103 and learn to bless the Lord. Jacob's prayer moves on from thoughts of God's steadfast love and faithfulness to an earnest prayer for deliverance from danger which he feels very keenly. Jacob was afraid, and when we are afraid it is best to tell God. There is no use pretending we are brave. The prayer ends where it began, with the faithful promises of God, and Jacob did not seem to realise that what he was afraid of was that God's promise would be frustrated by Esau. God was not worried. He is always at peace in Himself and confident about His plans. What a blessing to have a God like that.

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32:13-32

This was the night Jacob had to do business with God so that his whole future could open up with possibilities. The picture still shows a man busy organising every detail of his situation and yet there may have been an awareness in Jacob that he needed to be alone. Sometimes we can limit our usefulness to God by refusing the discipline of loneliness, insisting on ceaseless camaraderie and activity so that God never gets us to Himself. There is a time to be still, to be quiet, and to have nothing to do so that we can wait upon God (Ps.46:10, 11; Isa. 40:28-31). But we must be careful. There can be no withdrawing from company into an isolation that is not of God. Elijah did this and came to grief (1 Kings. 19:1-4). There is a time when the right and spiritual thing to do is to seek company and to share the burdens and cares of the heart, There is a wrong way of depending *only* on God. But God has a marvellous way of separating us from all that would confuse or complicate in order that He may deal with us, The picture we now have is of Jacob separated from all he had acquired over a spell of twenty years. All along the line God had blessed him (10) and all along the line Jacob had wrestled against God. Put it radically: in blessing Jacob, God had lost Jacob and now there was to be a showdown, Would Jacob have come back to God sooner if he had not been so competent and successful in business? We cannot say, and we must not cast doubts on God's methods for His ways are perfect. We shall see this clearly in the next chapter in

the total change in Esau's attitude to his brother. Enough for today to say, "My times are in Thy hand" (Ps.31:15). Jacob was beginning to realise that this was what he really wanted.

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32:13-32

Read along with our passage Hosea 12:2-6. This story of Jacob is often used as an illustration of wrestling in prayer, and by faith refusing to let go of God until the blessing is granted. But the incident seems rather to be a parable of the whole of Jacob's life. On the one hand he wanted to hold on to God and yet he struggled against God. In the night time encounter it was the Angel of the Lord who took the initiative, and in the wrestling it was the same as it had been all along. The Angel did not prevail until at last He called on superhuman strength and touched Jacob to cripple him. God had to deal with this man in power rather than in gentleness, and that was after a spell of twenty years and more during which God had sought to bring Jacob to the place of willing submission and a surrender of his wilful self-sufficiency. Why had Jacob been so stubborn? Was he afraid to yield to God? Was it an emotional thing stemming from his troubled, manipulated childhood, and the dominance of his scheming mother and the weakness of his father? We cannot tell. What we can grasp is God's determination that his life should not be wasted. And, in the moment of his being crippled, Jacob saw the issue and realised how near he had been to forfeiting his usefulness and his future service. The verses in Hosea tell us that Jacob wrestled against the angel and then he wept to the angel. He held on to God in a way he had never done before and, realising his place and his usefulness were in danger of slipping away, he cried out, "Not that, God." Think of David's similar cry when he pleaded with God not to take from him His Holy Spirit in terms of service (Ps. 51:10-12). This was an important day for Jacob. It could well be the same for those who read these notes, a day in which we will taste the sweetness of a new surrender.

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32:13-32

Keep in mind the fact that God had prepared Jacob for this encounter. He does not spring surprises on us as if His design were to catch us out and, whether we are aware of it or not, God always prepares us for the next stage. That is a great comfort, especially when we can all be so like Jacob, wanting God more than anything else and yet being wilfully perverse, arguing every point with God, almost as if we did not trust Him. Never forget that God is the God who gives, and gives generously, for enjoyment as well as service (Rom.8:31-32; 1 Tim.6:17; Ps.16:11 AV and RSV; John 10:10). It is only because we are deceived by Satan that we have doubts about God's good intentions. Eventually Jacob asked the angel's name, almost as if he realised at last that he was dealing with God in a very personal way. He was not told the name but he was given the blessing he pleaded for. He never forgot that night when he met with God face to face. His deep spiritual experience did not become an idolatrous pre-occupation, as can so easily happen. Jacob was far too aware of the significance of what had happened. His life had been preserved from self-will and waste and, as the sun rose, Jacob knew that for him a new day had begun, with new possibilities, new hopes, and a new determination to be God's man and to walk in the light with Him. It is a great story of the triumph of the grace and love of God. But we must remember that there was not now the simplicity that could perhaps have been. After all, Jacob still had to live with his wives and his children and with what *they* had grown up to be in his years of fighting against God. There is a lot of the story to come yet and we are wise to judge nothing before the time (1 Cor. 4:5). Look on to Jacob's testimony in Gen.48: 15-16 and if you can read Wesley's hymn, "Come, O Thou Traveller Unknown." Always remember that God is love.

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33:1-11

It seems totally against the run of the story to find Esau dealing with Jacob with such grace, welcome and dignity. If we look back to 27:41 we are reminded that if he had had opportunity Esau would have taken vengeance on his brother without reference to God at all. His anger and resentment were real and deep and this is one of the reasons why Jacob had to be "trapped" and detained so long in Laban's household. If he had

returned earlier he would have precipitated a crisis for which neither he nor Esau was prepared. As we have studied the story we have not thought about Esau. We may have assumed he would continue to be the kind of man he was at the beginning. But we underestimate the grace of God. He works His wonders in unexpected places, although not always in terms of salvation. The stories of Saul of Tarsus, Cornelius and Lydia for example all tell of the grace of God that goes on ahead, preparing the way for His word and work of salvation (Acts 9:10-16; 10:1-8ff; 16:11-14). The story of Abimelech (Gen.20:1-9) and of Joseph (Gen.50:15-21) tell of God's advance preparation for the safety and development of His work. That Jacob had no conscious awareness of this is evident in his over-humble approach to his brother. He was very aware of his guilty conscience. In v.4 we have the same picture as in the story of the Father of the prodigal. If ever there was undeserved grace it was here and Jacob found it hard to receive it. He urged gifts on his brother as if to say, "At least let me do something to make up for my wrongs." We are all a bit like that. We find it hard to believe that God really does forgive freely and fully. In v.10 it seems that Jacob was realising that Esau was dealing with him exactly as God had done, in marvellous grace that opened a door of hope for the future. What a lesson on how to deal with those who have wronged us!

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33:12-20

Esau's attitude had reminded Jacob of the grace and goodness of God. Did Jacob's attitude and dealings with Esau turn Esau's thoughts to God? It is open to question. There are two ways to understand this story. We could see in it a return of Jacob's inbred deviousness and double dealing, whereby he agreed to meet his brother in Seir and then went in the opposite direction to Succoth. He could have said to his brother, who seemed very open to reason, that he was under oath to God to go to Bethel, but he did not do so. Was his deceit necessary or justified? Most of us know quite a bit about taking the easy way out of a difficult situation by being not quite honest. We salve conscience by saying that we meant what we said at the time but later it seemed wise to change, and the other party was too far way to tell them! The other way to read this story is to give Jacob credit for seeing in the warmth of Esau's welcome a real danger of being drawn into a lengthy stay and partnership with his brother; a partnership that could never be a spiritual one, and which would right from the start be a drag and a hindrance in terms of spiritual obedience. How much we need the New Testament warning about the unequal yoke (2 Cor. 6:14-7:1). Note what happened next. Jacob, having evaded the issue instead of taking his stand in faith, travelled on to Succoth and then to Shechem. And he settled down there and built cattle sheds (Succoth means "booths"). He also built an altar to God, the God of Israel. He was going to be a spiritual man. But he should have been at Bethel. Worship cannot be a substitute for obedience. What is more, disobedience is dangerous, as we shall see.

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34:1-12

With some obvious dedication Jacob, the returned backslider, built an altar and called it, "God, the God of Israel" or "Mighty is the God of Israel" (33:20). But the point is that Jacob had stopped short of Bethel. It was not a temporary hesitation nor one of those "slowing down" or "sticky" passages we all have from time to time in our Christian lives. He built a house as well as an altar and he was putting down roots. No doubt he would have protested that he was not committed in any way to staying there but actions speak louder than words. He built an altar and began to pray about his decisions after he had already made them. Now, Jacob was quite clear in his own mind that he was God's man, going into God's future, and this was his true desire. But for reasons that are not clear he stopped and settled in a place where he should not have been. We may say that he was not *far* out of God's will, and that is true. Every mistake is not a total disaster. But Jacob created a situation of harm and complication for others more than himself and it was the painful and indeed shocking developments that caused him to go flying back to God. Now, let us consider the story in its different aspects. It would seem that by settling in Shechem Jacob introduced his daughter Dinah to a society and culture she neither understood nor could cope with. She was not ready for it. She may have been precocious and too eager to go out and about too soon (1). On the other hand she may have been rebellious as her brothers were. There is no suggestion that she

went looking for trouble or even thrill. Perhaps she just did not think. But look what happened and how it happened.

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34:1-12

We cannot tell if this was the first time Dinah had gone out and about in Shechem. We cannot tell if there had been several occasions when the prince and she had met. She may have been flattered by the attentions of such a man who would seem to be a "catch". On the other hand she may have been abducted by force or she may have been "invited" to the palace. It is not clear whether the man seduced her or raped her. Certainly she stayed on in the palace (17b, 26) and Shechem intended marriage. In v.3 there is the clear affirmation that the man fell in love with her. But there are two very important things to note. First, the language used in v.2, 5 (took and violated) makes plain how the Bible regards unchastity. It is a sin against personality and a sin against God. We need the stark words of 1 Cor. 6:15-20. In Old Testament Law the severity of the punishments for sexual sins indicates the radical attitude of God in such matters (Deut. 22:22ff). Second, in this relationship the physical took precedence over the emotional, romantic and the spiritual aspects and this can lead only to complications. This is why it is so important before we allow ourselves to become involved that we should seek the mind of the Lord, and that very often means seeking the counsel of those whose human and spiritual judgment we have learned to trust. Always remember that in the first romance in the Garden of Eden God took the woman to the man and both recognised at once that it was God's will, and His gift for united service. In a day when even among Christians there seems to be a casual attitude to this side of human relationships we do well to consider this statement in a Journal of Psychiatry. "Co-habiting, far from deepening a relationship, curtails the possibility of the two people getting to know each other as persons." In our story the arrangements went ahead for a marriage. We must go on to consider the reactions of the parties.

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34:13-24

We must still read in from the earlier part of the story. Shechem acted according to his own nation's culture and asked his father to negotiate the marriage contract with Dinah's father. Jacob heard what had happened and at first it seems he held his peace until his sons came home, so that there could be a family discussion (5). But some suggest that Jacob was already considering the economic advantages of an increasing liaison with this kingdom (9, 10). Jacob's sons, however, reacted very radically. They were angry, not only about their sister but ostensibly on spiritual grounds because of a man who had worked "folly in Israel" (v.7 AV and RSV). But it is all too easy to set high standards in some things for other people and at the same time lose sight of our own wrongs. Jacob's sons made use of the holy sign of God's covenant (circumcision) and debased it by making it an instrument for deceiving the men of Shechem (14). The equivalent would be organising a baptismal service or a communion service and inviting people to take part with the specific objective of getting them into your power in order to get vengeance on them. On top of the deceit there is the fierce and savage lawlessness and vengeance that seems far too radical by way of punishment for the wrong that had been done. It is not easy to be angry without falling into sin, and all who name the name of God need to learn that it belongs to God to exercise judgment (Rom. 12:19). This story makes plain the need for the law later on to stipulate *only* an eye for an eye. It is all too easy to react more than is necessary, right or safe, and when we are hurt and wronged we need to hurry into the presence of God for our own safety. Of course we must also note that the king and the prince were also guilty of deceit (20-23). But then they were pagans, not lightened with the light of God. The sons of Jacob were God's men, and a higher standard was expected from them.

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34:25-31

This is a grim story that is also sad. Dinah's two closest brothers Simeon and Levi (all three being children of Leah) along with their men were the first to take action but the others seem to have joined in for the plunder (25, 27). The sons were the avengers, acting in fury. Jacob, the father, seems to have wanted the way of

appeasement, acting possibly in fear. In this evil situation both were wrong. What we have to see is that Jacob, somewhat out of the will of God, was beginning to manifest his former weakness and lack of resolution. There is no sign here of the man who wrestled with the angel and discovered that nothing was worth having if it meant losing out in usefulness to God. We find Jacob here more than a little attracted by the material advantages of dealing with this situation in a "soft" way. But we see also fear rather than faith emerging as the dominant attitude of Jacob (30). We also see how little respect the sons had for their father (31) and that is never a good sign whether in respect of a natural father or a spiritual one. There is a deep lesson here and it is very practical. When we are not right with God it is the weakest parts of our personalities that come to the fore and assert themselves, stealing from us our spiritual dignity and capacity, and reducing us in our own eyes and in the eyes of others. Be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might and put on God's armour to defend yourself in your own vulnerable areas (Eph. 6:10ff.). The shame and the cost of this incident made Jacob able and glad to hear the voice of God, as we will read in the next chapter. But it all made an impression that Jacob never forgot. He knew what he should have done, and he made plain what he thought of his murderous sons in Gen 49:5-7.

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35:1

One single verse is enough. God spoke to His servant right in the middle of his failure and shame, and He spoke of a positive future. It was as if to emphasise to Jacob that not even this blunder, on top of all that had gone before, had cancelled out God's gracious plans for his future service. This is of course part of the marvel of the story of the Resurrection. The Risen Christ came to the company of disciples who were broken and miserable in their failure and He recommissioned them, giving them fresh heart and hope. Of course, in our story here, we must recognise that sore circumstances had been the means of grace to get Jacob back to God, and there is no doubt at all that what Jacob wanted more than anything now was to get away from Shechem, where he should never have been in the first place. God does indeed move in mysterious ways His wonders to perform. We would seldom choose His methods and that is just as well since we are so clouded and prejudiced in our thinking, and our motives are not always free from self-interest. But God's ways are higher than ours (Isa. 55:9) and in His providence all things do work together for good (Rom. 8:28) even when we cannot see that it is so. Note also how God takes Jacob back in thought to his experience in chapter 28:13-15. That may be the word to some today. Is God saying it is time to get back to the place of renewed vows and to taste the sweetness of a new surrender? When God called Jacob to go to Bethel and *there* make an altar, it was not just a call to get back into the centre of God's will and back into the way of obedience. The altar is not only the place of worship, it is the place of fellowship with God. And, as we are drawn back into close fellowship with God, we are drawn nearer to each other, and together we are ready to go forward in service (1 John 1:3,4,6,7).

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35:2-8

Jacob was now far more decisive and he was no longer prepared to be tolerant in respect of his own household's idolatry. He insisted that all the "clutter" they had acquired and kept should be put away, since it was an offence to God and a hindrance to both their blessing and their service. It may well have been that Jacob had turned a blind eye to the existence of these idols and magic charms (ear-rings) just to please Rachel because he loved her dearly. But it is not love to allow a loved one to go on in a way that is contrary to God and to have in her life things that simply hinder her spiritual development. He called his own family, including his bad tempered sons, to a new dedication and fresh start on the road of spiritual obedience, and Jacob himself took the lead. Do not forget, as we have already indicated, that it was only the impending chaos of his human situation that brought Jacob to this attitude and action of spiritual realism. But now Jacob gives testimony to God (3) recognising that it was God's gracious deliverances that had brought him thus far. He also recognises that his lack of spiritual example and leadership had led to a poison spreading through his whole family. He sees now that evil idolatry should have been dealt with at its first beginnings, and we likewise must learn that situations that need to be rectified simply go from bad to worse if left alone. Both Jacob and his family had so settled down that they had lapsed into the spiritual state of being neither cold nor hot (Rev.3:15, 16). But God knocked loudly at the door

and, mercifully, Jacob responded. It is wonderful to think, although it is not specifically stated, that God forgives and takes back the penitent. What a Gospel (Isa. 1:18; Hos. 14:1-7; Ps.103:10). Our God is the Father of the prodigal son.

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35:2-8

There are two further important points to note. It is clear from v.4 that Jacob's personal return to God resulted immediately in a new spiritual authority in his family and a new decisiveness in his thinking. Keeping ourselves in a right relationship with God is the only way to be an effective instrument of His will and a clear channel of His blessing to others. If we get spiritually confused it is highly unlikely that we will be able to guide anyone else clearly and safely. A clean heart and a right spirit are of the essence of witness and service, as David expressed so clearly in Psalm 51:6-13. The second thing to note is the providential activity of God as Jacob and his family made their way to Bethel. By a sovereign work of the Holy Spirit a great fear and a compelling restraint fell on the cities round about and Jacob journeyed without harm or hindrance. Proverbs 16:7 states a general principle but it must not be pressed to extreme in the light of Jesus' words in John 16:33 concerning the tribulation that true disciples will inevitably meet. At the same time divine protection is not a fiction. God watches over His people whether or not they are aware of it. Usually it is only when we look back over the way that we have come that we realise that we were being watched over and guided all the time. Do not fail to see in v.5 the clear teaching that evil is always under the control of God. It is not free, and any opportunity given to it is solely in order to further the purposes of God. Jacob built his altar and called the place "God of Bethel". But the joy and peace of his new surrender to God was mingled with sorrow because Deborah, who had served the family for two generations, died. She had been nurse when Jacob's mother was only a child. The place of her burial was called the "Oak of Weeping" (8). Perhaps Jacob was being made aware of the shortness and uncertainty of life and being made to think of what little time he might have left (Ps. 39:4-5).

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35:9-15

When someone has been out of God's will and confused and then returns to God in a new dedication and desire, what is needed more than anything else is a new awareness of God. This is exactly what Jacob was now given and his heart must have lifted in gladness as he became aware that God was again speaking to him in a way that he could understand. We do not know how God appeared to Jacob but we know it was to bless him (9). There was also to be a change of name from Jacob to Israel, almost as if God was indicating that what Jacob was by nature was not going to be allowed to hinder or prevent all that God purposed by His grace. In John 1:42 and Matt.16:17-18 we find Jesus saying the same to Peter and there is great hope and encouragement here for all of us who straggle with our personalities and temperaments and our inbuilt temptations. "You are you shall be." God is in the process of fashioning us into the people we could be and should be, and His skill and determination are illustrated so clearly in the story of the potter in Jer. 18:1-5ff. In so many ways Jacob had been a vessel that had been spoiled. But God re-worked the material and Jacob now heard God speaking of future service and blessing. He may well have wondered in doubt if all this could possibly be true of *him*. It seems almost too much to believe that a man who had been so foolish, stubborn, weak and wilful could have such a glorious future. But then, God said that He was God Almighty, the El Shaddai God, the All-Sufficient God. Jacob may well have been aware of the story of his grandfather Abraham in Gen. 17:1ff and this would have quickened his spirit, realising that the God of Abraham and Isaac was indeed *his* God. What Jacob did (14-15) was a repetition of 28:18-19 but much had happened in the intervening years "to make the second inwardly richer than the first. God's repetitions, if this is a sample, are turns of a spiral rather than a wheel." (Kidner)

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35:16-20

The name El Shaddai (All Sufficient) (11) stands over against human frailty and limitation to give assurance, comfort and encouragement. It is found in Gen. 17:1; 35:11; 43:14; 48:3 and 49:25 and we do well to grasp its

significance because all too often when the pressures of life are great and the difficulties loom large we tend to lose heart because our concept of God is too small. Jacob's story moves on and we find him now in the school of sorrow for his much loved wife Rachel died in childbirth. But why was Jacob on the move again? Could he not rest at Bethel? Was this a journey taken at the command of God or simply set in motion by his own restless spirit? We need to be careful before committing ourselves. Whatever is not of faith is sin (Rom. 14:23). Was the journey too much for Rachel in her condition so near the time of the birth and had she been still at Bethel would the child have been born safely? Had Jacob's thoughtlessness led the wife that he loved into danger? Was Jacob too fond of his wife? Remember his tolerance about her idols (31:32). He had only one son by Rachel (Joseph) and the expectation of another son may have been a distraction. On the other hand, the death of Rachel in these circumstances may have been "just one of these things" that happen to all of us in this world. When Rachel was dying it was the sadness of her past life which was uppermost and she called the son, Benoni, which means son of my sorrow. But Jacob, humbling himself under God's mighty hand, spoke in faith and re-named the child, Benjamin, son of the right hand. Perhaps Jacob was learning at last that his times really were in God's hand, and that God was indeed round about him planning his future (Jer. 29:11) and working it out in perfect love and method. But it was very sore for the man when his wife was taken from him. It was sorer still if the man sensed that God *had* to do this to preserve his future usefulness. Jesus' words in Matt. 10:35-39 are very searching.

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35:21-26

Jacob was certainly travelling through a valley of sorrow at this stage of his life. You can imagine how he would wish that he had never stayed in that area of Eder (21). We are told nothing of the circumstances leading up to this terrible breach of family honour (incest). Bilhah was Rachel's maid but according to custom she was regarded as a wife to Jacob and the shock of what was done must have shaken Israel (Jacob). Hopefully it also sobered and restrained others, although we cannot be sure of that. That Jacob should suffer such a blow from his own son is terrible and tragic, and it could well have broken him. What blame must attach to the woman we cannot tell but, if she enticed the man without being unduly interested in him save only as a "capture", she would not have been the first to do so, or the last. The enormity of Reuben's sin, and what it cost him in terms of his future life and work is made plain in 49:3-4. Already two of Jacob's sons had revealed their cruel passions (34:25) and now his first born son revealed his carnal lust and insensitivity, indifferent to man and to God. Of course, without minimising his guilt, we must see this as a direct assault of Satan on a family chosen and ordained in the sovereign grace of God for future service in the cause of the plan of salvation. We are not told of any sense of shame, let alone repentance on the part of Reuben and this is a sign of great significance. Remember that this man Reuben bore in his body the mark and sign of God's covenant. In like manner we who believe bear the mark and sign of the covenant of baptism. How wise a guard we must set on ourselves lest we give opportunity to the Devil to blast our lives, hinder our service and dishonour the name of God. We must guard also lest we break the hearts of those who love us and to whom we owe a great debt. Read 1 Cor. 10:1-13.

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35:27-29

For Jacob it was one blow after another: the death of Deborah, the death of Rachel, the incest of his son. In that context it is now recorded that Jacob's family stands complete. His twelve sons were born and the future lay ahead and the saga of the twelve tribes of Israel was ready to begin. But now Jacob faced the death of his old father Isaac and the break with the past generation was complete. As Jacob stood by the side of that grave would he not have sore regrets as he thought of how he had deceived his father; how he had left home and been away for so very long; and how there had been so little opportunity to show his father that he was a changed man?

Calvin comments that v.29 indicates that Isaac is well spoken of and that his long, full life suggests that the blessing of God rested on him, and that he was ready and willing to go. This may well be the case, and many a man who has been foolish and indulgent and worldly in his earlier days has been drawn back to God so that his last years are the happiest and the most spiritual. A footnote in Calvin's commentary points out that though

recorded here the death of Isaac did not in fact take place until fifteen years later, after the events of chapters 37-38 and the selling of Joseph. That would mean, contrary to what we said earlier, that God in His mercy granted father and son a time of fellowship together during which Jacob no doubt would have recounted the dealings of God with him. Perhaps Isaac learned something of what it meant for a father to welcome back a prodigal. Heb.11:20 speaks of Isaac in terms of faith, but old Isaac must have had many regrets about things he could not put right. It is best to live so that you are ready to go at any time.

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36:1-43

A chapter full of names is not inspiring reading but what is recorded in the first eight verses gives the key to the chapter. As the next stage of God's work of salvation begins we are told of the family of Esau disappearing from the picture. They are no longer a relevant contribution to what is going on. Esau is Edom, and far into the future we find the prophet Obadiah speaking God's judgment on Edom. Four times in our chapter (1, 8, 19, 43) it is emphasised that Esau is Edom, as if to make plain he does not change. This is the hard, impenitent spirit that despises all spiritual values, and we need to go back to 25:31-34 to see this mans contempt of his spiritual heritage. In Heb.12:16-17 we are told that Esau *wanted* the blessing but had no change of heart. His tears were those of anger and frustration rather than repentance. In 28:6-9 we see the deliberate perversity of Esau in taking a Canaanite for his wife, and as the years went past he did not change That is why in today's verses we find Esau taking the deliberate decision to move himself and all his people away from Jacob (6). The "official" explanation in v.7 is given materialistic terms, but underlying this is the deliberate choice to move away from the way of faith, and away from the man and the family on whom God's hand rested for purpose and blessing. Esau either could not or would not see that God was with Jacob in a way that He was not with himself. No doubt the deceit and duplicity of Jacob caused some of Esau's contempt, but we need to be careful before we blame the sins of others for our own backsliding. There are many reasons why some people contract out of their place in a work that is blessed by God. God knows the truth of every situation and we must judge nothing before the time (1 Cor. 4:1-5). Esau is Edom, and he fades from the scene. Jacob is Israel, God's man who, in spite of all his sins and failures, is to be the instrument and servant of God in days to come.

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36:1-43

Ponder this chapter again and think what has happened to some people you knew in the past. Where are they? Are they still in contact with Christian things? Are you disturbed to discover sometimes just how totally pagan they and their children have become. Here in v.9ff. we are told of Esau's sons and grandsons as if to emphasise the succession of unbelief. Think of families where for generations no one has had any interest in God let alone faith in Christ. Think of areas of our land, once blessed in Gospel ministry and salvation, where now there is a hardness that seems beyond influence. We seem to be being told here that Esau made his choice for himself and his people after him and God confirmed them in their choice (Rom. 1:28). If we look at v.12 we see the name Amalek, and that name echoes in the Old Testament in terms of bitter enmity to Israel. We have already commented on Esau moving away out of the main line of significant history, but we must also think of this in terms of the work of God moving forward and onward and leaving behind those who, because of unbelief and totally materialistic considerations, have declined to go on. This is something that is being repeated wherever there is a work of God's Word bearing God's blessing. If we do not give diligence to make our salvation and our service sure we will be left behind. Think of the warning in Hebrews 2:1-4 regarding drifting. Remember that as we drift so the truth drifts away from us and we are less and less aware of it. Little wonder Heb.4:1-2,11-13 urges us on, as does Heb.6:1-3. We have to be serious. Esau went away and became the source of opposition to God's people that lasted for generations. Read Heb.3:12-14.

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37:1-2a

The mention of Jacob here serves to bridge the story over to Joseph and begins the long saga of events that brought the whole family of Israel into Egypt and finally into slavery just as God had foretold many years previously (Gen.15:13-16). That early reference in Genesis indicates something of the context of the story we are to study because it spoke of the iniquity of the Amorites developing and being allowed to develop. Added to this, as we have just seen, is the fact of the disaffected family of Esau, disaffected from God and from God's people, who are the "carriers" of God's purposes. As the story goes on we will be faced with the bitterness, jealousy and scheming of men but we have to see it all as being under the hand of God. In due time we shall come to the glorious statement of Joseph as to how God over-ruled the very real wickedness of the brothers (50:20) and we do well to pause and to ponder the workings of God's providence. His ways can baffle at times, just as the disciples were baffled by the "disaster" of the Cross until they saw it in its true light (Acts 2:22-24). Viewing the situation from a distance (and being wise after the event), we shall see very clearly the follies and errors of even great men. But we must also be amazed that God uses those who are so very far from perfect, refusing to allow His servants' sins to frustrate His purposes. He deals with His people, but He saves and uses them in and through all His discipline. We do not excuse people's sins, especially our own, but we must see that God is greater than our sins (1 John 3:20). Read Heb. 12:3-11; Jas. 1:2-4; 1 Pet.1:3-9. God is dealing with us and working through us. This makes sense of a lot of things.

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37:2-4

We could entitle this section "The life of Joseph" even though the story of Jacob is not quite finished. Indeed he does not disappear from the scene for a long time yet, but the significant focus is now Joseph. The context of the story is the atmosphere of evil and unbelief, with pressures upon the children of Israel from various alien cultures. They lived in a real world, just as we do, and they were infected by the spirit of worldliness just as we are. There was the clash of personalities and tensions between the older sons and the younger ones, a tension complicated by the foolish favouritism of an old father and older grandfather. Remember that Joseph had grown through his first seventeen years of life with both Isaac and Jacob in the background. Remember that the birth of Joseph had signaled the beginning of a significant move in Jacob's life (30:25) and it seems that Jacob had always doted on that particular son. But he did not seem to have grasped the fact that his son was to be significant in God's work, nor did he realise as he should have done that if the boy was significant, then he would be the target for Satan's attacks to seek to spoil or prevent what God was planning. This is something we must remember about our own children and should make us pray with earnest faith. It should also make us careful lest we "spoil" or hinder them. What a tragedy if our attitudes or example were to turn one of our own children away from God. How tragic if our self indulgence in respect of our children drew on them the enmity of others as it certainly did in Jacob's family. We cannot tell from these verses if Joseph was simply a "tell-tale" or if his reporting to his father was the right and necessary exposure of evil being done behind Jacob's back. There is a time to speak, a time to tell whoever is in authority, and when that time comes it is not only wrong but sinful to adopt the "don't tell" attitude.

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37:5-11

Keep clearly in mind that Joseph was a chosen man for God's service. But he was also proud, precocious, spoiled and arrogant and far too aware of his spiritual destiny. Without doubt he needed the fires of trial to purge him of these graceless attitudes and to work in him that balance and dependability that would fit him to be the long-term servant of God, the work of God and the people of God. Of course, the brothers and the father were not free from criticism. Why was it that they had no awareness of the significance of Joseph, no willingness even to entertain that thought, and apparently no thought of God being in the process of developing and furthering His work? Were they all too busy with their flocks and too occupied with the mere business of life? We shall see soon that in their spiritual slackness their moral convictions were far less real than they should have been. But concentrate on Joseph. He had a dream, and God was in it. But should he not have kept

this to himself until he was clearer as to what it meant? There is a time to speak out plainly and to declare the will of God. But there is a time to wait on the Lord and to look to Him to open the way and to make the path plain. Joseph obviously had very little awareness of his brothers' deep feelings or he would not have thrown in their face their spiritual inferiority compared to his superiority. This will be a fascinating story to follow and we learn from it to consider well what God may be planning for us. If we begin to see this more clearly and are willing to do His will, then be careful not to spoil it by presumption or by undue reticence or fear. God prepares us for our future. See to it that we learn.

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37:12-24

We were introduced to Joseph when he was seventeen years of age and we need to remind ourselves that by the time he was thirty he was Prime Minister of Egypt. But at the beginning of the story he was so consumed with a sense of his own importance that his attitudes set in motion what had all the appearances of a work of the Devil that endangered his very life. Youth is the time to learn to bear the yoke and to learn discipline. If we do not learn it in the comparative security of home then God must use other methods, and these methods can catch up on us rather suddenly, as Joseph discovered. We are not told about the young man's reactions when he was set upon by his brothers. He may have been angry or self-pitying and he was very aware his father was not there to take his side. It is an unpleasant story but it would have been even sadder in the long run if this young man, so full of potential, had never fulfilled that potential. There were no dreams or visions now. There seemed to be no word from God and no intervention by God. It may have been that Joseph had to think things through as he lay in the pit, to see whether his dreams had been simply a projection of his own day-time thoughts of ambition. That ambition may have been instilled into him by his mother who had for so long been denied motherhood that she may well have indoctrinated her son to think himself better than all his brothers who, after all, were not sons of Jacob's favourite wife. We cannot be sure of these things. But there is good reason to believe that it was through this sore experience that Joseph began to be the man of God he was destined to be. So very often it is when we are "down in the depths" that we begin to look up to God. After all, when we are really down, there is no other direction that we can look. But do not forget there is a Devil. Remember 1 Pet. 5:8. Peter remembered.

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37:12-24

Consider Joseph's s brothers because they had grown up in the same atmosphere and with the same pressures as their younger brother. There were all sorts of passions and prejudices at work within them, as we saw in the story of Shechem (Chap. 34). These men were in a precarious spiritual condition and the attitude and actions of Joseph simply accentuated this. He may have been the most spiritually minded of the sons but he was no help to his weaker brothers. In his proud and precipitate words and actions Joseph not only brought danger to himself and to the purposes of God which centred on him, he caused the latent evil in his brothers to flare up in an almost uncontrollable way. He proved a stumbling block to them (Rom. 14:13). The murderous plan was made and it is quite amazing to see it that it was Reuben (think of 25:22) who exercised restraint. If he had not weakened his spirit by his sin he might well have been able to take a far more decisive stand against this unrighteousness being done against his brother. Of course, as v.22 says, Reuben had good intentions. But they came to nothing. That is a problem that many people have. We mean well, but somehow never get round to it. Turn back again to Joseph and see in this anointed servant of God something of a fore-shadowing of the experience of the Saviour. Joseph was devalued and rejected by his own. His significance as a chosen vessel unto the Lord was totally unrecognised. We must accept that even if Joseph's behaviour had been full of the grace of God (as Jesus was full of grace and truth) his own brothers would still have hated and refused Him. Such is the blindness and bitterness of unbelief.

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37:25-36

We shall take two days to study this passage because it is full of instruction. We said yesterday that Reuben's good intentions came to nothing but it is still true that he prevented the death of Joseph. His motives may have been mixed. He was out of favour with his father for obvious reasons and he may have thought a "good turn" to Joseph would reinstate him. He was also aware that as eldest son he would be held responsible for any wrong done if a brother's blood was shed. The picture in v.25 almost points forward to a similar situation when Jesus was crucified: "And sitting down they watched Him there." At first there seems to have been total indifference to the distress of their brother even though they were aware of it (42:21). Then Judah spoke, and we see that in some measure a spirit of disquiet was operating. Possibly he knew he could not win over his brothers to free Joseph and what he suggested was in measure self-interest (26) but later on we see the emerging of a real greatness in this man (43:9; 44:33). But here there is no greatness. Kidner points out that the word "profit"(AV v26) means "rake-off", and in this calculating attitude there is certainly no sign of any concern for their old father and his reaction. The deed was done and the brothers collected their money and went home. It was the Midianites who carried Joseph forward to his next place of service in the cause of God. Very soon Reuben, who no doubt had been on duty with the flocks, and who had been trying to work out a rescue attempt, returned to find the treachery completed and his reaction was one of self-centred agitation. No-one seemed to be bothered about Joseph. How easily "self" can dominate our whole life.

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37:25-36

Kidner points out that there is irony in the fact that it was a goat that was chosen for the means of deceiving Jacob. Remember it was goats that were used by Jacob and his mother to deceive Isaac (27:9, 16). When the brothers reported back their father would have been well aware of the cold indifference of their words in v.32 when they spoke of "your son". But that hurt was nothing compared to the distress of losing Joseph, and Jacob made no attempt to hide his grief. He made it plain that losing Joseph could not be compensated for by all the rest of his family. That shows just how unbalanced Jacob had been in his family love and in some measure explains, though it does not excuse, the sons' contempt for their father. The New Testament says fathers are not to provoke their children (Eph. 6:4) nor must neglect on the one hand or over-indulgence on the other be allowed to distort their developing personalities. Of course we must allow for Jacob having some turbulent thoughts of regret about his own life and its spasmodic backsliding. In our original notes on this story (away back in 1969) we said "How often we hear old men who have been changed and transformed by the grace of God late in life when their active days are over, mourning the wasted years and wishing it had been different." We cannot call back the past and we rejoice in the comfort of grace that forgives and brings so much sweetness when it seems humanly impossible. But we can do something about the present. True repentance as to the past will bring the present and future into focus and consecrate them to the service of God. Have you more than your share of perplexities and disappointments just now? God is in it. He always is, and He works wonders.

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38:1-30

What a grim and ugly story this is and how it exposes the atmosphere and morals of society in general and Jacob's family in particular. We begin to see how good and providential a thing it was for Joseph to be away from that situation and atmosphere lest he be tempted and contaminated. Yes, we know the story, and how Joseph was tempted in Egypt but God had a remedy that would not have operated in the homeland. Would it not be sad if someone had to be sent away from us in order to preserve their persons and their usefulness to God? But there is another solemn lesson here. We are shown the potential for degeneracy when faith ceases, when men and women are at cross-purposes with God, and when people are no longer consciously aware of God. We shall soon read how very different it was with Joseph compared with his brother Judah. It is amazing just how quickly Judah went down into the morass. His Canaanite wife is not even named. But should he have drifted into this kind of marriage? Was his wife in any sense a "believer"? Did he even bother to find out what kind of person she was or was it just a case that Judah was desperate to get married in order to have children and so

guarantee the family succession that was so important? One thing is clear. There seems to have been no reference to God and no attempt to seek His will and His blessing. That is no way to get married! The years went past and the sons grew up. Was the marriage reasonably happy so long as God was not mentioned? We are not told of the wickedness of Er, but it made God very angry. The story of Onan conforms to standard practice (cf. Deut. 25:5ff) and the word "when" (9 AV) should read "whenever" (NIV). The man's attitude was one of deliberate refusal of all that was expected of a son by his father and his brother's widow. We must remember that it was Tamar's right to be the mother of Judah's heir. The story must develop further.

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38:1-30

The practices of these far off days are strange to us but the continuance of the family name was of vital significance to all in Israel. In v.11 Judah made a promise he had no intention of keeping. In time Tamar realised she had been deceived and decided on her course of action. Judah by this time had degenerated to the level of living for immediate carnal satisfaction, and he seems to have had neither hesitation nor shame. It was a casual liaison that meant nothing. For Tamar it was a means to an end; the end being revenge, or motherhood, or both. In v.24 Judah, the hypocrite, acted the part of an indignant man of God until he was exposed and only then did he confess his sin and shame (26). It is a shock when sin finds us out, and the nature and value of the shock is seen in whether or not there is repentance; and the evidence of repentance is a change in life. We are given here only the facts of the story and no moral assessment is made. As we go on with the story of Joseph we shall see that there is a very different way of dealing with temptation and injustice. Joseph will show us how to do so, even though he paid a high price. Some observe that Judah's words in v.24 indicate the tendency to set one standard for men and another for women (cf. Hos. 4:14). The amazing thing in our story is that God, in sovereign grace, over-rules and works through the most glaring wrongs of men and women to bring to pass His good and perfect will. In Ruth 4:18-22; Matt. 1:3; and Lk. 3:33 we find the names of Tamar and Perez in the genealogy of the royal line of Judah. Where sin abounded, grace much more abounded (Rom. 5:20). This should make us worship, with godly fear.

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39:1-6

The story again focuses on Joseph, but we see at once that it is very different Joseph we are now dealing with. His sore trials had worked a new grace in him (Rom. 5:3-5; James 1:2-4; 2 Pet. 1:3-11). Joseph was a slave, but God was with him, and Joseph knew it. It was also evident to Potiphar that God was with Joseph and that he was a man to be trusted. In a very real sense Joseph was the best thing that had happened to Egypt for a long time, and that nation was blessed for Joseph's sake. But as yet no-one, not even Joseph, knew just how significant it was to prove that this handsome young man of faith was among them. It seems that the Devil was still very aware of the significance of Joseph and a fierce attack was being prepared. But before we go on to that part of the story take time to think back over what Joseph had come through. Think of the pit his brothers threw him into and their indifference to his pleas. Think of the slave train with its humiliation and privation. He was sold as a mere chattel and must often have felt that he was totally forgotten by all, including God. Perhaps there even faded from his conscious thinking the intimations God had given him of a significant spiritual future. After all, there was no sign at all of that coming to pass. But it seems right to say that Joseph, like Jesus, learned obedience through the things he suffered (Heb. 5:8). Read Psalm 105:16-22 which emphasises the cruel experience Joseph suffered. But remember, he did not become bitter. "Out, of the presses of pain comes the soul's best wine." It makes all the difference to the outcome when our attitude accepts sore situations and yields to God in them. Joseph came out of his sufferings a man of strength and grace.

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39:7-10

We need the end of v.6 to set the picture. Joseph was a fine figure of a man and it may well have been that the woman had "noticed" him in an interested way right from the start. But her attraction was a carnal one and the

time came when she went after Joseph with specific intent. She did the chasing, and this is very different from what happened in Gen. 2:22 when God brought the woman to the man. Of course in Joseph's situation the woman was not entitled to start a relationship. She was not free. But even if she had been, it is the man who should take the initiative, not least to persuade the woman that it is both safe and right for her to open her heart to respond to love. It is quite thrilling to see how Joseph reacted to this situation. He had opportunity because his master would never suspect him, but Potiphar's trust awakened a glorious response of righteousness in Joseph. How could he deceive and despise and deal wrongly with the one who had treated him with such goodness and grace? But the real anchor and inspiration for Joseph was God. This was what really mattered. He was determined he would not sin against God. All he had gone through had worked this grace in him. He was God's man and as such he would have no trifling with sin. Now notice that after the first blatant temptation was resisted the woman persisted, and we see the crafty technique of the Devil at the end of v.11 when the house was empty. We can imagine the woman saying, "We won't do anything wrong. I respect your convictions; but we can be good friends; surely there is nothing wrong in that?" But Joseph would not even be with her. He made it his business to make sure, as far as he could, that their paths did not cross. This is indeed walking in the light (1 John 1:5-7) out in the open where it is safe. This is why we need to watch as well as pray (Matt. 26:41). "Lead us not into temptation" is a prayer that we can answer by refusing to be stupid.

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39:11-23

Remember that Joseph could not change his place of work or residence. He was a slave. The day came when circumstances favoured the woman. No one was near, and the temptation came with sudden power. Joseph did the only thing a sensible man of God could do. He ran. That was the way of escape (cf. 1 Cor. 10:12-13). But in a sense there seemed no escape and the woman's shrill voice slandered Joseph. "Hell has no fury like a woman scorned". And when that woman is a tool of the Devil there is no limit to what she will say and do. Note how cold and calculating she was. This was no momentary cry of frustration, it was the cold deliberateness of Hell. The interesting thing is that Potiphar, although recorded as being angry, did not have Joseph put to death as he might well have done. Perhaps the husband had suspicions of his wife! Ending up in jail, Joseph's public reputation was in shreds because he was a well-known man and this "story" could not be hid. But perhaps the woman's reputation was more public than she imagined. Things have a habit of getting out when we are acting contrary to God's servants and His work. Jesus spoke of things being shouted from the housetops (Lk. 12:1-3). But the Bible also speaks of our sins being covered and put out of sight and out of God's remembrance (Rom. 4:6-8; Jer. 31:34). Learn from Joseph's story. When we are set to do God's will we will know what to do. Joseph stood firm when it was necessary and reasoned his case. When it was necessary he took to his heels and ran, not waiting for explanations. As he ran, he must have looked to God. How many can understand the intensity of his prayer? Who can understand his desolation as the prison door clanged shut? What a challenge to faith: Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him (Job 13:15 AV).

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39:11-23

God's ways are perfect. Sooner rather than later Joseph must have become aware of the fact that he was in the only place in Egypt where that evil woman could not get at him. He was safe. God had organised it. What a sense of relief must have come to him. But what of the future? What of the service to which he believed God had called him? Joseph may well have looked back to think over the way God had led him. He had been delivered from his brothers' murderous intentions. He had prospered in Egypt and had learned many things regarding administration of business in Potiphar's house. He had been delivered from the fierce attack of evil that was so manifestly contrary to God. Would God do all that simply to let it all be undone and to leave him in the lurch? It cannot be so. Paul affirmed this in Phil. 1:6 and also discovered that the things that happen work out for the furtherance of God's purposes (Phil 1:12-14). Of course, it is not easy to see and even less easy to feel that all things work together for good when everything seems to be going wrong (Rom. 8:28). Now, without minimising Joseph's human hurt (the saints of God are intensely human) read the last three verses of the

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passage. God was with Joseph. How could it be otherwise? Later in history God was to say, "Them that honour Me, I will honour" (1 Sam. 2:30). Whatever circumstances may be, and no matter what criticisms are levelled, when God is pleased with a man and his work it will be obvious. But remember Psalm 105:17-19: there was a grim spell. There was the death before the resurrection. The two go together. The truth is that whatever his circumstances, Joseph was the same man. He did not have to adjust. This is integrity.

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40:1-23

Read the whole of this well-known story to get the thrill of it and then look carefully at the details. It was not a brief weekend that Joseph spent in the dungeon (15). The chapter begins, "Some time later.. ..." and at the end we find that yet another two years go past (41:1). Having tasted the bitterness of losing his high position and being left in jail, Joseph was well qualified to share with the butler and baker, who were high-ranking court officials, the hurt that came to them. Of course, it seems that their "offence" was something real and deserving of punishment whereas Joseph was without guilt. Again and again in the story we are constrained to think about Jesus who had no sin and who yet tasted the feelings of human experience to the full (Heb. 2:17-18; 4:15-16). It may have been some comfort to Joseph that the captain of the guard (some suggest it was Potiphar) saw to it that these important prisoners were put under his charge. It may have been to make sure they were carefully supervised or it may have been an act of kindness on the jailer's part to give Joseph some congenial company. God thinks of all the needs of His children. He is kind, and any wounds He causes are for our good and our blessing (Job 5:17-18). We must learn to see our sore experiences in terms of our fruitfulness in service. "All corn must go through the mill before it can become the bread of life to others." Joseph certainly went "through the mill" but the amazing thing is that wherever he went he was a blessing to others and not a "drain". This is all the more amazing when you remember that all along he seems to have had no-one like minded with whom to have fellowship on a human level, let alone a spiritual level. What a man he was! And what a transformation from the rather unpleasant young man he was at the beginning of the story.

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40:1-23

There are deep practical lessons to be learned from this chapter concerning spiritual service. By the providence of God Joseph was in the place where he was needed to serve the future purposes of God. There was little obvious evidence of God being in the situation and little indication that important issues were being worked out. But it is clear that Joseph maintained his spiritual life and kept in fellowship with God so that when the butler and baker had their dreams Joseph was so in tune with God that he was able to interpret the dreams. Note also, and this is an indication of spiritual rightness and stature, Joseph was human enough and interested enough to notice the troubled faces of the two men and he cared enough to ask them about it. The men in turn had learned enough about Joseph to know that he was a man it was wise to talk to, and they did. Immediately Joseph related the whole situation to God. He witnessed to his faith in God, and it seems he had a real awareness that God was in this situation in a significant way. That is why Joseph not only interpreted the dream but made his plea in v.14-15, making it plain as he did so that he was an innocent man. There is something of a grandeur about Joseph in his manifest spiritual maturity. In his earlier days, as a result of his dreams, he had been a young man totally absorbed with his own spiritual experiences and his own interpretation of them. But now, he was aware that when God's hand is on a man, and when His blessing attends a man, it is in order to make him a servant of God and of others. This was something Jesus' disciples took a long time to learn (Matt. 20:20-28). But keep in mind in our story that the positive fruit of Joseph's service here did not become evident for another two years (40:23; 41:1,9).

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40:1-23

The great thing about Joseph is that he was ready, willing and able when opportunity for service came. This was to be true two years later when Pharaoh had his dreams. Now it is not easy to keep spiritually fresh in the long

dreary spells when everything seems negative and even contradictory of all your prayers and hopes. Proverbs 13:12 speaks of hope deferred making the heart sick but it did not do so to Joseph. Did he still think of those earlier intimations from God that he had a significant future? We, who have read the story through, know that he had but there was very little confirmation of this to Joseph in his grim circumstances. What is more, he had to be the messenger of gloom and doom to the baker and that could not have been easy. The Lord's messengers do not always have good news to deliver. Indeed, if we are faithful to God and His Gospel we will be at one and the same time a messenger of salvation to some and judgment to others (2 Cor. 2:15-16). No doubt Joseph would often have prayed earnestly to God that his circumstances might be changed and that he might be set free to serve God as his heart so much desired to do. But his important service at that time was to be done in prison, and in that prison he was being kept safe and prepared for service far greater than he yet realised. Think of how Paul pleaded with God to remove his "thorn in the flesh" (2 Cor. 12:1-10). How we need to wait upon God, accepting the dispositions of His providence, so that we might serve Him the better. Did not Jesus speak about the fruitful branches being pruned with the sharp knife, cutting them back with seeming harshness, so that they would bear more fruit. (John 15:1-2). When the knife cuts, God purposes a crop.

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41:1-13

Sometimes God seems to be very slow. We in turn tend to be very superficial assuming that when there is much "happening" it must be a time of spiritual significance. One of our hymns says,

"But the slow watches of the night
Not less to God belong." (Hosmer)

Another hymn, seldom sung, says,

"For while the tired waves, vainly breaking
Seem here no painful inch to gain,
Far back, through creeks and inlets making,
Comes silent, flooding in, the main." (Clough)

Joseph may not have been aware of it but it was getting near high tide. But it was two full years of waiting for Joseph. How long did he cherish hopes that the butler would remember? It would have been so easy for God's man to react in bitterness. The temptation was greater than it had been at the beginning. He could have been bitter about the past and his brothers' wrong dealing with him. He could have been bitter about both Potiphar and his wife. Should not the man who had been so well and faithfully served have known Joseph would not be a traitor? He could have been bitter about his present circumstances, their long continuance and the manifest ingratitude of the butler. It is easy to become bitter and we are warned against it in Heb. 12:15 because it poisons ourselves and others. It is not easy to learn faith, patience, endurance and continuance, but according to Rom. 5:1-5 trials and tribulations are the things that produce these graces. We need to learn to wait upon God (Ps. 27:14) and to humble ourselves under His mighty hand (1 Pet. 5:6-11). But we must also see to it that we are doing right (1 Pet. 4:19). Make sure you are doing what pleases God. This is vital because what is not of faith is sin (Rom. 14:23).

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41:14-24

When God's time comes everything can happen very quickly. But remember that Joseph's story began when he was seventeen (37:2) and he was now thirty (41:46). Did it take all that time to make him ready? Joseph's heady speech at the beginning of his story suggests that he felt himself ready then. In Luke 22:24-34 Peter was quite sure *he* was ready and able, but in spite of the warning Jesus gave him, when the time came he collapsed. In the story of Abraham twenty years elapsed from his call to the significant birth of Isaac and of that spell there were thirteen years about which nothing is recorded (Gen. 16:16- 17:1). In Jacob's story twenty years were spent in the irritating but refining service of Laban before the real advance of service began. In Moses' case, two-thirds of his life were past before he was ready to lead God's people at the time of the Exodus. In the case of Paul

there were the silent years in Arabia between his baptism and his mighty missionary labours. What is the lesson? If God has a work for you to do in the future there will be secret preparation under His providence and you must make sure you are learning what God is teaching. If the work God calls you to is to be a long-term work, that is a work that lasts rather than a "flash-in-the-pan" commotion, then there must be a well-laid solid foundation. This is what was happening in Joseph's life. We are not told how much he realised this at the present stage of his experience. But then, God often does not explain in detail in order that we might learn to trust Him. He puts us in positions where the only thing we can do is to trust. The extent to which we learn this and are prepared to go forward with many unresolved problems is the extent to which we will be ready for God when the time comes.

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41:14-24

These seemingly slight verses are truly instructive. The details in v.14 make plain that Joseph's time in prison had not been easy and had indeed brought a real degree of personal humiliation. But the verse also makes plain that it was to Pharaoh that Joseph was brought, right to the throne of the ruler of Egypt. Now, if the butler had remembered earlier, Joseph might well have been released two years previously to go back to the relative obscurity and real danger of Potiphar's house. There is always "reason" in God's dealings and His plan is to lead us to greater rather than lesser service. But we need to be prepared. Now, for Joseph there had been much suffering. Was it all necessary? No. He brought some of it on himself by youthful arrogance. Some of it was the result of the butler's lack of gratitude, and his self-centred forgetfulness added colossally to Joseph's suffering at a time when he seemed to have become a true man of God. Perhaps there may have been some hidden necessity for this, because God does not afflict unnecessarily. He remembers our humanity (Ps. 103:13-14). But think of Jesus' "extra" suffering in Gethsemane (Matt. 26:40) and the words of the Psalmist, (Ps. 142:4; Ps. 69:19-20) and Paul's words in 2 Tim. 4:9-17. At the same time we must never forget that God is always present. Pharaoh had a dream that worried him and that was instrumental in bringing him to deal with God, just as a bout of sleeplessness brought another king to a similar crisis (Esther 6:1). On another occasion a king got a terrible fright and learned that he was not "seeing" things as a result of alcohol delirium but was being dealt with by God. How we underestimate God. How we need to affirm again and again, "I believe in the Holy Spirit." He knows no limitations and He works to bring to pass the will of God.

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41:25-36

Try to imagine the thrill and amazement Joseph must have felt when his situation changed so swiftly and dramatically. He must have been a man of much prayer and close walk with God to have coped so magnificently. Think of the many opportunities for witness that we allow to slip past unrealised. Now look back to the immediate and confident answer in v.16. Joseph had no desire to have the centre of the stage. He made it plain that he was only a servant of God and he pointed Pharaoh to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But Joseph went on to stress that God is not just the interpreter of worrying dreams. He is also the God of providence, active in the affairs of men and nations, not only on a personal level but also in the realm of agriculture and national economics (28:32). This is important for us because almost unconsciously we have been so indoctrinated with materialistic philosophy that we tend to interpret national and world events solely in terms of economic factors and the pressures of international finance. We forget that there is a God who is active in human affairs and that all the "happenings" of life have to be related to Him. But we must be careful in "interpreting" events and must not jump to conclusions. The years of plenty ("we've never had it so good") did not necessarily mean the nation was in good heart and in favour with God. The years of famine (economic collapse, unemployment and food relief schemes) did not necessarily mean that the nation was evil and under God's rebuke. Of course these interpretations must not be excluded. The Bible makes it plain that it is God who gives or withholds the rain (Deut. 11:13-17). The Bible also makes it plain that we live in a fallen world so that irregularities, complications and disasters must be expected (Gen. 3:17-19).

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41:25-36

Note how accurately Joseph assessed human experience in v.30. How quickly we forget our many blessings and deliverances when our circumstances change, and how quickly we complain against man and against God when our immediate satisfactions are restricted or denied. Note also that it was made plain to Pharaoh that the nation's circumstances would get worse and worse. This was not going to be a brief "hiccup" of economic distress. It would last and God was to be in it all the way through. But what was God doing? He was using Egypt and its circumstances (as He is entitled to do) to further His purposes, and by means of international complications He was speaking to His own people, Jacob and his family, (the church) to awaken them to righteousness, to recover them from backsliding, and to prepare them for future generations. We must not lose sight of the fact that Jacob and his family were also to suffer under famine. We may talk of "coincidences" and there are things that just seem to happen, what one commentator calls "life's irregularities" in a fallen world. But we must always remember that God's ways, though mysterious, are higher and better than ours (Isa. 55:8-9). A word of warning is necessary. All dreams do not necessarily have deep spiritual significance. Some of them are the result of too much coffee or toasted cheese late at night. Nor must we evaluate every "famine", accident or disaster in specific terms or give them significant meanings. What we must do is to remember that God is in charge, and power belongs to Him (Rom. 11:33-36; Ps. 62:11 AV).

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41:37-45

Our chapter, which began with Joseph a forgotten prisoner in jail, now tells of Joseph as Prime Minister of Egypt. It all happened very quickly, or so it seemed. But if we look back to v.33-36 we see the wise words of a man who had learned well the principles of business administration in the service of Potiphar, and who knows but that he may have been able to do post graduate studies with his books in jail? Never think that what is happening now (although it may seem remote from spiritual activity) is irrelevant in respect of future life and service. God is the great Master-craftsman, and is wonderfully good at training apprentices. Read, for example, Heb. 12:5-11. When Pharaoh spoke in v.38, mentioning the Spirit of God, he was no doubt far from clear as to the full significance of what he was saying. He was a man who was head of a nation that believed in many gods. But Joseph's testimony in v.16 had made an impression and it was manifestly clear to Pharaoh that Joseph's God was with him. In spite of all that had been said and done against this man God was pleased to let His blessing rest on him, and God does not bless that which is not of Himself. This is one reason why we should be careful about criticising any person on whom the hand of the Lord rests. It does not mean they are perfect. But it does mean they are chosen and anointed of God and that must determine our attitude (cf. Ps. 105:12-15; Isa, 54:17). Joseph is set second only to Pharaoh and the ring, the garments, and the giving of a wife were all elements intended to conform Joseph to the culture of Egypt, as indeed was the shaving referred to in v.14. No doubt these "robes" and chain of office were necessary and Joseph did not refuse to wear them. Perhaps he had no option for Pharaoh was totalitarian and Joseph had been a slave and a convicted prisoner. But, after his clear confession of the God of Israel, no-one would think he had adopted Egypt's religion. Would that we all stood out so clearly and recognisably as God's servants.

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41:46-57

Joseph began his administration of Egypt's affairs and there is still no mention or sign of this having anything to do with his father Jacob, his family, or God's plans and revealed purposes for his life. Though he lived as an Egyptian, married to an Egyptian wife, he gave his sons Hebrew names. He had not forgotten his true identity nor would he deny it. His first son was named by way of testimony to the fact that he refused to let the past embitter him. He saw now the hand of God in it all, just as he saw more clearly his own wrongs and failures. But he allowed the past to go, and that is a lesson we all need to learn. Granted there are times we must make restitution to those we have harmed and hurt, but if we believe truly in forgiveness then we must believe that our sins are blotted out and forgotten. They may not and must not be allowed to call the tune in the present or to hinder the future. Forget the past: the good and the bad; and press on for the prize (Phil. 3:12-14). The second

son was named by way of testimony to the goodness and faithfulness of God who had blessed him in the land of his affliction. Is it not true that very often we can look back to the times of sore battle and tearful trial and see that in these days God blessed and enabled us to make significant spiritual progress? How often the valley of weeping becomes a door of hope (Hosea 2:15), provided our tears are those of repentance and not just self-pity (2 Cor. 7:8-11). What a testimony there is to Joseph in v.55! He was a man tried and proved and to be trusted. He was God's man, and he makes us think of God's other Man. We do well to say, "Go to Jesus: what He says to you, do."

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42:1-5

The end of the previous chapter tells how widespread the famine was and it appears that it was more severe in Canaan than in Egypt, or at least that it had started earlier. By and large we have forgotten about Jacob and his family but we need to remember now that they had lived these past years with Jacob's inconsolable sorrow over the assumed death of Joseph and with the tensions and unease that must have troubled the consciences of the sons. It seems nothing had improved, because Jacob now had another *favourite* son, Benjamin. Thirteen years had gone past during which the brothers kept their guilty secret, and perhaps Jacob had his suspicions. But now, all was going to be brought out into the open. Although they did not realise it their past actions would confront them. Be sure your sin will find *you* out (Num. 32:23) even though your actual sins may never be known. What a man sows he reaps, plus the increase (Gal. 6:7). Of course it all takes time and we may well say at a certain stage of life, "Why is this happening to me?" We all tend to take too short a view of life. We know only in part (1 Cor. 13:9) and that is why we should be slow to pass judgment, especially on others. In today's verses we have the beginning of the story of how the past caught up on a group of wilful men. On the face of it, it had all to do with circumstances, famine and the need for food supplies to be negotiated. But God was in it all, not concerned merely with this divided family as individuals, but with the creating and fashioning of a people who were and would continue to be His instrument of salvation for the nations in future generations. This is how we must think of the life of the church and of the individual congregation. God's hand is on us and we must see to it that there is appropriate commitment and willingness to be led. Too many Christians nowadays are "doing their own thing", forgetting their debt both spiritual and material to the church that has nurtured them.

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42:6-17

In yesterday's verses we should have noted Jacob's scant respect for his sons who all seemed to be waiting for the other to do something to deal with their situation. It was the old man who gave the lead and the sons went to Egypt. Now, lest we think Joseph unnecessarily harsh, look down to v.24. Sometimes a weeping heart has to conceal itself so that stern but necessary words can be spoken. Real love is costly, and is often misunderstood. The proud brothers, who by nature did not find humility easy, came and bowed down to the Egyptian (as they thought) administrator. It is amazing what real hunger can do! Amongst other things, a touch of spiritual hunger can make us see how gracelessly we take regular spiritual diet almost as if it was our right. Joseph recognised his brothers and he remembered the dreams he had had about them (37:5-8). How exactly God's prophecy had come to pass. But the emphasis on Joseph remembering may indicate that this had more or less been out of his mind. Had he forgotten the intimation of destiny and service which God had given him? It is so easy to lose vision and to let the pall of ordinariness cloud everything. Think how Paul said that he was not disobedient to the heavenly vision (Acts 26; 19). Joseph must also have remembered that these were the men who resented God's plans and worked against them, and it may have been that he was aware that there was little sign of repentance or even troubling of conscience. They did not recognise him. Joseph had not been in their thoughts. It was necessary for Joseph to sound hard and be formal so that he could be God's agent to sift their hearts. Joseph already knew what he would do.

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42:6-17

Stay with these verses in order to consider the immense amount of human feeling that must have been involved in this encounter. It is important to do so because it is all too easy to be insensitive to what people feel, especially in situations of stress, and when our main concern is to get out of our own predicament. Note how much information Joseph gained in what may have been a lengthy questioning. He learned that his old father was still alive and that his little brother was at home. That must have caused a welling up of emotion. It may well have affected the brothers also to have to rehearse their family history and to say that one son was missing. Joseph would certainly have noted their protestation that they were honest men (11) but the truth of that was not yet evident. He was well aware how deceitful people can be and he was aware of how an immediate need can make even the nastiest of people affable for a time. If we want something, we can be very nice, and we can be deceivers, just like the Devil. Against that background consider the reaction of the brothers to the terms stated in v.14-17. They may have known that their father had his suspicions about their guilt in respect of Joseph's disappearance and they had little hope of getting him to part with young Benjamin. They may have felt that Jacob would not grieve unduly if *they* did not return home. They were a troubled lot and they were given three days in prison to do some realistic thinking. They may well have spent part of the time blaming each other for what had happened, or blaming their father for giving such strict orders to go down to Egypt. They were learning, what all of us must learn, that they were in God's hand, that they were being searched and tried, and that there was no escape (Ps. 139:1-12, 23- 24). Everything is open to the God with whom we have to do (Heb. 4;12- 13). There are no secrets.

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42:18-28

The passage begins and ends with reference to God. Imagine the effect on the brothers of hearing this "Egyptian" governor confessing his faith in God. Had they any experience of coming across government influenced by godliness? We have seen little of this kind of government in our nation for a long time! Were they amazed by a powerful governor apparently changing his mind and changing conditions of negotiation in favour of the other side without any pressure? We see little of this from any side of negotiations, political or industrial.

In v.16 one brother was to go home but now only one was to remain in prison, and even more astonishing they were to be given an allocation of grain. The brothers agreed to the proposal (20). Almost at once (21) it seems they were convicted and troubled, almost as if their evil was being overcome by Joseph's good (Rom. 12:21). By the Holy Spirit these men were convicted of sin, righteousness and judgment to come (John 16:8-11; Acts 24:25 AV). For years their consciences had been under control and unmoved either by their father's grief or the memory of their brother's tears. But now their guilt came home to them. Their day of reckoning had come, and Reuben spoke up, reminding them of his advice and abortive attempt to save Joseph's life (37:21-22, 29-30). There is a time to say to people, "I told you so!" There is a time to point out to people that what is happening to them *now* is the direct, long delayed, but inevitable consequence of earlier decisions and actions taken deliberately. Remember that while they talked among themselves in their own language they did not realise that Joseph understood every word. What character and discernment he had not to reveal all too soon; but to let God's gracious though painful discipline have its full effect. This is one of the costliest aspects of pastoral counselling.

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42:18-28

No discipline is easy to accept (Heb. 12:11) and at times we may feel we do not deserve it. But in all that the Lord brings to us He is concerned to correct us, to bring us to Himself, to life and to future service. Think how the Father of the prodigal left his son to the rigours and miseries of the far country in order to bring him home (Lk. 15:11-24). Although spoken harshly and critically the words of Job 5:17 are true. Sometimes our own wickedness will correct us (Jer. 2:19). Sometimes we pray to be corrected, casting ourselves on the goodness of God (Jer. 10:24). The time comes when we speak the often quoted words of Ps. 119:67-71. If time permits read Lam. 3:19-39. But to return to the immediate experience of the brothers, consider these words of C.S. Lewis:

“God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.” (The Problem of Pain) Joseph's tears were caused by seeing his brothers' miserable spiritual condition and also by becoming aware of how Reuben had tried to save him these long years ago. Perhaps this is why Reuben was not kept as a hostage, but replaced by Simeon the second in seniority. Secretly Joseph replaced the money which they had paid for the grain, possibly to make sure that they would not be held back from returning to Egypt through lack of resources. In the event the cash was discovered on the journey and at once these backslidden men were even more aware that they were being dealt with by God. They believed in God, but they had lived their lives a long time without reference to God. It is a common error, and we do well to pause and to consider our own lives. Are we doing right by God? Are we listening to what God is saying to us? Are we responding to what He is saying and to His dealings with us?

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42:29-38

When the sons returned home they gave an accurate report of what had happened. Then when they *all* emptied their sacks and found the returned money they were shattered. The interesting thing is that the sons had already related their circumstances to God, but there was no such response in Jacob. He was not going to move or change. His self-centredness had hardened against God and men ever since his favourite, spoiled son had been lost. He had not forgiven his sons nor had he submitted to God, to whom he owed everything he had. How easy it is when our proud wills have been crossed to lapse into a spirit of total non-cooperation. Self-pity and wilfulness become a spiritual "ball and chain" that prevent progress or development. In v.36 Jacob was really saying, "Everything is against me." But he could not have been more wrong. For the first time for ages his whole situation was developing in a positive way. He just did not recognise it to be so. He was so wrapped up in his own resentments and fears that he was just not aware of how God was working. We have not been told anything about Jacob's family life during the years Joseph had been in Egypt but it could not have been all that happy with the cloud of God's displeasure over it. After all, even Jacob had resented the interpretation of Joseph's dreams (37:10-11) even though the truth had lingered in his mind. We do not need to be radical and obvious backsliders to be out of tune with God. There can be a disaffection from God, an estrangement or withdrawal of relationship, that both strains and tires out the spirit. When this is so a sourness creeps into the spirit and makes us critical of God and man. Sometimes it needs shock treatment to resolve it. Sometimes it takes famine. Jacob was meeting both.

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43:1-10

When people sulk with God He has plenty time to wait until circumstances stir them into action. Having stated his position and made his decision to refuse negotiations with Egypt, Jacob dismissed the matter. For all we know he may well have day-dreamed about his "great" and "successful" days in the past, patting himself on the back as the man who wrestled with the angel and prevailed. But past spiritual victories do not validate present experience nor can they be a substitute for continuing obedience. This chapter opens with an emphasis on the increasing famine. God was speaking more loudly and putting on the pressure. Imagine the feelings of the families as they watched supplies decreasing, but being afraid to raise the subject with their domineering father. In the end Jacob spoke but Judah stood up to him. Then Jacob, true to type, was petulant, blaming others, accusing his sons of lacking regard for their father, and making it plain that Benjamin was the only one who really mattered to him. Isn't it amazing how the old nature, given a chance, asserts itself even after many years of dealing with God and receiving His blessings? On the other hand note how the fear of the Lord had made the sons of Jacob far more manly and realistic than they had been at the beginning. They had got a fright and were beginning to see that dealing with God was serious business. Judah spoke again (8-10) and he prevailed whereas Reuben had failed (42:37-38) possibly because Jacob was now more aware of the fact that he had little option. He was jeopardising the whole family of Israel. In fact, if he was going to have Benjamin at all, he must first give him up. In the end Judah said to his father that if he had not been so unwilling to go forward when God

was making the way plain, then the whole situation would have been resolved, This was plain speaking and it was necessary.

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43:11-15

It is difficult to say whether Jacob simply bowed to the inevitable because the alternative was to die in the famine, or yielded to the pleadings of Judah in the submission of faith. Perhaps we should give the benefit of the doubt until it can be shown to be otherwise. This is a good principle to work on and it keeps us from judging, especially on the basis of limited information or understanding (Matt. 7:1-2; 1Cor. 4:3-5). It is interesting that the historian gives Jacob his new name Israel, perhaps indicating that there are signs of the man rising to his true dignity of faith. The gift to be taken seems to have been luxuries rather than staple foods because, after all, it was a time of famine. The gift may have been the accepted thing when approaching a man of high station like Joseph, but there was no gift the first time. Was this then a bribe to curry favour, as had been the case when meeting Esau (32:13-21). If so, it signifies that there was still deep pride in Jacob's heart and he had not yet yielded his cause to God. At the same time Jacob seems to have been clear in his thinking, sending back the money to make plain they were in fact honest men. Jacob was not a poor man but in time of famine gold cannot buy food and no amount of material affluence can ever compensate for or meet spiritual hunger. The hardest thing for Jacob to yield was his pride, and that centred on his youngest son Benjamin. This too he yielded, committing all that might happen into the hand of Almighty God, the All-Sufficient God, the covenant-keeping God of Abraham (Gen, 17:1). It seems that Jacob, in the silence of the time of suffering, had made his way back to the higher spiritual ground on which he once stood (35: 9-15).

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43:16-25

There is a new sense of anticipation in the story. A new stage has been reached. But do not fail to sense the apprehension the brothers must have felt, and do not forget old Jacob at home waiting, wondering and perhaps praying. Sometimes we need to be deprived of everything, so that God can begin to give us more of His goodness. Make the following words a prayer for today:

"O for a closer walk with God,
A calm and heavenly frame;
A light, to shine upon the road
That leads me to the Lamb!

"Where is the blessedness I knew
When first I saw the Lord?
Where is the soul-refreshing view
Of Jesus and His word?

"What peaceful hours I once enjoyed!
How sweet their memory still!
But they have left an aching void
The world can never fill.

"The dearest idol I have known,
Whate'er that idol be,
Help me to tear it from Thy throne
And worship only Thee.

"So shall my walk be close with God,
Calm and serene my frame;

So purer light shall mark the road
That leads me to the Lamb." (Cowper)

In spite of all his weakness, pride, failures and stubbornness Jacob still had a future. God's stern discipline of him was in fact redeeming love that refused to allow Jacob to waste the last section of his life or lose out on his spiritual service. That kind of God is a God to be trusted.

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43:16-25

Note how great a part fear played in the lives of the brothers even when they were being treated with generous hospitality. Their fear made them draw very wrong conclusions from their circumstances (18) but at the same time it impelled them to take action and to speak out. Now, fear can be a very good thing at times. It can hold us back from sin, warn us of real danger, and turn us back to God. In this sense fear is good and pure (Ps. 19:9; Prov. 1:7; 9:10; 14:26-27) but without doubt fear is one of the Devil's most constant and most destructive weapons. It paralyses emotions and actions, distorts judgment and blinds to spiritual realities (2 Kings 6;15-17; 2 Tim. 1;7; 1 John 4;18). It is not our love for God that dispels fear but His almighty love for us which is the ground of all His gracious plans and intentions. You cannot but be sympathetic towards these brothers when you see their terrible apprehension regarding what might be the significance of events and what might be the consequences. But no-one can deal with hypothetical situations and the drumming persistence of the word "if" brings only torment. The steward of Joseph's house showed them what to do. They must look to God and trust their God, the God of their fathers who does all things well. It must have surprised these men to find such a confident testimony to faith in the upper realms of the Egyptian Civil Service. But this is just one other testimony to the fact that God was with Joseph. People were being brought to faith at their work through the influence of a godly man whose whole personality had been refined through suffering. True to the promise made earlier, Simeon was released and you can imagine that he may well have asked with some asperity why they had taken so long to return. His imprisonment had lasted longer than necessary because of the spiritual and human obtuseness of Jacob. How we influence people, hurt and hinder them, when *we* are out of sorts with God!

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43;26-34

Note how the early verses of this passage tell again (42;6) of the accurate fulfilment of Joseph's teenage dream that the brothers would bow to him. But this is a different Joseph. He is a big and important man, a veritable spiritual giant, the key figure in God's purposes for that whole generation, and yet he was totally human (30). There are times when you see before your eyes the outworking of God's purposes for those you love, and you sense their hurt. Then when you feel again the deep hurt they have caused you, and when there sweeps over you the memory of the costly road you yourself have trod, the only response or reaction is tears. But Joseph was aware that his tears had to be private. They could not be shared with his brothers, at least not then, because the gracious, disciplining work of God's grace had to go on to its completeness. While Joseph regained his composure in private the brothers may well have been again filled with fear, misunderstanding completely Joseph's sudden departure. The meal began with the Hebrews and Egyptians at separate tables, as custom decreed, even though Joseph would no doubt have preferred to sit with his brothers. But then, our preferences must not be allowed to dominate nor to take precedence over what the work of God and the good of others requires. Joseph knew full well that a human reconciliation with his brothers without their returning in faith and obedience to God would be futile. He arranged for them to be sitting at table according to family order, and this amazed the brothers. They were being made to think of divine intervention. They were being made to ask, "What does it all mean?" At the end of the chapter they had begun to relax. Did they see the gracious concern that must have shown on Joseph's face? The story makes you think of how the Risen Christ dealt with His confused disciples in Lk. 24:41-43; John 21: 9-14.

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44:1-13

While we marvel at how Joseph master-minded this whole process of sifting and testing his brothers to see if there was any change of heart in them, we must at the same time set a guard on ourselves lest we try to "play God" in our dealings with others. Remember Jesus' words about seeing specks and ignoring planks (Matt. 7:3-5). Joseph was aware that human nature is not easily changed or disciplined and his brothers, feeling that the strain was off and that everything had worked out better than expected, could well have reverted very quickly to their former pattern and attitude of life in which God was simply forgotten. We all know what it is to pray earnestly during a crisis and then go back to an easy-going, superficial Christian life-style. Be quite clear that in the whole of this story there is no suggestion at all that Joseph was seeking revenge. His motivation was love, as is clear from 43:30 and 45:1. The brothers had already in measure been brought to a conviction of sin (42:21) but now they had to learn their total helplessness. There was nothing they could do. They were trapped. But this time there was no selling of the young brother. They all stood together and returned with Benjamin to Joseph. Of course, they still misunderstood the motives of Joseph, being sure he meant them harm. In the same way we often accuse God of wrong motives, of being harsh and inconsiderate, denying us things for which we cry out when there seems no need for denial. This again is the work of Satan, just as it was in the Garden of Eden when he suggested that God was intent on denying man his rights (Gen. 3:1-5). It takes a life-time to learn the kind of faith that says, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him" (Job 13:15 AV) and, "He knows the way I take. When He has tried me I shall come forth as gold" (Job 23:8-10).

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44:14-34

What a story! And how the pressures of life reveal how men have been purified. Joseph's frightening words in v.15 evoked a very humble response from Judah, especially in view of his pledge in 43:8-9. Joseph's response must have solemnised all of them, because they would still remember the former occasion when they went home and told their father about a lost son. Whatever else they could look for there would be no peace. There never is for those who do evil (Isa. 57:20-21). Their foot slides in due time (Deut. 32:35 AV). But consider Judah as he is revealed in this passage; culminating in wonderful words in v.32-34. Think back over his story. In 37:26-27 we see a man of compromise, not principle. In chapter 38 we see a man of stupid carelessness and moral wrong, admitting his wrong in the end (38:26). In 44:16 we see Judah as the great confessor, laying his own sins and that of his brothers before the judge. Now, we see him as the great intercessor, yielding his person and his life to stand surety for Benjamin and his brothers; and this he did all for love of his father Jacob. Judah offered to take the place of the condemned Benjamin. Such thoughts should lead our hearts on to the coming of the great Son of the tribe of Judah, Jesus Himself. But of course, Judah did not become this kind of man overnight. True character and saintliness do not come easily. The fiery furnace must be used to purge the dross so that the true gold will be seen and be useable. Consider Malachi. 3:1-4 and 1 Cor. 3:10-15. Compare Moses' prayer, so similar to that of Judah's, except that he was innocent and the people guilty (Ex. 32:9-14,30-35). We must remember that forgiveness does not always allow us to escape the consequences of our sins. Remember also that the God who changed weak Judah into a mighty man of God can do the same for us. Think of Jer. 18:1-4.

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45:1-8

This was the day of revelation when everything became clear and plain. We see in Joseph "strong feeling and sound spiritual argument" as he explained to his mystified brothers the significance of what had been happening these long years. They had forgotten God, fought against God, and resented His dealings with them. But God had over-ruled and He had not given them up. What tenderness of love is seen here in Joseph! It is indeed love to the loveless. And it did not waver or hesitate even when it was regarded with suspicion and mistrust. Joseph called them nearer to himself, just as God calls us to Himself in Christ. We are indeed dealing with and being dealt with by everlasting love which ever seeks our good by leading us, even by hard roads, into God's good and perfect will. Read the wonderful passage in Hosea 11:1-9 where God's love is in agony at the thought of giving

up His backsliding people. Read Rom. 5:6-8 where we are told that God does not wait for us to become a little better and a little more worthy before He loves us. The picture here in Genesis makes us think of Jesus weeping over a Jerusalem that did not want Him. Joseph said, "Come near," and that may be the word that many who read this note need this very day.

"Today Thy mercy calls us
To wash away our sin,
However great our trespass,
Whatever we have been;
However long from mercy
We may have turned away,
Thy blood, O Christ, can cleanse us,
And make us white today." (Allen)

Though our sins are scarlet they can be white as snow (Isa. 1:18) and where sin has abounded, grace abounds much more (Rom. 5:20).

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45:9-15

Take two days for this study with its various references and comparisons. Everything about this passage points to the future, and Joseph interprets the past as being the instrument of God in His providence to bring them all to the present in order to make the future possible. There is a wonderful example of this same interpretation of God's disciplining His people in Jer. 29:10-14 where God is speaking to His people in their exile and shame. But for the future there must be a good foundation (1 Tim. 6:19) and to that end God provides all that is needed (1 Cor.3:21-23). In our passage for today Joseph's words come in a torrent, almost as if he was only then seeing clearly all the significance of the years that lay behind him, years when so many things seemed to be without significance and totally negative. We can all quote so easily that all things work together for good (Rom. 8:28) and we believe it. But in the actual situations of life it can be difficult to see it and even more difficult to feel it. Of course we must recognise that there is and always will be an element of incompleteness in our life and experience. We and our work are only part of the ongoing story. We enter into a work that others have begun (John 4:38) and in due time we pass the work on to those who must carry it a further stage. This is very evident in the "Roll of Honour" of the men and women of faith in Hebrews 11. They knew themselves to be strangers and pilgrims and that they had to live and die in faith (Heb. 11:13-16,39, 40). Read the New Testament account of our story in Acts 7:1-6; 9-19ff. Go on to Acts 13:36 and read the summary of David's whole life and then read Paul's words in 2 Tim. 4:6-8. At all stages, but especially at the end, how important it is to know that you have been faithful. It is doubtful if Joseph was looking much beyond the remaining years of famine. But God was looking much further than that.

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45:16-28

Such was the standing of Joseph in Egypt, and such the impact of his personal, moral and spiritual integrity, that Pharaoh was open-hearted and enthusiastic about bringing the whole family of Jacob to Egypt. Perhaps he assumed that they would all be of similar calibre to Joseph. They were not, because they had not responded to the disciplines of God in the way Joseph had. Joseph had grown in grace. But some have neither desire nor appetite (1 Pet. 2:1-3; 2 Pet. 3:14-18). Of course, we must not suggest that Joseph was perfect, and it is disturbing that the man who had discovered in his own experience the danger resulting from favouritism now singled out Benjamin and made him very different from his brothers. Perhaps the emotional "mountain top" of recent days had drained him more than he realised, and the Devil, who is always on the watch for opportunity, was beginning to sow seeds of complication. How we need the whole armour of God to stand in the evil day (Eph. 6:10ff). The picture of preparation and journey is drawn very vividly but when there is a lot of commotion there can easily be something of a spiritual dust-storm in which God gets concealed. Perhaps culture required it, but it seems as if all the gifts were too lavish. All the problems were not yet solved and this new stage of the

history of the Hebrew people had a solemn as well as a glorious element in it. We are dealing with history, which is guided and determined by the will and promises of God. We must learn the lessons of history and take a long-term view of all things, a very long term view. Look back to Gen. 15:13-16. What we are about to read of was to lead to long years of slavery. But that too had its manifold purposes. The Hebrews would have opportunity to grow to a great people, to maintain their identity, and in due time learn what it really meant to be a redeemed people.

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46:1-7

Look back to 45:24 and note Joseph's wise warning to his brothers. Did he think they would fight over the rich gifts? At first Jacob could scarcely believe the story (26) but as the details were recounted and when he saw the wagons and the provisions his spirit revived. Jacob was always a calculating man, but this time he could see that God was indeed in all this situation. The decision was made and the journey started without delay. But it started with worship and there is a suggestion that Jacob was seeking the face of God and His confirmation because, after all, he was moving; out of the land he had been told to live in. Perhaps he was recalling the complications to Abraham's life when he went to Egypt during famine (Gen. 12:10ff). It is always good to seek the mind of God before we move, no matter how conducive the circumstances are. All Jacob's natural impulse was to go to Joseph, and he had made up his mind to do so, and yet he paused. Sometimes we hesitate through unbelief and fear, and we hold back from God's future which is greater than the present. Sometimes we hold back because by temperament we are slower than others to cope with change, and God is long suffering and understanding. Sometimes our hesitation is that of faith because when big decisions affecting the future are about to be made we must have His seal of approval. This Jacob received. Read v.3-4 very carefully and see how God committed Himself to Jacob. God was very aware that it had taken this man twenty years to adjust to and to overcome his disappointment over the loss of a son. If ever Jacob needed reassurance it was then, and God gave it to him in glorious measure. God said, "I am ... I will make you ... I will go with you... I will bring you again ..." Little wonder the Psalmist says the man is blessed indeed who has the God of Jacob for his help (Ps. 146:5).

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46:8-34

The first part of this passage (8-27) simply details the names of the household of Jacob who came to Egypt. Sixty-six travelled (26) and when Jacob, Joseph and Joseph's two sons are added the total of seventy is reached. Their arrival in Egypt would not have been an impressive one because, apart from Joseph and his two sons, they were an unknown, and outwardly an unimpressive company. Who would ever have guessed that in days to come these were the people whose descendants were to bring about the downfall of Egypt and change the course of world history? Perhaps at first the appearance, the strange behaviour and the religious scruples of this people were a cause of amusement in Egypt, but they were accepted for Joseph's sake. It may have been that after the first ceremonial welcome they were largely ignored and this could have been a relief to the whole family who had gone through quite a traumatic experience and needed time to come to terms with their new situation. Everything was done correctly. It had been arranged for Jacob and his family to go to Goshen (45:9-11) and Judah was sent ahead to be the formal escort to bring Joseph (representative of Egypt) to meet Jacob. No doubt there were many other official representatives present. The meeting was emotional (29) and Jacob's words are reminiscent of old Simeon's utterance of faith in Lk. 2:25-32. After all, it is quite an experience when you see before your very eyes the fulfilment of what God has promised and has been working towards for many long years. How we need to learn that we are dealing with God and being dealt with by God right through our *own* story.

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47:1-6

Take note of the closing verses of yesterday's passage (46:31-34) to see how wise Joseph was in the counsel given to his family. They were to emphasise to Pharaoh that they were keepers of livestock, so that he would

agree gladly to their settling and living in Goshen rather than being drawn into the life of the capital city with its dangers. Joseph may well have realised just what a dangerous temptation that would be to the greedy natures of his father and brothers. It may also have been an awareness on Joseph's part that it was vital for his family to keep their identity as a separated people, because after all they were a people laid hold on by God, named by His name, and existing for His service. How wise we need to be in ordering our lives. We must understand what the will of the Lord is (Eph. 5:17) so that we will not place ourselves in positions, in relationships, and under obligations that limit severely our availability for God and obscure our identity as the people of God. Be wise. Faith is not blind and should not go blundering on. Be attentive to God's leading, by whatever means it comes, and He will lead you to the right place (Acts 16:6-10).

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47:7-12

The earlier verses of this chapter show how wisely Jacob's family followed Joseph's advice, and their bearing before Pharaoh (a mighty totalitarian ruler) was all that was expected. "The interview is a good model of straightforward, peaceable dealings between, a pilgrim people and the temporal power. (1 Pet. 2:11-17)" (Kidner) The amazing thing is that when old Jacob was presented in court there was no resentment expressed when the aged Jew blessed the mighty Pharaoh. The Egyptian courtiers might have been astonished, perhaps thinking this was an act of discourtesy. But it was not so. All the Egyptians, Pharaoh included, may have regarded this action of Jacob's as merely a cultural thing on the part of the leader of a new (in Egypt) immigrant community. But for Jacob it was much more. This is yet another occasion in his life when he recognised his true identity as God's man, and rose to full stature. We may feel that Jacob should have been more reticent in view of the many failures and imbalances of his past life. But should we not rather marvel that, in spite of all that had been, here is God's man witnessing a good confession before the powers of the world? Jacob identified himself with his pilgrim fathers before him, and indeed he compared himself unfavourably with them, not claiming to be a giant of faith. It does however seem strange that Jacob spoke only of evil days because, although there had been plenty of them (often as a result of his own folly and stubbornness) there had also been many days of plentiful grace and blessing. It may well have been that Jacob, feeling he was not far from death, was more aware of his failings as a man of God than ever before. But Scripture records twice that Jacob blessed Pharaoh.

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47:7-12

Jacob who was now 130 years old was 70 years old when he had been at Bethel (28:20). "All his spiritual greatness was in the second part of his life, and even that was, in part, spoiled by his stubbornness. His early years were those of a young man who would not learn and could not be taught. Young men be careful! Older men take heart: God can still take up your life, if yielded. Old men look back and ponder what your testimony would be to such as Pharaoh. Each day passes quickly. Make sure its hours are filled with what will last and leave no regrets!" (Quoted from the Daily Notes of Nov. 1970). The last two verses of the passage tell of how God supplied all their need on the scale of the riches of His grace (Phil. 4:19). It is not an empty religious phrase to say, "The Lord will provide," because He does. But His ways vary tremendously. In Jacob's story it was by way of a long story of human wrong and providential over-ruling, in which God's chosen instrument suffered hardship and shame. When Paul spoke of this supplying of need it was through the kind thoughtfulness and practical, sacrificial giving of other Christians. Joseph recognised that his great advancement in political and economic power was given him by God in order to serve God's people and to preserve them for the future. But more often, the provision is by ordinary people in difficult situations through their costly offerings which are given, not on the basis of what they can afford but in sacrificial service to the Lord who bought them (2 Cor. 8:1-7). Indeed Paul says this kind of liberality is the proof of genuine love to the Lord (2 Cor.8:8-9). Read also 2 Cor. 9:6-15. In so many ways we are a blessing to others by the overflow from our own full hearts. A dried up Christian is a sad sight. Joseph's heart must have rejoiced to be able to do so much for those who had treated him so badly.

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47:13-26

This is the account of Joseph's economic policy and, no doubt, each will evaluate it according to his own political philosophy. So long as people had money to spend they had to pay for their food. After that, they had to barter their goods and eventually they had to sell their land and forfeit their independence. It meant in practice that Pharaoh owned the whole of Egypt. We may feel this was unjust but the people said otherwise (25). The fact of the matter is that we are reading the story of how Egypt became the mighty power that soon was to persecute and humiliate the people of Israel (Exodus 1:1-14). The story is by no means finished. This chosen family was still not ready for the future that God had planned for them and for their service. Do not fail to see that at present the Israelites were living and increasing by permission of the world power of Egypt. They had been received graciously because God in His providence had prepared the situation. But they must have been aware of the need to walk very carefully because totalitarian rulers do not hesitate to use their power when they feel threatened. From v.23-24 it seems that the agricultural and economic situation was beginning to return to normal and it is a fact of history that when the tensions and social restraints caused by crisis begin to ease, public and political opinion can change very quickly. But at the same time we must see clearly that it is in the world as it really is that God works out His sovereign designs. It is the Most High God who rules in the kingdoms of men and, without consultation but not without purpose, He gives power to kings and empires so that through them His will may be done. It is only faith that can see this, rest in this, and act upon it (Heb. 11:8, 17, 23-28).

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47:27-31

Thus Israel dwelt in Egypt. Do we see how contemporary the application is? Egypt had the grain (nowadays it is oil that certain countries have) which the world needed, and the world had to pay the price. In Egypt the situation was that the state controlled every aspect of human life. This may not have been too much of a problem so long as a man of faith and integrity like Joseph was in control. But that can change quickly and another man's finger can be on the controlling button. At least it *seems* that men have control but we emphasised yesterday that power belongs to God alone (Ps. 62:11 AV). On one level the children of Israel seem small, insignificant and irrelevant, and that may well be an indication of how far they had slipped spiritually. In our reference to Exodus 1 we stopped at v.14 but the story there goes on to tell of government legislation to control the birth-rate and to exercise a political selection in the matter of which babies were to be allowed to live. Nowadays people interfere with life before it is ever actually born and it is done in the name of human rights. At this stage of the developing story you can imagine both Egyptians and Israelites commenting on the national situation and agreeing that things were getting better with every passing year. But there was much more going on than was immediately obvious, and some of the things that were happening were beginning to have a sinister effect on the Israelites. For seventeen years they dwelt in Egypt and they began increasingly to enjoy Egyptian food and Egyptian life-style, both of which had a spiciness that appealed to the natural carnality of fallen human nature. Yes, the people of God became more and more worldly, and perhaps their lifestyle was scarcely different from that of the Egyptians. Worldliness is a dread disease in the life of the believer and one cause of concern in modern evangelical life is that there is no longer the kind of preaching that calls for separation from the world. Worldliness affects us and dulls our spirits, and it does even more harm to our children after us (cf. Exod. 16:1-3; Num. 11:4-6).

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47:27-31

When we lapse into worldliness we need to be reminded that our days are numbered (Ps. 39:4-5). We need also to be reminded of the story Jesus told about the man who gave all his best effort and time to his career, with considerable success (Lk. 12:13-21). Life does not consist in having things to enjoy. Jacob knew he had not long to go and it is marvellous seeing him rising to his true stature of faith. He asserted his real identity as one

of God's company who live and die by faith (Heb. 11:13, 39-40). He wanted even his funeral to be a testimony to the fact that he was one of God's chosen people and that he would die as he had lived, in the faith of the covenant made by God with his fathers. He affirmed that he was a pilgrim whose home could never be in this world. He made it plain that his thoughts and his heart were on the future, God's future, and not on his own past, with all its fluctuations and failures. After all, why should Jacob or we ourselves want to brood over and be anchored to the past with its miseries if we believe that there is indeed forgiveness with God? If God has forgiven us, we are under obligation to forgive ourselves and to refuse to be held back by even the most painful memories. How can God have pleasure in our company if we are perpetually bowed down and saddened by sins that He has forgiven and forgotten (Jer. 31:34)? The truly spiritual reaction to our failures and sins is to learn through them to draw nearer to God and to walk more closely with Him. This is what God wants. Is it what we want? Jacob bowed on the head of the bed or on his staff. He was at prayer before God. He still had work to do, and he was determined to do it.

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48:1-7

There is always a great deal to learn by the bedside of dying saints because they are too near eternity to be interested in anything but the truth. When a man knows his work is virtually over and he must hand it on to his successor he will speak well and wisely if he is near to God. Read also at this point the counsel of Joshua when he was old (Josh. 23:1-3, 6-14); the challenge of Samuel in similar circumstances when his leadership had really been rejected (1 Sam 12: 1-5); and the sense of spiritual responsibility in Paul's words to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:17-20,27. Go to Paul's dying words in 2 Tim. 4:5-18 and see the realism, free from bitterness, the desire to give young Timothy all the wise advice and guidance he needed for the safe continuance of the work of the Gospel. Jacob, knowing he was near to death, had the same concern for the future and it was with his heart exercised about the future that he allowed himself to look back over his years. His testimony was that the explanation of his whole life was to be found in the Almighty God (El-Shaddai) who appeared to him and spoke to him at Bethel (Luz). Read again the story in Gen.28:10-17. It was indeed a significant crisis in Jacob's experience, even though it took years for the reality of it to be worked out in his life. At long last Jacob saw clearly that the work for which he had been laid hold on by God was infinitely more important than he was. He was still intensely human as the reference to the death of his beloved wife Rachel makes plain. But the future had to be prepared for and provided for, and to that end he formally adopted the two sons of Joseph and gave them prior place over Reuben and Simeon. Jacob knew what he was doing, and that he was doing it by the inspiration and command of God, as tomorrow's passage makes plain.

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48:8-16

The full significance of Jacob's actions here is recorded in Heb.11:21. This was Jacob at the peak of his faith, holding to the promise of God, looking to the future, and yielding gladly to the sovereign will and purpose of God. He may well have been remembering his own youthful stupidity and pride, aided and abetted by his mother, in stealing the birthright from Esau (Gen.27). He was determined that he would not be foolishly stubborn as his own father had been. God's will and God's choice once made known must not be trifled with. The question in v.8 links with the statement in v.10 and must have reminded Jacob of his own father Isaac. The old man knew he was dealing with things belonging to God and, even though Joseph seems not to have noticed, Jacob had already named Ephraim before Manasseh. It may have been that Joseph regarded this as a mere slip of the tongue on the part of his dear old father and he did his best to "arrange" that the blessing should go to the elder of his two sons. But it was not to be. God does the arranging. Even Joseph has to be reminded that the covenant blessings are not secured by natural succession but by the sovereign gift of God. Joseph had proved himself a man of stature and capacity both humanly and spiritually but no man is ever perfect. All have blind spots and areas where their wisdom and discernment fall short. This does not in any way diminish Joseph's stature. He too is mentioned in Heb. 11:22 as a man with the vision of true faith. What we must all do is to give thanks to God for the way in which He does in fact over-rule in the decisions and dispositions of life so that His

people and His work will be led on in His good and perfect will. All things do work for good, even though it may not seem or feel to be so at the time (Rom. 8:28).

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48:8-16

The blessing pronounced by Jacob on Joseph's two sons is a mighty utterance indeed and gives new meaning to the words, "God bless you," which we tend to use with little awareness of their dynamic. Set this "blessing" in the context of our studies in which we have been reminded of the work of God spanning the generations. We have been shown the glory of God's grace overruling hopeless situations and making them vehicles of salvation and purpose. In all of this we have seen God's forbearance and forgiveness, taking people with all their complications of heredity and personality and making them men and women of God. What we must do is to look to the God of Jacob, whom Jacob recognised as the God of his fathers. This is the God of the covenant, the God who cannot lie, who never breaks His word and with whom there is no shadow due to change (Heb. 6:18; Jas. 1:17). This is the God of great faithfulness (Lam. 3:22-23). The thought of past dealings with God steadied Jacob's heart. He went on to speak of the God who had led him all along the way. This is the God who is the shepherd of Israel (Ps. 80:1; Ps. 23); who knows His sheep by name (John 10:1-5, 14); who seeks for the straying one to bring it back (Matt. 18:12-13), and who carries the lambs with exquisite tenderness (Isa. 40:10-11). But Jacob's God is also the redeeming God, the One who interferes in human situations to work deliverance and to reclaim for God and for His service lives that could well have been wasted (Ps 103:1-5). Read Isa. 63:7-9; Exod. 14:19-20; 33:12-15. It is this God of Jacob we want to bless our children and our children's children after them. It may be that all of God's dealings with us are designed to make us the kind of people who can bless our children in God's name.

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48:17-22

We are dealing here with three generations and their ages are approximately 145, 56 and 20. Those who want to check the figures can consult Gen. 37:2; 41:46,50; 45:6; 47:28. The two young men would have been very aware of all that was being done but the focus is not on them, nor on their possible reactions to their promotion or demotion, but on Joseph. We see in him the same spiritual overconfidence that marred his life when he was young. He was too sure of his own assessment of the will of God and at the very moment of significant blessing he tried to interfere. It may have been that Joseph had been so accustomed, for so many years as Prime Minister of Egypt, to giving orders that were never questioned that he just assumed he knew best. But Jacob did not allow interference, and he gently but firmly checked his son. No longer did Jacob give unquestioning preference to this son whom he had loved too much and to whom he now owed so much. Jacob was now fixed on God. But at the same time he recognised that the burden of leadership now fell to Joseph (21), and he encouraged his son. The words, "Behold, I am about to die, but God..." remind us of the words in Joshua 1:1-2. No man is indispensable and no man should try to hold on when the time comes to hand over the work to God's next man. But it is vitally important that those whose work is nearly over should encourage the next generation by seeking to anchor them in God, whose purposes go on to their fulfillment in spite of men or devils. All of us, of course, are working for the future and it may be that the real test of our "success" (whatever that may mean) is in what stands and lasts after we are gone. Peter spoke of how the prophets spoke and worked far beyond anything they were aware of (1 Pet. 1:10-12) and affirmed his own intention to guarantee, as far as possible that his basic ministry would not be forgotten (2 Pet. 1:12-15). Over against all our weaknesses, failures and fears we must place Jacob's words, "BUT GOD".

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49:1-7

Jacob's dying words outline prophetically what the future of his sons would be: a future that would be the fruit of the character already formed in them. What we *are* determines the nature and quality of what we do. As a man thinks so is he (Prov. 23:7 AV). What is in a man comes out (Matt. 7:16-18; 15:15-20). Jacob had observed

his sons carefully and shrewdly, and he knew that people would be true to their character and would be seen for what they were when crisis and stress came. This is why it is so important to make full use of all the opportunities given to us to learn and to grow in grace when circumstances are reasonably good (2 Pet. 1:3-11). Of course in studying these "prophecies" about Jacob's sons we must be careful in applying the lessons to ourselves. There is nothing fatalistic about God's dealings with us. Nothing in the past or the present need necessarily keep us back from going on into God's future, even though we may have to live with some of the complications we have introduced into our human situation. But God is greater than all we are and have done, and His grace can triumph gloriously. When God on one occasion promised to restore the years that the locusts had eaten He was saying that the future would be as if there had been no locusts at all (Joel 2:24-26 AV). Now think of Reuben described in v.3 in terms of his opportunity and capacity, and then in v.4 in terms of how he forfeited it all because of one obsessive action of evil passion (35:22). The flaw in this man's make-up was that he had become unstable, lawless, impetuous and, like water, could easily become an uncontrollable torrent. He was essentially a man of impulse, and therefore quite unpredictable and indecisive. Think of Reuben's "deep meditations" in Judges 5:15-16. But he never got round to doing anything. But lest we be desolated, remember that water can be harnessed and channeled and made mightily powerful in service.

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49:1-7

Remember that all the sons of Jacob were listening to their father's words. The story of Reuben calls us to consider, especially if we are young, whether we are wasting our potential for life and for God by refusing to allow our personalities to be brought under the good yoke of God (Matt. 11:28-30). The story of Simeon and Levi tells again how the past, possibly forgotten, can determine the future in terms of service. Jacob counselled others to be very wary of getting too involved with them. In Rom. 16:17 we find Paul giving the same kind of warning, and the apostle of love does the same (2 John 9-11). The story of Simeon and Levi's fierce vendetta is told in chapter 34, and Jacob made plain that their anger took possession of them and robbed them of sense, balance and compassion. The tribe of Simeon was reduced from 59,000 in Numbers 1:23 to only 22,000 in Num. 26:14. Levi, though no different from Simeon, had a different experience. It may well have been that Jacob's rebuke cut deep into Levi's heart and began a process of godly sorrow which led to repentance (2 Cor. 7:10) because in due time there was restoration for the Levites. In Exodus 32:25-29, in the context of the story of the golden calf; at a time of great crisis for the whole people of Israel, the Levites heard the challenge and took their stand publicly on the Lord's side. Of course, the Levites were still scattered throughout the tribes of Israel in Canaan and they had no territory of their own. But God's judgment was mixed with amazing grace and mercy because the Levites were given holy service to perform. It was true of them as of so many others that they were drawn out of a fearful pit of their own making, set on a rock and given a new song and a new service (Ps. 40:1-3).

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49:8-12

This is a glorious prediction about a future of leadership, together with an element of prediction of someone coming to whom the sceptre of God rightly belongs. Taking v.9 and 10 together we cannot but think of the Lion of the tribe of Judah (Rev. 5:5-6) and of His sceptre stretched out over the nations and their generations. This is a picture of wonderful assurance because it makes us think of Jesus as king, who exercises that office by "subduing us to Himself, in ruling and defending us, and in restraining and conquering all his and our enemies." (Shorter Catechism) In v.11-12 we have words that signify the sheer abundance of the blessing of the kingdom of this descendant of Judah. All this is more important than we realise, because in our day we too should be looking for the coming of the promised King, and this is what we tend to lose sight of. This is why we so often get hemmed in by mere circumstances, and we need to lift up our heads and eyes because the kingdom is coming near (Luke 21:28). But one more lesson remains in the blessing of Judah. In the earlier story (Gen. 37) Judah seems to have sinned the same kind of sin as Reuben with the same grim aspects of the defilement of human relationships. Why was Judah dealt with differently from Reuben? Perhaps the answer is that Reuben's

sin was a true and deliberate expression of the kind of man he was, whereas Judah's sin was a ghastly disaster and a contradiction of all that he truly was by nature and by grace. Some people are bad by choice, and some get involved in badness because for a season, as a result of many influences, they have drifted away from God. How we need Jesus' counsel to watch and pray so that we do not enter into temptation (Matt. 26:41). We need also to remember and to use God's promised way of escape (1 Cor. 10:11-13). There is no point in praying not to be led into temptation if we go barging blindly into situations where we are bound to be tempted.

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49:13-18

Zebulun was to have a place and life of opportunity and affluence, and that has its dangers. It seems from Deut. 33:9 that prosperous trade was to be the pattern of life, and not many can cope with abundance. Paul learned how to cope through the hard disciplines of his life (Phil. 4:11-13) but no doubt all of us need the prayer of Prov. 30:8-9. The description of Issachar suggests he was un-refined and coarse and perhaps lazy. He was strong and able, and yet always eager to take the easy way of comfort rather than the demanding way of duty. Issachar was willing to lose his liberty and even pay tribute by way of work rather than lose the enjoyment of the present situation. Such is the attitude of those who say, "I know I should, but I can't be bothered." The first verse to describe Dan (16) indicates calling and possibility but this gives place immediately to a way of life and activity that is far from admirable (17). Dan's calling was to judge, vindicate and deliver, and in due time Samson emerged from the tribe of Dan. But as a tribe they chose the way of deceit and double-dealing. Judges 18 (a long story) is an example of their serpent-like, behind-the-scenes way of operating. Being secretive is seldom if ever a good sign. It is interesting to note that in Rev.7:4-8 there is no mention of Dan. Some suggest that antichrist would emerge from the tribe of Dan. Whether it was such thoughts as these or a recollection of his own past duplicity that evoked Jacob's cry in v.18 we cannot tell. It seems that everything was now making Jacob look to God. That can do nothing but good.

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49:19-21, 27

Here are four sons and their tribes who get but a single verse each while others get a considerable passage. Does this devalue them in comparison to others? We must be very careful before passing judgment on any because we know only part of the story (1 Cor. 4:1-5; 13:9, 12). And we must always remember the significant teaching of 1 Cor.12:20-22 to the effect that the least honourable are *necessary* for the true functioning of the whole body. We must also remember that in the providence of God some are called and appointed to more obvious and more distinguished service than others. But, while this is privilege it is also great responsibility. Much is expected from those to whom much is given (Luke. 12:48). Gad was to have a turbulent life of fighting, but he would fight and would not be overcome. Asher, on the other hand, would be rich in produce and in such blessing would be a blessing to others. Of course, a life that is made a blessing to others can be demanding and draining. But read Deut. 33:24-25 and the promise there which is glorious. The counsel to all who feel life is a case of giving all the time is, "Stay at the fountainhead, and you will never run dry." Naphtali would be a free mountain people; active and zealous, and they would breed truly and keep their character. Barak, whose name is linked with Deborah in Judges 4-5, was from Naphtali. Benjamin was to be warlike, a people with capacity and drive. From this tribe came Saul, King of Israel and also Saul, who became Paul, the mighty missionary apostle. It is interesting to note that in Deut. 33:12 Benjamin is spoken of in a very tender way. The stern words of Jacob are however borne out in the story of Benjamin in the Book of Judges. When we think of our own story being written are we not aware of how much we need the saving, keeping grace of God to counteract the natural, destructive potential of our human nature.

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49:22-26

The first verse speaks of the fruitfulness of Joseph and the picture is of a tree sending its roots down to life-giving water and, in proportion as the roots go down, so the tree bears fruit (Isa. 37: 31-32). Depth of spiritual

character and range of influence and blessing go together. But none of this comes about without cost, and Jacob looks back to Joseph's earlier days that were so marked by suffering and dishonour (23-24a). It had been warfare, and it is rightly described as such, because being a man on whom God's hand rested significantly Joseph was the target for the fiery arrows of the evil one. Think back over the story we have studied and see how again and again he was assaulted by the Devil. There was no let up, and the battle went on right to the end. Think of the significance of the comment at the end of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness (Luke 4:13). The Devil gave intimation that he would be back with further assaults, and the voice and influence of the Devil can be traced right through the life of our Lord. Joseph; like Jesus, remained unmoved. This is one of the most impressive aspects of Joseph's life. No matter his circumstances he remained constant, first when everything was against him and then when everything was in his favour and his faith had been vindicated. He was indeed a man separated from his brothers, not in the sense of being sold by them, but rather in the sense of being singled out by God and set apart for holy service. To be chosen for service is privilege indeed (Eph. 3:7-8). But it can very often lead to a particular kind of loneliness because it involves leadership. Pray for all who lead.

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49:22-26

We must take one more day with this passage in order to consider the comprehensive description of the God who strengthened and enabled Joseph, giving him an ability and pliability that were needed for his life's work. God is the Mighty One of Jacob, the champion of His cause, who makes it His business to deal with the principalities and powers that wage war against His people. Joseph's God is the shepherd who leads, feeds and guards the flock, for the simple reason that it is precious to Him. He is also the Rock, the foundation and the head of the corner (Ps. 18:2, 31-32; Isa. 28:16). Paul speaks in 1 Cor.10:4 of the Rock that followed Israel. Jacob goes on to address Joseph, speaking of "the God of your father" and that is a wonderful way for any father to speak to his son. It is as if Jacob was saying that the God who helped him would help Joseph. He was also reminding Joseph that he was not the first in the line nor the last, but one of the succession of those chosen by God in sovereign grace to do His will and to be blessed in the doing of it. Finally Jacob spoke of God Almighty, the El Shaddai God, the all sufficient God whose desire it is to bless His people exceeding abundantly above all they can ask or think (Eph. 3:20). Such references to the God of our salvation should bring to mind such Scriptures as Isa. 40: 21-22, 27-31 and Deut. 33:26-27, and such hymns and Psalms of praise as, "The God of Abraham praise," and Psalm 100, "All people that on earth do dwell, sing to the Lord with cheerful voice." The paraphrase of that Psalm ends,

"Wide as the world is Thy command,
Vast as eternity Thy love;
Firm as a rock Thy truth must stand.
When rolling years have ceased to move."

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49:28-50:3

Look back to 47:29-30 to sense again the calm composure with which Jacob faced the fact that his life was well nigh over. Compare this with reference to David in Acts 13: 36. It is a beautiful picture of a man falling asleep when his work is finished. Think also of Paul in 2 Tim. 4:6-8 where the word "departure" has some reference to a ship casting off its moorings to go on the tide. Abraham had also been referred to as being "gathered to his people." Although the context here seems to be that of a burial place, it seems certain that Jacob had at least some thoughts of a continued existence even though the idea of resurrection may not have been clearly formulated. Without doubt a man who had dealt with angels and had seen the ladder between earth and heaven believed that there was a world beyond this world and that it was real. Certainly we who live in the full light and truth of the Gospel must believe with glorious assurance in the reality of the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. Indeed, if in this life only we have hope in Christ we are to be pitied (1 Cor.15:19). Having charged his sons and blessed them each one with an appropriate blessing, and having made arrangements for his funeral so that his very burial place would be a symbol of his share in the family of God, Jacob lay down and

died. Joseph was totally human in his sorrow and, even though he may have been well aware of all his father's failings and failures, he honoured him before the court of Pharaoh. There was official mourning for Jacob for seventy days, and that is believed to be only two days shorter than the official mourners period for a Pharaoh. So ended the life of Jacob.

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50:4-14

It was Joseph who made and carried out all the arrangements for the burial of his father. It was both natural and necessary for this to be done by him because Pharaoh's permission was needed for the journey to Canaan. The fact that Joseph was in charge also guaranteed the return of the whole family to Egypt. The presence of a large company of official Egyptian mourners at the funeral also helped to guarantee the return, even though they were present as a genuine token of Pharaoh's sharing with Joseph his very real sorrow. Note also (8) that the children and the flocks were left in Goshen and that was yet another guarantee that all the brothers would return to Egypt, even though there was now no famine to put pressure on them. In all these details we see yet again evidences of God's over-ruling providence. By His own careful methods He shepherds His people into the place where they need to be for the sake of their future. It may well have been that Joseph had influenced his brothers regarding the need for them to return to Egypt and it is likely that Joseph was aware that his brothers still had a significant lack of trust in him. Be that as it may, all the arrangements were made and carried through without complications. Then Joseph returned to Egypt where he would continue to render to Pharaoh the things that were Pharaoh's, but would give to God what was His by right, the first love and loyalty of his heart and life.

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50:4-14

Since death and bereavement are things we all must face eventually, we do well to think about it while we are reasonably detached from the actual experience. For the believer there is both comfort and hope. Jesus' words at Lazarus' grave give the ground on which we stand (John 11:25-26). His words in John 14:1-3, 27 were spoken to comfort and reassure His disciples. Paul's great cry of victory in 1 Cor.15: 55-57 has eased the grief of many a heart by the side of an open grave, and has proved then and afterwards that indeed we do not sorrow as those who have no hope (1 Thess. 4:13-18). Our God is the One who wipes away the tears from our eyes (Rev.7:17). It is a pity that we do not talk more openly about such matters. If we did, Heaven would be more real to us, the world to come more near, and we would live in a different kind of way. But what of loved ones who, so far as we know, are not believers, not "in Christ"? We should be much in prayer for them and seeking by the whole tenor of our lives to point them to the Saviour. Of course, only God by His Spirit can convict and convert them, and for this we must pray in faith, encouraged to recognise by our own conversion that the grace of God has broken into the family unit. Remember too that old people do not find it easy to change nor to speak of the things of eternity. And there may be faith deep down, brought into being by some Gospel influence many many years previously but overlaid by the malicious activities and entanglements of the devil. What hope of spiritual growth could there have been if people had no church to go to but one that was empty of grace, and was barren with lifeless formal religion. Look to God and pray for salvation for young and old alike. The old may not have long to go.

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50:15-21

When you consider how much Joseph had done for his brothers and how generously gracious he had been, it must have hurt him deeply to be aware of their continuing lack of trust. How could they possibly think he would want to hurt them? They must have thought Joseph was like themselves! Of course irrational fear like this is usually the work of the Devil, because fear, more than anything else, introduces confusion and tension into a situation. Joseph's grief was only increased by the fabricated speech in v.16-17. How little these men knew about forgiveness. Had they learned anything at all under God's discipline over the years? The truth and grace of Joseph's reply are wonderful to read (20-21). There is marvellous and mature faith in the three aspects of

what he said. "To leave all the righting of one's wrongs to God (19 cf. Rom. 12:19; 1 Thess. 5:15; 1 Pet. 4:19); to see His providence in man's malice (20, cf. 45:5); and to repay evil not only with forgiveness but also with practical affection (21; cf. Luke 6:27ff.), are attitudes which anticipate the adjective 'Christian' and even 'Christlike'." (Kidner) It is certainly not easy to face up to and to speak of the wrongs that have been done to you personally without being hard and bitter. But if we can at the same time recognise that, in and through all the wrongs that others do and that we ourselves do, God is able to work His gracious purposes in us, for us and through us then our attitude will be changed. Our capacity to cope and to forgive and to help will be increased immeasurably. What a comfort it is to realise that in all the business of life we are in the school of discipleship and that our teacher is God Himself.

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50:22-26

Almost reluctantly we come to the end of Joseph's story, at least part of his story that has to do with this temporary world. This man, who had such a disastrous start which seemed to bring his usefulness to God to an abrupt end, lived to the fullness of days and saw his children's children. We are not told anything about the last spell of his life and indeed he seems to fade from the picture. This is not surprising because the stage is already set for the next phase of the story of redemption as recorded in Exodus. But time had to pass before that was set in motion. No doubt it was what we would call an ordinary spell with little or no excitement because with the famine past everything would return to normal. Perhaps things were so normal that the family of Jacob would gradually become accustomed to their worldly life in Egypt and forget that they were a people called to significant destiny. How easy it is to forget the spiritual dimension of life. How dangerous it is! That gives great importance to Joseph's dying words to the gathered representatives of his brothers and their families. He sought to fix their thoughts, hearts and expectations on God and on the promise of God. He pointed them to the future, and in the instructions about his bones he was bearing testimony to Egypt and to his family that his faith and trust were in God (Heb.11:22). What Joseph said that day was remembered, as Ex. 13:19 and Joshua 24:32 make plain. We end with Joseph's great affirmation of faith: God will visit you. We must see to it that we are ready for Him in the day of His power (Ps. 110:3 AV). All sorts of experiences may well overtake us but this much we have learned from our long story. There is nothing in all creation that has the power to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:31-39). On this basis we go on to do His will.

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26:1-5

Certain elements in the story of Isaac, which are apt to be overlooked, are brought to our attention. The reference to Abraham in v.1 distinguishes the earlier famine from the one beginning to put pressure on Isaac's circumstances. We have already noted Isaac's love of good food. There are further references to Abraham in v.5, 15, 18 and they remind us that Isaac was born into and grew up in the context of a spiritual work already established. In spiritual terms that can be a blessing but it can also cause a spirit of complacency which ignores both the privilege and responsibility such a situation brings. In terms of church life, those who had to fight to establish a ministry of the Word and prayer tend to have a different attitude to work and to loyalty from those who come into the work later. There is always the temptation to enjoy the blessings rather than to work for the future. Against this background we must see the famine, which no doubt would be explained in terms of climate and rainfall, as being one of God's methods to awaken the whole family of Isaac to their need to get their lives right with God. God was meeting with His servant Isaac and speaking to him in and through circumstances of adversity. God would rather speak in tenderness but if His people are insensitive and are not listening then He must speak more loudly. We all know from our own experience that adversity, difficulty and disappointment all make us draw nearer to God and make us pray more earnestly. Consider Ps. 119:67; Rom. 5:3-4; Jas. 1:2-4. It is love that rebukes and chastises, the love of the God who knows best what is for the good of His children and the usefulness of His servants. Of course, as the story of the Prodigal Son makes plain, love sometimes has to allow the loved one to stray for a long, long time until the grace of repentance is awakened.

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26:1-5

It is difficult to tell if this incident followed soon after the story in the previous chapter or if it refers to an earlier stage in Isaac's life. It is also hard to tell whether Isaac was moving in the general direction of Egypt (where there was food) or whether he was moving away from Egypt towards Philistine territory. What is important is that in Isaac's immediate circumstances God appeared to him, spoke to him, guided him, and reaffirmed His promises regarding both the present and the future. In terms of guidance we generally ask God to make plain what we should do but, as in this story, we need to be told what not to do, where we should not go, and in what company we should remain. These verses give a great picture of God being right there in Isaac's actual situation, standing guard over His servant when the pressures were assailing him at his most vulnerable point. The thought of deprivation, the loss of human comforts and the consequent disturbance of his comfortable way of life were not easy for Isaac to cope with. Read the passage carefully and see that God encouraged His servant by urging him to look to his God, and to God's promises and faithfulness, rather than at the circumstances surrounding him and his reactions to them. Mark clearly the repetition of "I will". Isaac was made to look back to the faith of Abraham, and to take that as his example and encouragement. The obedience of faith is the way to cope with and to handle life in all its various stages. Perhaps God was urging Isaac to look back to his own faith and trust when he willingly yielded to God's mysterious command on Mount Moriah.

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26:6-11

Look back to v.5 and do not fail to see the significance of the word "because". It indicates that Isaac in his generation was experiencing the blessing of God because of the faith and obedience of those who had gone before. We should always remember and give thanks to God for those who prayed for us in faith when we were neither willing nor able to pray for ourselves. We should also remember when we are experiencing God's blessing on our own Christian service that we may be reaping the fruit of those who laboured hard and at great cost before us, perhaps seeing little clear fruit for their labours (John 4:37-38). Now look at v.6. Isaac responded to God's guidance in faith. He stayed where he was, because God had said not to go any further. But almost at once Isaac's faith was assailed by and mixed with fear, and these two are always in conflict. There are times, of course, when there is real danger and in these situations God's word is always, "Fear not". That is a command, not just pious advice. Let not your heart be troubled, because you believe in God: the God who is there and who is active and who, in all things, is busy furthering His good purposes for our lives. But Isaac gave way to fear, just as many more of God's servants in Scripture have done. We must see in this a specific work of Satan, even though Satan is not mentioned. The great enemy of our lives and service does not go in for advance publicity but works with great subtlety and persistence. The Devil does not necessarily tempt to great moral wrong, possibly knowing we would recognise the wrongness and resist the temptation. The enemy's devices are subtle and therefore dangerous. We think more of this tomorrow.

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26:6-11

"O what a tangled web we weave, when first we practise to deceive". (Scott) A complicated minister (not in any sense an evangelical) who had created all sorts of terrible problems for himself and others said, "I have stopped telling lies, because I forget what lies I have already told". In many different situations we need to be recalled to the Ten Commandments and the injunction, "You shall not bear false witness." Note that Isaac's deception of Abimelech lasted a long time (8), during which his behaviour in public had to be very different from that in private. Of course, God sees and knows, because nothing is hid from Him (Heb. 4:12,-13). In due time Isaac's sin (and duplicity is sin) found him out (Num.32:23). This exposing of Isaac could be regarded as unfortunate or accidental, but it could also be that in the interest of Isaac's own spiritual safety and of the future of God's work that God simply exposed the man in such a way that his wrong-doing became public. Abimelech, a man who could not be thought of in any way as a believer, administered a firm but gracious rebuke to the man of God,

making plain that Isaac's wrong life could have caused serious spiritual and moral damage to other people. Think of how in our own day, not least in the realm of sport, prominent and famous people are charged with bringing the game into disrepute. This man of God brought the name of God and the testimony of the work of God into disrepute and possibly caused a shadow to fall on the work for some time to come. We are not told of Isaac's reaction to the rebuke but certainly he was made to recognise that his fears, and his doubt of God's willingness and capacity to keep him safe, had been quite unfounded.

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26:12-16

It is interesting to note that Abimelech did not require Isaac to leave his territory and that may indicate that there was some grace in the king's heart. He recognised the sin and failure of the man of God but he did not take an attitude of condemnation in the way that some Christians condemn other Christians, sometimes on the basis of rumour rather than fact. We need to guard against an unforgiving spirit, especially in view of the searching words of the Lord Jesus Christ (Matt. 6:14-15; 18:23-35). We must assume that some real degree of repentance was in Isaac's heart because, true to His promise in v.3-4, God blessed His servant. As a man of God and a servant of God, Isaac was not "finished" even though he had signally fallen from grace. Perhaps some of his own household regarded Isaac as a failure and may have despised him. But our failures are not an insuperable barrier to God. If our hearts condemn us, God is greater than our hearts (1 John 3:20). Where sin abounded grace much more abounded (Rom. 5:20 AV). Think how God has declared His willingness to heal the backslidings of His people (Hos. 14:4 AV) and so to restore them that it will be as if the wasted years of the locust had not happened (Joel 2:25). Why are we so unwilling to give the sinning believer another chance? Why do we not encourage and help the wanderer back to the narrow way? Are we like those who pass by on the other side and leave the battered traveller to his fate (Lk. 10:29-37)? It is quite thrilling to read here how richly God blessed His penitent, restored servant. What a God we have! But remember: there is an enemy.

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26:12-16

Isaac prospered in human terms because of God's blessing and he became very rich. Now, there is nothing wrong in being rich, especially if it is the result of labour as we live and work in God's good will. But there is a danger. Worldly prosperity can have a devastating effect on the essential pilgrim spirit of authentic Christian life. Riches can create greed rather than contentment and spiritual life is affected because of the necessary preoccupation with worldly business. Consider Luke 12:13-21; 1 Tim. 6:8-10; Heb. 13:5-6; Prov. 30:7-9. It is so easy to be anchored to this world, its ways, its demands and its distractions. It seems that Isaac, who was always susceptible to human comfort, was beginning to settle down as a business farmer and to forget his high and holy calling to be the means of blessing to others. He would have been aware of the stopping up of the wells which Abraham had dug but they were out in the wilderness and he was comfortable and provided for in the city. But then public opinion began to turn against him because of his prosperity and soon he was being sent on his way by the same Abimelech who had been so gracious and forgiving towards him when his behaviour had been despicable. There are two lessons here. The first is that we must see God's methods in getting Isaac on his way as a pilgrim, teaching him to live by faith. The other lesson is that we should see here, as in the story of Gadara in Mark 5:14-17, how some people, when they see clear evidences of God's power and grace unto salvation, life and blessing, not only have no desire to seek after God for themselves, but actually ask God to leave them and their territory. Perhaps another lesson is to see how persistently, patiently and accurately God watched over, led, guided and encouraged His uncertain servant.

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26:17-22

The story tells of the continuing efforts of the Philistines to hassle Isaac, trying to prevent him from becoming stronger. It would not have been easy for Isaac but these "trials" are the very things that make us all look to God. Read Psalm 119:67 and James 1:2-4 (in J B Phillips' translation if possible). Isaac knew the past history of

God's dealings with his father and dug again the wells of Abraham which had been filled up with debris by the Philistines. There is a parable here of what has to be done in many a congregation where the spiritual life and witness of the church have been blocked by years of worldliness. In an age where there is an increasing demand for evangelical novelty, (anything that is new to kindle interest is grasped), it is a good thing to look to the past, to days when God's power was known in the land, and to ask and to seek for the old paths (Jer. 6.16). Some "methods" have been proved to have lasting fruit and others proved to be shallow and ineffective. In following the pattern of the mighty man of God who had carved out the way, Isaac was doing right (Heb. 13:7). Of course Isaac met opposition (20) and it seems that again and again Isaac gave ground, yielded what he had worked for, and moved on to start again. Was this Isaac's natural disposition to take the easy way out of a situation rather than standing his ground? Or was this faith operating in the sense of trusting that God would provide and bring a peaceful solution through what seems to have been compromise? Evangelical Christians tend to abhor "compromise" but we must learn to recognise the difference between what is desirable and what is possible at any given stage of the on-going work of God. Of course, to do this, we need to maintain a close walk with God.

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26:23-33

Keep in mind that Isaac was neither a pioneer nor a fighter but essentially a consolidator. That is not a criticism but simply a recognition of facts. We are all different and we create problems for ourselves and others when we try to copy others and to be what we cannot be and were not meant to be. God takes us as we are, with our capacities and limitations, and uses us in our lives in the places He sets us, to do the work allocated to us. We have the privilege and responsibility of being servants and must always acknowledge that apart from God we can do nothing (John 15:1-5; 1 Cor. 3:4-9). Of course, God is always working with us to fashion us and make us ever more useful and more pleasing in His sight (Jer. 18:1-4). That is evident in the life of Isaac, although we shall soon see the sad side of the story, a story that highlights the meaning of Paul's words about receiving the grace of God in vain (2 Cor. 6:1). In today's passage (23-25) we see one of the great gleams of spiritual response and calibre in Isaac. We see also the amazing grace of God because, just at the right time, when assurance and encouragement were needed, God appeared to Isaac and spoke to him wonderful words. Isaac was assured that the God of Abraham was his God too. And He is our God, the faithful, covenant-keeping God. We need to let our hearts thrill to God's words: "Fear not. I am with you. I will bless you." God means what he says and He is always in the process of carrying out what He has promised. Isaac's awareness of God and his response to God were expressed in his building an altar and his calling on the name of his God. Here is a man who sees and knows that his God is good; that God is love; that God is a God to be worshipped, trusted, adored and served. Think well. Are our hearts towards God? Are our lives surrendered.

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26:23-33

Note how the spiritual emphasis of this passage is set firmly in the context of the on-going activities of ordinary practical work-a-day life. In v.25 and again in v.32 there is the emphasis on the necessary activity of digging wells. This is important, because there is a spurious kind of spirituality that neglects and even ignores the practical things that have to be done to make the life of a home, and the life of a congregation, both effective and bearable. There is a time to pray and a time to work; a time to read the Bible and a time to look after the family; a time to pray for people and a time to speak to them, to visit them, and to help them with inglorious work. Read Micah 6:6-8; Jas. 1:22-27. Whatever Isaac's reaction was when Abimelech and his deputation arrived, the story tells how wisely he handled the situation. His words were plain but restrained and his soft answer was fully effective (Prov. 14:35; 17:27). Isaac's question in v.27 was plain and justified and was spoken with some courage. Abimelech's answer in v.28 was factual and a recognition of spiritual truth, but the claim in v.29 may have been spoken with tongue in cheek. Isaac certainly took the higher ground, accepted the Philistines at their word, and treated them with courtesy. They signed a treaty of peaceful co-existence and Isaac sent them on their way. That was far better than a confrontation, because some confrontations, even though the battle is won, are not productive. We may feel satisfied that we won, but must ask if in the long term the work

of God was advanced. We need wisdom from above. We also need the grace to acknowledge that sometimes we have been wrong.

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26:34-27:4

The brief but vivid summary of Esau's attitude to life and to his parents is the light that exposes the folly, stubbornness and spiritual confusion of Isaac, especially in relation to the work and purposes of God. No matter how much Isaac was attracted to Esau's strong, physical personality, he must have recognised in his son's deliberate choice of pagan women as his wives, that Esau had little interest in the spiritual issues and standards of life. This has already been made plain in the story in 25:29-34 where it is made totally clear that Esau despised, set little or no value on, the spiritual possibility and potential of his life. For him, a healthy body was paramount, not least in terms of interesting and stimulating activity. Read and ponder 1 Tim. 4:7b-9. Many people have great concern about their bodies, their diet and health but give little attention to the health and well-being of their souls. Of course, when we live in that way the truth about us will become evident when the time comes for us to die, and we know that time has come. Isaac was aware that he did not have very long to live and we are told his eyes were dim. His spiritual vision was defective as well as his human eyesight and, although he was on the edge of eternity, there was very little sign of spiritual awareness, nor of the fact that all of us must in due time give account to God of the stewardship of our lives. This is a subject greatly neglected. Read God's summary of one man's life in Dan. 5:23b. Read another man's sad confession, sad because he had no time or opportunity to remedy things (1 Sam. 26:21). Read also Rom. 14:10-12; 1 Cor. 3:10-15; 2 Cor. 5:6-10; 1 Cor. 4:2. Remember, our lives are not our own. We have been brought with a price (1 Cor. 6:19-20).

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26:34-27:4

Consider how different this whole incident might have been if Isaac, aware that he was soon to die, and aware that there was such a thing as God's blessing to be given, had first dealt with the spiritual issue and then moved on to a celebratory meal. There is nothing wrong with enjoying food and nothing wrong with a healthy, active, sporting life. But it is a matter of setting priorities. That is where so many go wrong and, when priorities are wrongly set when people are young, the pattern of life becomes established so that change in later life is, if not impossible, then accomplished only with great cost and stern personal discipline. Eccles. 12:1 is wise counsel, as are the words of Prov. 22:6. Such verses should cause us to pray more than we do for the whole system of education in our schools, because children are sometimes being indoctrinated in unbelief, lawlessness and self-will even in Primary Schools. It is not the government, nor the education system that must provide the answer, but parents and churches. The teaching of God's Word and the example of the lives of Christians are the creative influences backed, of course, by prayer. And we must pray in faith not fear. Isaac may have been vague about many things but he was clear and determined that Esau would carry the blessing into the future. We are not sure if Isaac knew of the incident of the selling of the birthright. Esau certainly kept quiet about it at this time. We assume Isaac knew of God's affirmation that Jacob would carry the blessing. It seems likely Rebekah would have told her husband about it, and perhaps also about the trading of the birthright. If Rebekah did so, because of the unhappy atmosphere of the marriage, it seems to have made Isaac even more determined that his favourite would be the one to be blessed. That seems to be clear in v.29. How sad it is when our reaction to, and our liking for, people influences our spiritual decisions and we refuse to see or to bow to God's will.

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27:5-17

Rebekah was a very strong-willed woman who was determined to run the lives of other members of the family. She had no thought of being in submission to her husband as head of the family. Of course, true "headship" calls for spiritual character and grace and a very high standard of love as Eph. 5:21-25 makes plain. Isaac seems to have been determined to keep his plan secret from his wife, but his wife was an expert at spying on her husband and this may not have been the first time that she had anticipated and countermanded a plan of her

husband's. There is little sign here of husband and wife being heirs *together* of the grace of life. When relationships are being formed we need to ask, "How much have we in common in our aims, capacities and desires in relation to God's will?" Sometimes people have great potential to be good friends but do not have the personality or capacity to be husband and wife. Think how sad it must be for two Christians to look back on their life together and have to confess that they have not been "helpmeets"; they have not enabled and encouraged each other to be all they could have been for God and for service. Note in the story that there is no indication that Rebekah thought of speaking to her husband about this very important matter in relation to the will and work of God. Communication is so important in relationships. Of course, if Rebekah had broached the subject in a way that was challenge, rebuke, accusation or denunciation, it would simply have confirmed Isaac in his determination. On so many occasions it is vital that our speech should be with grace, seasoned with salt (Col. 4.6). There is so much here for us to learn, not least to curb our natural wilfulness.

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27:5-17

Rebekah was not an easy person to live with. She felt it was her right, even her duty, to be in charge. We cannot but feel sorry for Jacob as his mother ordered him around. Rebekah was so sure about her objectives (God had told her Jacob would be the one to receive the blessing) and about her methods that she did not seem to realise she was taking the place of God and administering His affairs. Did she think that God was unable to bring about His will, simply because a stubborn old man was trying to thwart it? Rebekah was making the mistake many of us make far too often. She was over influenced by appearances and circumstances and, as a result, fear displaced faith. Believing that Jacob had been promised the significant place in the future development of God's covenant promise, she saw herself as working for God. But she was doing so on a carnal, fleshly level that involved cunning, deceit, manipulation and lying, and that is not the way to do God's will. God is light, and everything to do with His will and work should be able to bear the scrutiny of light (I John 1:5-7). At first Jacob was hesitant about his mother's scheme but his concern seems to have had more to do with being found out rather than with the wrongness of the plan. But when his mother said, "Trust me," he went along with her and submitted to the whole scheme of deception. When we come to v.19 we find Jacob acting out the part with great confidence. Neither father, mother or son is to be admired, but they all in due time had to live with the consequences of their own actions. All of us do well to consider very carefully the influences we exert on other people. It is a terrible thing to live with the thought that we led someone away from God's way of faith and obedience.

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27:18-29

In his commentary, Derek Kidner observes that "These rival stratagems only succeed in doing 'whatsoever (God's) hand . . . and counsel fore ordained' (Acts 4:28)." We do well to ponder more often than we do the sure and sovereign providence of God. In and through all the machinations of men, women and devils, God works His will and furthers His work. This is fact, whether or not it seems to be so, and whether or not we believe it to be so. Today's story is full of lies. The old man was suspicious but his spiritual hesitation was overcome by the enticing smell of the savoury meat prepared. We should be slow to criticise, because we are often swayed against our better judgment by people's flattering words and by our own human preferences. It is so easy to be taken in when people speak spiritual words with apparent confidence and sincerity. Rebekah's scheme was "successful" but it was not really needed, because God had already "ordained" Jacob in terms of both blessing and future service. We must learn from this story that "string pulling", or getting people "to put in a word for us", in terms of some object or application are not really needed if our desire is to yield to God's good, perfect and acceptable will for our lives (Rom. 12:1-2). Isaac's words in v.27-29 were gloriously spiritual, the words of a man who says he delights in his God and who sees the blessing of God as the source of fruitfulness in life and service. Isaac knew all the right "doctrines" but the tragedy is that he believed he was speaking these words to Esau. He had no desire to bless Jacob like this. How sad it is to be at cross-purposes with God! How sad it is to be as spiritually blind as Isaac was!

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27:30-40

As the story unfolds and as we see the actions of various people, keep in mind the wise words of Prov. 19:21. Keep in mind also that in contemporary terms we are reading the story of a senior man appointing a younger man to a position of leadership in God's work. Isaac must have known that Esau was basically a worldly-minded man and therefore unfitted for spiritual service. And yet he would have "ordained" him, hoping perhaps that responsibility would bring out and develop the spiritual side of his personality. Over against that superficial attitude, consider Paul's clear advice to Timothy regarding the stewardship of God's Word and work (2 Tim. 2:1-7). There is a real sense of drama in v.30. Jacob, pleased with his success and possibly without any sense of shame at having deceived his old, frail father, left the presence of Isaac, feeling everything was settled in his favour. In one sense it was, but the immediate arrival of Esau (did the brothers pass each other?) signified that the consequences of what had been done had still to be lived with. Jacob's and his mother's wrongdoing were to be found out and exposed very quickly and we will have to consider the reactions of all the parties. But first, think of Esau. He readily agreed with his father's request in v.1-4, even though he knew full well that he had already sold and sworn away God's blessing (25:29-34). But Esau's word counted for nothing. As far as he was concerned what belonged to God could be taken up or thrown down, depending on his feelings and his immediate situation. But that cannot be! There are decisions that are binding and there are opportunities that can be forfeited and never recovered. Consider well Heb. 2:1-3a; 4:1-2; 10:32-39; 12:15-17. Read also 1 Cor. 9:24-27, where Paul speaks of being disqualified from service (not from salvation). How solemn, to be laid aside as of no further use in holy service.

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27:30-40

When he realised what had happened, Isaac was shaken to the core of his being and his words, "Yes, and he shall be blessed," were an acknowledgment that God had over-ruled his shallow but determined desire to bless Esau. Isaac was also shaken by the thought that he had in fact been fighting against God. He submitted to God and to circumstances and, in a sense, by faith he accepted defeat. Think of the comment in Heb. 11:20. The reference seems to be to submissive faith rather than triumphant faith. Esau's reaction was typical of those who sit lightly to spiritual responsibility and commitment and then resent it bitterly when they are not able or even allowed to share in God's blessing. Some Christians choose to stay on the edge of a fellowship and its work, especially holding back from the Prayer Meeting, and then complain that they have no share in the deep and sweet life of the fellowship. In v.35- 36 Isaac blamed Jacob, when he should have said to his son that God had over-ruled and prevented a great error. Esau blamed Jacob, recognising Jacob's duplicity in the present incident but at the same time making out that he himself had had no responsibility on the earlier occasion when so casually and with contempt he had, by his own decision, sold his birthright. Ever since the Garden of Eden, people have looked for someone to blame for their spiritual misfortune (Gen. 3:12). There was no sign of Esau being moved by this experience to humble himself under God's mighty hand (1 Pet. 5:6). That would have involved recognising Jacob as the promised "seed", having God-given priority and leadership. That he would not do. Esau's future was already taking shape.

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27:41-45

Look back to the blessing pronounced on Esau in v.39-40. Some versions read, away from the fatness . . . and away from the dew of heaven . Note the contrast with v.28, spoken to Jacob. Isaac pronounces over Esau the appropriate destiny of the "profane person: the freedom to live unblessed (39) and untamed (40)." On the human level it is not hard to see why Esau hated Jacob, although hatred is usually blind to its own faults and responsibilities. The focus of the on-going story moves now from Isaac to Jacob, but we must not assume from v.41 that Isaac's death was imminent. His death is not recorded until 35:28-29 when he was 180 years old. It is usually very difficult to calculate dates and ages in the Old Testament but it may be that Isaac's continuing life

held in check Esau's plan for revenge. In v.42 we have another example of the unhappy atmosphere of the home of Isaac and Rebekah. Everyone seems to have been suspicious of everyone else, and someone was always looking for opportunity to further their own position by passing on bits of information. This is the kind of thing that can disturb and sometimes destroy a Christian fellowship. We need to be clear: gossip is sin, always destructive and never helpful. We need to remember the Commandment about bearing false witness. Rebekah, true to type, at once took charge of the situation and, in order to keep Jacob in the long run, she now had to send him away. In fact she lost him permanently, because it was twenty years before Jacob returned to his home territory. Note in v.45 that Rebekah still regarded herself as the one in charge of the situation and she was planning long-term for her son. Some people take a long time before they realise just how irrelevant they really are in the outworking of God's purposes. Note also in v.45b that Rebekah realised that she had lost any respect or regard that Esau ever had for her. She must have known that her husband, realising or suspecting the part she had played in his deception, would also have no trust in her. It is a sad family story.

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27:46-28:5

Rebekah was a woman whose thinking was a strange mixture of the spiritual and the carnal. Knowing that Jacob was marked out by God for future service, she did not want him to leave home as a fugitive, because that could cast a shadow on his character. “ Her broaching the subject of Jacob’s marriage was a masterstroke: it played equally on Isaac's self- interest and his principles. The prospect of a third Hittite daughter-in-law and a distracted wife would have unmanned even an Abraham.” (Kidner) We are not actually told what Isaac's thoughts were as he spoke to Jacob and sent him away to choose a wife from the family of Laban. His motive may have been to pacify his wife, or to keep Jacob and Esau apart. On the other hand, having been shaken deeply by God (27:33), it may have been that something of Isaac's earlier spiritual awareness and commitment began to emerge again and he accepted his responsibility in relation to God's on-going purposes. If Jacob was to serve God then he needed the right kind of wife. In pronouncing his blessing on Jacob, Isaac was also warning Esau in a significant way not to interfere. In blessing his son, Isaac spoke in the name of God Almighty, the El Shaddai, the all-sufficient God, the faithful God of the covenant-promise given to Abraham (17:1). Jacob, now set free from the influence and manipulation of his home, was made aware that he would not go alone, but in the company of and under the shadow of the Almighty (Ps. 90:1-2; 91:1), the God of purpose, power, providence and blessing. Jacob's pilgrimage had started with God, but attitudes of craft and duplicity he had learned at home remained with him to complicate his life and his service.

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28:6-22

The focus of the whole narrative is now on Jacob. There is only a passing comment on Esau in v.6-9 which seem to suggest that it was to spite his father that he married into the family of Ishmael. In v.10 we have the beginning of a spell of many years of wandering and difficulty for Jacob. We have already seen the unpleasant side of his character, for he was double-tongued and double-dealing, yet he was destined to become Israel, a Prince with God. Right from the start he was marked out as a man who was to play a significant part in God's purposes but that alone did not make him a man of faith, reverence and obedience. He was a wilful man. He had to learn. He had to be fashioned. And it was not until God finally broke him that he was ready for use. In many ways he wrestled with and struggled against God most of his life but God persevered in grace and made him a vessel fit and ready to be used (Jer. 18:1-4). Although we may criticise Jacob we must remember that he did not have a good start in life. His father was a backslider, his mother domineering, possessive and manipulative, and his brother was profane. Perhaps it is little wonder Jacob was complicated. But all of us have a history that we have to learn to live with, and by faith to conquer what we are in ourselves, and the situations we have created by our own actions. We must also learn to live with God and with his providential dealing with us which is always for our good, our blessing and our usefulness to others. At this stage in the story Jacob is on his way to Haran to stay with his uncle. He was also looking for a wife (whom he found after a struggle). He was also looking forward to returning home, which did not happen for twenty years. God is never in a hurry, but never

slow. Right now this was a man marked out for God and yet adrift from God. In fact Jacob was on the run from home and from God. It will be a fascinating story.

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28:10-22

We may run away from God but we cannot get away from Him. The Psalmist discovered that (Ps 139: 7-12). Having settled for the night and feeling no particular spiritual urgency Jacob slept, and he dreamed. The ladder and angels he saw reminded him forcibly that the agents of heaven were actively involved in the affairs of earth. Perhaps even in his dream Jacob became aware that he was leaving God out of his reckoning and out of his handling of life. Both the eye of the Lord and the angels of God run to and fro through all the earth (Zech. 1:7-11; 4:10). It may have been that Jacob was being reminded of his needs being taken to God and of God's gracious answers being brought to him. What is clear is that God spoke to Jacob. It was not an interview sought by Jacob. The God of glory appeared to him as He had done to Abraham (Acts 7:2) and the same faithful God declared His purposes of grace in a glorious statement (13-15). The God of Abraham (whom Jacob would have admired), and the God of Isaac (and Jacob had scant respect for his father) was pledged to be Jacob's God, to give him a future of purpose, blessing and service. The promise in v.15 has blessed more people than could ever be counted but it is not quite clear what it meant to Jacob. It seems he may have taken it to mean that you can count on God's blessing even when you are going your own self-willed way. Perhaps it does mean that, because the gifts and calling of God are without change of mind (Rom. 11:29). But blessing may not work out in practice quite how we expect, because God's ways are past finding out. All things do work together for good (Rom. 8:28) but the process can be painful. We must consider Jacob's reactions more closely.

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28:10-22

When Jacob awoke he was immediately practical facing the implications of what had happened. That God had come near to him he had no doubt. But he was unsure of what it meant and equally unsure of his own reactions. He had not expected to have to deal with God away from home, and many a person away from home has had this kind of surprise. Everything is open to the God with whom we have to do (Heb. 4:13). Jacob was disturbed (17) and there is a suggestion in v.16 that if he had known God was in that place he would not have spent the night there. That is why some people will not go to church and are even more unwilling to go to a prayer meeting. They are afraid they may actually meet God and they are neither willing nor in a condition for that. The fact that God was there did not make the place holy nor did it make it right for Jacob to be there. After all, God was in Sodom and so was Lot! Jacob called the place Bethel, House of God, and he built an altar but he did not change his plans. This shows how a person can be deeply moved by a sermon or an "experience" without ever coming to God or yielding to God, It also shows how you can have dealings with God, knowing it is God, yet still hold on to things, plans and people that God cannot and will not bless. It makes plain how we can recognise God and agree with God and yet refuse to change or to become what God can make us. In fact, Jacob argued with God for the next twenty years. The amazing thing is that the faithful God of grace persisted with him. Put the lesson vividly. Jacob sang a hymn of consecration, made a vow, did it with all reverence as appropriate to the occasion, and then went his own way.

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29:1-14

Without contradicting any of the lessons we emphasised in the last chapter, we still recognise what happened at Bethel as a significant element in Jacob's spiritual pilgrimage. The Spirit of God was at work in this man's life. How could it be otherwise? He was a chosen man; and no doubt he meant his vow in 28: 20-22, including the totally voluntary tithe, even though he seems to have postponed the significant operation of it until well into the future. Even if Jacob was not clear about the future God was and he was preparing His servant for service, Consider this in relation to Paul in 1 Cor. 9:24-27; and 2 Cor. 12:7-10. Of course it is not always evident what God is doing. Sometimes He hides Himself (Isa. 45:15; Job 23:1-5, 8-10), so much so that

we are tempted to think God has forgotten (Isa, 49:14-16). But it is not so. His providence is often unseen and unknown but it is never unsure, and sometimes God gives us intimations or indications of His intentions as He did to Jacob when he saw the ladder and the angels. It is doubtful if Jacob thought much about God when he saw the beautiful Rachel. It seems to have been love at first sight and very emotional. We know from the story that this was indeed the girl for Jacob but his brash barging in and his manifest self-confidence make plain that he was not aware of his being adrift from God. And when you are adrift from God that is not the time to be making emotional commitments, no matter how romantic the situation. Read Prov. 3:1-8 and Ps. 37:3-7a and then look back to the story of how a wife was found for Isaac and how the servant waited so trustingly for God's clear guidance (Gen. 24:10-21,34-49). When we learn that God is the perfect match-maker we will trust Him with our romances. This is evidence of faith.

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29:15-30

Jacob begins to learn that it is not easy to get life the way you want it apart from God. He discovers you cannot get rid of the past by moving to new territory (v.1). Jacob discovered that a man reaps what he sows (Gal. 6:7) and that God sees to it that we get paid in our own coin. Jesus said, "With what measure you mete it will be measured to you...." (Luke 6:37-38 AV) and we read here how Jacob, who had earlier deceived his father and his brother (and possibly had forgotten all about it) finds himself deceived by Laban. God certainly knows how to deal with people. Jacob had fallen for Rachel in a big way, he declared his love, and he made it plain he was in earnest and not willing to risk a refusal by the father (18). But just as Jacob had seen and exploited Esau's earnest eagerness in Ch.25:29-34, so Laban spotted his chance to get the better of Jacob, Of course, in his eagerness Jacob ignored totally the accepted convention of the East, that the elder daughter should be married first. People say that love is blind and it can certainly be totally selfish, ignoring all other considerations in order to get what it wants. Of course, the selfish element in that kind of love has to be purged out else there is little hope for the marriage. Sometimes when a person says, "I love you", it really means, "I love me, and want you". It does seem from the story that Rachel was the more glamorous of the two girls. Perhaps she was aware of it, too aware of it, and it takes a deeper attractiveness than just appearance or even personality to make a girl a true partner for a man who is called of God for significant service. If you are looking for a partner make sure you are looking for the right things. The real thing lasts.

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29:15-30

Several interpretations of v.20 are possible. It may simply signify how totally Jacob had fallen in love with Rachel. Far from feeling it a long time to wait Jacob seems to have considered this a trifling price to pay for such a bride. The verse may also signify that for this spell of time Jacob behaved with total propriety, signifying that his intentions were totally honourable. It is always a good thing when relationships are so kept in the presence of God that there is never anything to hide or to feel ashamed of. In v.21 Jacob was obviously meaning Rachel and, having been honourable for a spell, he assumed that Laban would also be honourable. But, since no name was mentioned, Laban acted on the basis of custom and gave the elder daughter. The feast was magnificent and, according to custom and in the interest of modesty, the bride was heavily veiled. It was not until morning that the deceiver discovered he had been deceived both by Laban and by Leah who must have been party to the plan. Jacob's protest in v.25 reveals the total self-centredness of the man. He would deceive anyone if it was to his advantage. He had publicly insulted Leah by insisting that her younger sister be married before her. Jacob never thought of anyone else's feelings, and there are many people like him. Of course, Laban should have spoken (v.26) earlier, but then he would not have had Jacob's service free of charge for seven years. Laban made light of it all but, with clever calculation he enticed Jacob into another seven years' service. Note that there is no suggestion that Jacob paused to consider what God was saying in all this. The complications had only started!

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29:31-35

The deceiver had been deceived but his stubbornness got him what he wanted. After only a week with Leah he married Rachel (with Laban's agreement) but that meant he had two wives. Could God bless that? Should Jacob have submitted to the over-ruling of God and been content with Leah as his wife? Were his feelings so dominant that all spiritual consideration left him? Jacob should have been asking, "Why is all this happening in this way? What is God saying to me?" Instead, being resentful at Laban's manipulation Jacob took it out on Leah. How cruel it is to react to life's hurts and disappointments by being vengeful to others! We must be careful lest we do this unconsciously. Jacob did it deliberately and made his rejection of Leah very obvious, to the terrible hurt of the girl, as v.32 makes plain. Of course, God knew and cared, and it seems that Leah's heart had been turned to the Lord in measure by the hurts and disappointments of her romance and marriage. Right from the start, by his attitudes and actions, Jacob sowed the seeds of discord in his family. As the story goes on we shall see this tension manifested right to Jacob's old age. This short passage tells of how much the human heart craves for love and acceptance. It tells also of how understanding and caring God is and how He is involved personally in dealing with the situations that cause us so much hurt. We see tomorrow how God begins to deal with the one who causes the hurt. Whatever age we are, whether single or married, in all our relationships see to it that we do not selfishly manipulate the feelings of another or take advantage of a person's manifest feeling for us. Do not be hasty in starting a love relationship. Trust God with it. He plans good for His children. And, in a relationship, do not be slow to show and express love in a God-honouring way.

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30:1-8

Reuben, Simeon, Levi and Judah were already born to Leah, and the despised wife was mother of the kingly and priestly tribes. Now consider the bitterness and envy that are at the heart of this family. Rachel envied Leah and blamed Jacob, so Jacob was wildly angry and blamed God. The glamorous wife was proving not too easy to live with, and in spite of knowing the story of Abraham and the complications of his impetuosity (Gen. 12:10ff), Jacob fell in with his wife's suggestion and took Bilhah as an "extra" wife. We may say this was the custom of these days, but custom is not necessarily God's will in the sexual and moral realm. Many things are accepted custom today but they are contrary to God's commands, and it is sad that many Christians seem to forget this. When the maid bore a son, Rachel was quick to say that God had judged or vindicated her. But that was not for Rachel to say. It was far too soon to be making value judgments. The story was only begun. When the next son was born Rachel again celebrated, considering that she had won the struggle with her sister. Of course, life is the gift of God and not the automatic fruit of a marriage union. All the people in this story seem to have forgotten God, and God does seem to be strangely absent, or at least un-noticed because inconspicuous. But the truth is that God was setting the scene and preparing the circumstances which were to be the instruments to bring Jacob to the place and to the frame of mind and heart that would lead to the sorting out of his personality, his religious life, and his spiritual usefulness. All things do work together for good. The process may be painful and take a long time, and one of the necessary elements in this is that we learn to recognise that many of the sore things in life have been introduced by ourselves.

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30:9-24

How sad it is when God's blessing to one person awakens envy and resentment in another. Neither wife was now childless, although Leah's children were her own in a way that Rachel's were not having been borne by her servant. But it was Leah who set the next phase of competition in motion and a further two sons were born taking the total to eight. Then we come to v.14ff. and the story of the mandrakes which were considered to be something of a fertility drug. The bitterness of the two women is very obvious and neither seems to have been aware that they were trading in things that should be beyond trading (15, 16). But God is not mocked. Rachel got the mandrakes but Leah got the babies, her capacity to conceive being restored by God. There is a suggestion in v.17 that Leah had in some measure turned to God in her barren years but we must not read too much into this. Neither must we ever conclude that God's blessing in one area of our life excuses or justifies the

wrongs in another area. Leah seems to regard her action concerning her maid as having been virtuous, possibly in respect of helping God to fulfil the promise of many sons to Jacob (28:14). But God does not need human wrongs in order to fulfil His promises. Yet another child, a first daughter, was born to Jacob and Leah. Then God remembered Rachel, but not in the sense that He had forgotten about her. It is more that God reminded Rachel that the issues of life were in His hand and it seems that Rachel's attitude in v.23 is somewhat more humble and Godward than it had been. It even seems that a measure of faith is present in her petition in v.24, believing that God would yet grant her greater blessing. Matthew Henry's commentary suggests that Rachel scarcely knew how to be grateful for God's blessing without being wrongly greedy for more. Godliness with contentment is much to be desired (1 Tim. 6:6).

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30:25-31a

Eleven sons and one daughter have been born to Jacob and in view of the domestic tensions in which these children grew up we will not be surprised when we read of personality complications in years to come. How sad it is when children have to grow up in a strained atmosphere caused by their parents being adrift from God. But we must not underestimate the gracious and powerful working of God by His Holy Spirit. That is the explanation of Jacob's request to Laban. He had become aware that it was time to move on. To what extent he was aware that God was in this we simply cannot say. Laban, being a calculating man who had no trust in Jacob, seems very gracious and in v.27 he asks Jacob to stay on. He states that he has learned by divination (by experience AV) that he has been blessed and prospered because of Jacob's presence in his home. Jacob, never strong on humility, is swift to agree with Laban (29-33). But can a backslider be a blessing to anyone? Can a man so out of God's will and so confused in his home and family life be a means of grace to another? In the over-ruling providence of God it can be so, but that does not excuse the backsliding. Indeed it should make us think what blessing *could* have come if the man had been right with God. Never forget that God is working on a long term plan with Jacob and his spiritual calibre is not to be judged by the immediate blessings of a temporary stage of his life. The whole situation seems very above-board, honourable and reasonable, as the two men give their official reasons for their actions. But the story goes on to reveal that they were in fact jockeying for advantage, both seeking to "pull a fast one" on the other. But God was dealing with both men, even though they did not think so.

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30:31b-43

On the face of it this is a competition between two breeders of cattle, sheep and goats and of how they tried to cheat each other. We are not going to discuss the various aspects of and superstitions about the process of breeding. It is obvious that Jacob was expert in selective breeding (40-42) and the result was success and prosperity. He was an important and wealthy man. No doubt it all took time, but God has plenty time and plenty patience. On one level we must see that both Jacob and Laban were rogues, weighing each other up and making their moves decisively. Laban was quick in v.35-36, obviously not too impressed by Jacob's protestation about honesty in v.33. There is no sign of Jacob resenting this crafty move. He simply set himself with determination to prove he was the stronger and more clever, and he succeeded. What are we to learn from all this? It is very practical. When we find ourselves seemingly entangled with, manipulated and threatened by, the scheming of men who seem to operate without thought or fear of God, we are to look to God, remembering that all the issues and all their various stages of development are in God's sovereign control. Read Prov. 16:9; 19:21; 28:10; and Ps. 9:15-16. God is not mocked (Rom. 12:19; Gal. 6:7-8). If we look ahead to 31:41 we shall see that this spell of Jacob's life lasted six years. All sorts of people were learning lessons, or they *should* have been learning. We shall see soon that beautiful, bad-tempered Rachel was a much more shallow person than we may have realised (31:19). Prosperity as well as deprivation tends to reveal just what we are spiritually. Judge nothing before the time (1 Cor. 4:1-5) and be careful not to be taken in.

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31:1-16

Jacob's story develops but it has taken the whole of twenty years (31:41) to turn his mind and heart back to his homeland. This should make us think of the patience of God or even the slowness of God who is more concerned to mould and fashion character than to overwhelm and compel. Consider Ps.103:9-14 and Rom. 2:4 and always remember that God's dealings with us are marked by love and integrity. He is not perverse. We cannot but wonder what Jacob's story might have been if he had not been so driven on by ambition and by the need to prove himself better and more clever than others. How important it is that we should always be listening to what God is saying to us. It is even more important that we should respond to God when He speaks. Already in 30:25 Jacob's thoughts are about going home but because of various considerations he hesitates. Now, in 31:1-2 the pressure of circumstances is beginning to compel him to take action. God sometimes has to make life uncomfortable before we take notice of what He is saying. If Jacob's home life and business life had been more congenial he might well have settled down again. But God got him on the move. Now read through today's passage and note how, all of a sudden, Jacob and his wives are talking about God. Of course, they needed God now. They needed His inspiration and assurance and they seem to have had no sense of embarrassment at becoming so spiritual so suddenly. But if we read these verses carefully we see that human considerations were still paramount in the thinking of both Jacob and his wives (v.1-2, 14-16). Without doubt God was in all this, but none of the people concerned realised just how significant a change was about to take place.

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31:1-16

The only key to the understanding of Jacob's story is God. This was a man destined for significant service and therefore everything about his circumstances has significance. We must emphasise the activity of God who was furthering His purposes with deliberate intent, accurate methods and perfect timing. But we must not forget the activity of the Devil who seems to have been able to introduce all manner of distractions into Jacob's life through his natural self-centred, self-willed propensities. Go back to 27:43-45 and see how human considerations had got Jacob on the run from home and from Esau. Now human considerations have him going in the right direction again, but there was still Esau to face. What is more, God was saying to Jacob to go back to the place and atmosphere of his former failure, and that must have been a deep challenge. Note how Jacob called his wives out to the fields, almost as if he trusted no-one. Note also how he introduced into his speech the words, "But God" (v.5, 24, 29, 42). All the characters begin to be aware that God, whom they had forgotten or ignored, had been in their situation all along. Think of how much misery is being referred to in v.5-6. Note the absence of any sense of self-blame in the very spiritual words of v.11-12 and note how Jacob claims assurance from God that Laban has been the bad character. Of course it is true that God sees all that people do to us, whether we are walking in His will or backsliding, and God is the one who deals with all according to their just deserts. Even though He uses the wickedness of men as a fire to refine His servants, He has no part in their wickedness and will judge them for it. No-one should presume. God is just.

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31:1-16

Along with this now familiar passage read Gen. 28:15; Rom. 3: 3-4; 11:29; 2 Tim. 2:13, and consider the faithfulness of God. Then read Gen.27:43 and 31:21 to emphasise that in this whole spell of twenty years Jacob was on the run. In all that time God never wearied, nor did He consider giving up Jacob. Having once pledged His love, God is true to His promise. This kindles great hope for the future, but also a real sense of shame because of our lovelessness. In today's passage Jacob refers to the God of Bethel, the God who cannot lie (Heb. 6:18) and who means what He says. It seems that Jacob had at some time told his family about the experience at Bethel and it is the memory of this that motivated him, whereas it seems to have been property and prospects that influenced his wives (v.14-16). At long last God is taking His man back to a significant crisis point in the past where Jacob had made a vow. This is a necessary spiritual exercise at times and it does us good to be reminded of a significant day when we pledged ourselves to God, and we meant it. We remind ourselves of whose we are and whom we are called to serve. We accept with fresh grace that we are not our own in any sense

at all (1 Cor. 6:19-20). We belong to God and if there is anything good in us at all, anything of promise, or fruitfulness, or service, it is the work of His grace (1 Cor. 4:6-7) by the Holy Spirit within us.

"And every virtue we possess,
And every victory won,
And every thought of holiness,
Are His alone." (Auber).

This is the stage Jacob is at and the story is of the pilgrimage of the returning backslider, He returns to the faithful God who has never forgotten him and who has watched over him. It is the God who promises to restore the years the locust has eaten (Joel 2:24-27 AV) and to make the future greater than the past. Blessed is the man who has the God of Jacob for his help (Ps. 146:5).

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31:17-35

The narrative moves on quickly and we must note how fear was very much mixed with what ever faith Jacob had at this stage of his life. There is no dignity in his departure from Laban's territory even though Jacob was now a rich and seemingly powerful man. Of course, it is only as we are right with God and know ourselves to be so that we can lift up our heads and stand tall. We note the shallow superstition in Rachel in v.19 and, while we may criticise the lack of spirituality in Jacob's pretty wife, we must remember that the example of her husband had not helped her to grow in grace. Jacob outwitted Laban and fled (20-21). What a scheming scurrying life this man had, always restlessly on the move, always up to something. He had not learned to rest in the Lord (Ps. 37:3-7). How could he? He insisted on being in the driving seat. Laban was not prepared to let things go. The Devil never is. It is dangerous for the Devil when backsliders return to God. But God is in charge of this whole movement and Laban got the shock of his life when he was warned to keep his hands off Jacob (24). That did not prevent him telling Jacob what he thought of him, making plain that he had little respect for him. Of course, we must see that Laban was still the total hypocrite in his plausible words in v.26-28. He was wrong, and he knew he was wrong, in saying he had power to harm Jacob. But he was trying to frighten Jacob, to unsettle him, to make him insecure and vulnerable. He gave a scornful challenge to Jacob's new found spirituality by the question about his household idols (30). It is devastating when the enemy sees and pierces the flaws in our spiritual armour. Jacob admitted his fears but denied the charge about the idols. He meant it. But he did not know the truth.

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31:36-42

There are three main lessons here. Note yet again the deceit of Rachel towards both her husband and her father. She played on her father's love to conceal her sin, and she played on her husband's trust to conceal her spiritual shallowness. Jacob had not been an ideal husband but he had loved and trusted her. The second lesson is to see a new (albeit angry) positiveness in Jacob, not only standing up to Laban instead of running away, but bearing testimony to the hardships of his past service in Laban's household. It had not been a romantic story. Everything Jacob possessed had been hard earned, not only in toil and sweat but in personal humiliation. Ten times, or repeatedly, his wages had been changed; that is, the terms of the contract had been manipulated, thereby heaping insult on injury. Jacob was aware that his own weakness was as much a contributory factor as Laban's ruthlessness and he may well have been recalling in his humiliation that both his father and grandfather had likewise been treated and rebuked by unworthy men (Gen. 12:17-20; 20:8-11; 26:6-11). Sin brings shame. Sin steals our dignity. Sin devalues us in the sight of others as well as in our own eyes. Why, oh why, do we ever listen to the Devil when he entices us away from our close walk with God? This was an important day for Jacob and it may well be so for those who read these notes. Read Hosea 14:1-7.

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31:36-42

The third of the lessons mentioned yesterday is found in Jacob's confession in v.42, Along with this passage read Isa. 54:7-8, 11, 13, 17. We cannot be sure to what extent Jacob's words were a radical statement of faith or just the beginnings of an awakening to the spiritual realities of his life. Certainly there were coming to the forefront of his mind and moving his heart, things he had learned many years previously, things he had been taught as the great priorities of life. He seems to have been becoming aware of his true identity and destiny, and this is a great moment for anyone. There was still a great deal of human pride and self-confidence to be dealt with, but when a man at last gets face to face with God the possibilities are immense. Jacob confessed that but for the grace of God he would have been an impoverished disaster and he was beginning to be amazed that he, having had such a miserable and complicated start to his life, should now be what and where he was. He speaks of God as the God of Abraham and he takes his stand in the line of God's covenant. The God of Abraham was El Shaddai, the all-sufficient God. Jacob speaks of God as the Fear of Isaac and this may simply signify the God whom Isaac feared in the sense of worshipped. Jacob may have been recalling Isaac's alarm when he realised he had been tricked in respect of the blessing (27:20, 28-29, 33) or he may have been thinking of Isaac's earlier faith and walk with God. Jacob may also be placing the authentic fear of the Lord over against his own human and carnal fear and realising that there is a fear that is totally healthy and indeed necessary for a true life of faith. Would God that we all learned to take God seriously: Consider Ps.19:9; Prov. 1:7; 9:10; 14:26-27; Isa.8:13; Heb.11:7 as a very few examples of the fear of the Lord. "Fear Him, ye saints, and you will then have nothing else to fear".

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31:43-55

It is a great story when God is in it. But we need to remember that God is in every story, seen or unseen, welcome or not, because He is the God with whom we have to do (Heb. 4:13). The fearful Jacob may have been surprised by Laban's willingness to part on the friendly terms of a covenant. He may have wished he had stood up to Laban earlier, He may have realised that, being willing to take his stand in faith, God was ready and willing to bless, keep and vindicate him. Hopefully the lessons would be learned deeply so that they would be an inspiration and help on future occasions of trial, one of which would soon meet him in the next chapter. There is no real indication that Laban was a changed man but at least he and Jacob were to part on reasonably amicable terms, and that is better than to part in bitterness, because bitterness tends to poison the spirit. The details of the ceremony do not need to concern us much. The names of the two places in Aramaic and Hebrew mean the same. – "the heap of witness". Both men seemed to commit their future actions to the God who witnesses and judges all things (cf. 1 Pet. 4:19). Laban charged Jacob by the God of Abraham but then added reference to the God of Nahor (53). Laban also set a standard for Jacob in the very area where he had made Jacob to sin, namely in the matter of taking two wives (50). He was not the first nor is he the last man to condemn in another the sin most glaring in his own life. At the same time Laban does remind us that when people play fast and loose with the marriage-bond the whole of society degenerates. He also reminds us that God sees and judges. The chapter ends with the two men parting on friendly terms, at least on the surface. But, their ways prove very different. Laban disappears from the main stream of the story of God's purposes. Jacob goes forward to high destiny. Where are *we* heading? Does there need to be an ending to certain associations? God is witness.

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32:1-2

Jacob had reached a crisis point in his life and he may well have had some awareness of this. In many ways he was a man haunted by fear (28:17; 31:2,20,31; 32:7). Some of this was no doubt a personality complication but without doubt the Devil played on it so that Jacob feared when there was no need to fear. This calls for faith of the kind expressed by the Psalmist (Ps. 27:1; 56:3-4). Now the dangerous thing about fear is that it not only torments us (1 John 4:18) and brings confusion, it obliterates God from our thinking and our awareness. The cleverness of the Devil is seen in that he can almost terrorise us with thoughts of fear lest we go out of God's

will. But God has not given us a spirit of fear (2 Tim. 1:7) and His Son Jesus was the one who said, "Let not your heart be troubled...My peace I give to you....." (John 14:1, 27). Apply all this to the account of Jacob going on his way into a new area and realm of service in God's will. He was aware, as we shall see, that there was Esau to meet and cope with, and he was still aware of the tensions of his last encounter with Laban. The man would have been less than human if he had not been deeply apprehensive, and it is a token of the grace, love, mercy and consideration of God that when he needed encouragement most the angels of God met him. Note that it was as Jacob went forward in a new obedience (an obedience almost forced on him by God's providential ordering of circumstances) that Jacob met the angels. He had met them at Bethel twenty years previously (28:12) and he had not been too sure about wanting their company. Now, after years of meeting people who had vexed and humiliated him, he was more disposed for heavenly visitors. It is always a good sign when we want God. But it sometimes takes a lot of effort on God's part to get us to that stage.

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32:1-2

It was God who arranged this journey and Jacob had to deal with God in a new spirit of faith and submission before he could cope with the future with all its possibilities. When he saw the angels he recognised at once that he was dealing with God, and when he spoke of "God's army" (RSV) or "God's camp" (NIV) he called the place Mahanaim, which means "two camps". He was aware he was not on his own as he went forward to meet Esau's camp. This is a great assurance. Think of the story of Elisha and his servant in 2 Kings 6:15-17.

"The hosts of God encamp around
The dwellings of the just."

Read Ps.34:1-7 and also Heb.1:14 where the angels are spoken of as ministering to the heirs of salvation. We are foolish indeed if we do not believe in guardian angels (Ps. 91:1-6, 11-13). Now consider this comment by Kidner: "In Jacob's pilgrimage, the way to the heights now led through a valley of humiliation which he made no attempt to skirt. Geographically the call to Bethel would take him nowhere near Esau, ensconced in the far South at Mount Seir; spiritually he could reach Bethel no other way.... to meet God he must 'first be reconciled to his brother.' The sequence of chapters 32, 33, culminating in 35:1-15, acts out powerfully the principles of Matthew 5:23-25a." All sorts of things were in the process of being put right in Jacob's life and God, having arranged the circumstances, now manifests His gracious and immediate and recognisable help. What a God He is.

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32:3-8

Life never stands still. In the good providence of God we are always being moved forward whether or not we are aware of it. To what extent Jacob was aware of the significance of the crisis about to meet him we cannot say for sure. If the previous verses assured Jacob of the good angels who were working on his behalf they did not make him forget that he had left behind him in the homeland many enemies, not least his angry brother Esau. Now, Jacob could have avoided the meeting. It was not necessary for him to go that particular way, as we pointed out in an earlier note. But there was a new realism in this man called to God's service. He did not seek to evade the wrongs of the past. His approach was wise, and in measure humble, even though he made plain by reference to his possessions that he was not in any sense a failure. However, there is a real note of deference in Jacob's language, referring to Esau as lord, and himself as servant. There is no hint at all of a claim to precedence because of the birthright. We could consider Eccles.10:4b and Prov. 15:1-2 in this connection. It may have been that Jacob, knowing Esau's materialistic spirit, was seeking to impress his brother with his success in worldly terms, as if to say that he was no longer the weak, characterless person he had been in his younger days. But worldly success and advance do not necessarily mean we have grown spiritually. Sometimes it simply means we have given priority to our careers and devoted our best time and attention to our own prosperity, as Jacob had in fact done for twenty years. There does not seem to have been in Jacob anything of the spirit of the prodigal son who said, "I am not worthy." (Lk.15: 18-21). That conscious response came when he got news of Esau.

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32:9-12

Esau had not forgotten the past. Esau was angry; at least Jacob assumed he was (but compare 33:4). Jacob's past wrongs were catching up on him, or so he thought. But the rest of this chapter tells of the most momentous step forward in his spiritual life and service. Why then should there be so much fear? It was the work of the Devil seeking to undermine confidence and to dispel hope in God. But it had this effect: it made Jacob turn to God in a realism of prayer that he had not manifested for a very long time. Still, as v.7-8 show, Jacob remained very practical in his provision for his family. There may have been an element of mere human calculation and planning in this, but that is not necessarily a denial of faith. Certainly in today's verses we see a man face to face with God. What a prayer this is! It begins with the covenant God of salvation, the God of Abraham and Isaac. It is grounded in the promise and command of God (9b): the word of the God that cannot lie (Heb. 6:18). It is full of acknowledgment of Jacob's own total unworthiness and recognises that all he has and all he has become are the result of God's good and gracious providence (10). How much we need to reach this stage of marvelling at God's goodness to us, His wonderful kindness, and His manifold mercies. Read Psalm 103 and learn to bless the Lord. Jacob's prayer moves on from thoughts of God's steadfast love and faithfulness to an earnest prayer for deliverance from danger which he feels very keenly. Jacob was afraid, and when we are afraid it is best to tell God. There is no use pretending we are brave. The prayer ends where it began, with the faithful promises of God, and Jacob did not seem to realise that what he was afraid of was that God's promise would be frustrated by Esau. God was not worried. He is always at peace in Himself and confident about His plans. What a blessing to have a God like that.

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32:13-32

This was the night Jacob had to do business with God so that his whole future could open up with possibilities. The picture still shows a man busy organising every detail of his situation and yet there may have been an awareness in Jacob that he needed to be alone. Sometimes we can limit our usefulness to God by refusing the discipline of loneliness, insisting on ceaseless camaraderie and activity so that God never gets us to Himself. There is a time to be still, to be quiet, and to have nothing to do so that we can wait upon God (Ps.46:10, 11; Isa. 40:28-31). But we must be careful. There can be no withdrawing from company into an isolation that is not of God. Elijah did this and came to grief (1 Kings. 19:1-4). There is a time when the right and spiritual thing to do is to seek company and to share the burdens and cares of the heart, There is a wrong way of depending *only* on God. But God has a marvellous way of separating us from all that would confuse or complicate in order that He may deal with us, The picture we now have is of Jacob separated from all he had acquired over a spell of twenty years. All along the line God had blessed him (10) and all along the line Jacob had wrestled against God. Put it radically: in blessing Jacob, God had lost Jacob and now there was to be a showdown, Would Jacob have come back to God sooner if he had not been so competent and successful in business? We cannot say, and we must not cast doubts on God's methods for His ways are perfect. We shall see this clearly in the next chapter in the total change in Esau's attitude to his brother. Enough for today to say, "My times are in Thy hand" (Ps.31:15). Jacob was beginning to realise that this was what he really wanted.

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32:13-32

Read along with our passage Hosea 12:2-6. This story of Jacob is often used as an illustration of wrestling in prayer, and by faith refusing to let go of God until the blessing is granted. But the incident seems rather to be a parable of the whole of Jacob's life. On the one hand he wanted to hold on to God and yet he struggled against God. In the night time encounter it was the Angel of the Lord who took the initiative, and in the wrestling it was the same as it had been all along. The Angel did not prevail until at last He called on superhuman strength and touched Jacob to cripple him. God had to deal with this man in power rather than in gentleness, and that was after a spell of twenty years and more during which God had sought to bring Jacob to the place of willing

submission and a surrender of his wilful self-sufficiency. Why had Jacob been so stubborn? Was he afraid to yield to God? Was it an emotional thing stemming from his troubled, manipulated childhood, and the dominance of his scheming mother and the weakness of his father? We cannot tell. What we can grasp is God's determination that his life should not be wasted. And, in the moment of his being crippled, Jacob saw the issue and realised how near he had been to forfeiting his usefulness and his future service. The verses in Hosea tell us that Jacob wrestled against the angel and then he wept to the angel. He held on to God in a way he had never done before and, realising his place and his usefulness were in danger of slipping away, he cried out, "Not that, God." Think of David's similar cry when he pleaded with God not to take from him His Holy Spirit in terms of service (Ps. 51:10-12). This was an important day for Jacob. It could well be the same for those who read these notes, a day in which we will taste the sweetness of a new surrender.

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32:13-32

Keep in mind the fact that God had prepared Jacob for this encounter. He does not spring surprises on us as if His design were to catch us out and, whether we are aware of it or not, God always prepares us for the next stage. That is a great comfort, especially when we can all be so like Jacob, wanting God more than anything else and yet being wilfully perverse, arguing every point with God, almost as if we did not trust Him. Never forget that God is the God who gives, and gives generously, for enjoyment as well as service (Rom.8:31-32; 1 Tim.6:17; Ps.16:11 AV and RSV; John 10:10). It is only because we are deceived by Satan that we have doubts about God's good intentions. Eventually Jacob asked the angel's name, almost as if he realised at last that he was dealing with God in a very personal way. He was not told the name but he was given the blessing he pleaded for. He never forgot that night when he met with God face to face. His deep spiritual experience did not become an idolatrous pre-occupation, as can so easily happen. Jacob was far too aware of the significance of what had happened. His life had been preserved from self-will and waste and, as the sun rose, Jacob knew that for him a new day had begun, with new possibilities, new hopes, and a new determination to be God's man and to walk in the light with Him. It is a great story of the triumph of the grace and love of God. But we must remember that there was not now the simplicity that could perhaps have been. After all, Jacob still had to live with his wives and his children and with what *they* had grown up to be in his years of fighting against God. There is a lot of the story to come yet and we are wise to judge nothing before the time (1 Cor. 4:5). Look on to Jacob's testimony in Gen.48: 15-16 and if you can read Wesley's hymn, "Come, O Thou Traveller Unknown." Always remember that God is love.

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33:1-11

It seems totally against the run of the story to find Esau dealing with Jacob with such grace, welcome and dignity. If we look back to 27:41 we are reminded that if he had had opportunity Esau would have taken vengeance on his brother without reference to God at all. His anger and resentment were real and deep and this is one of the reasons why Jacob had to be "trapped" and detained so long in Laban's household. If he had returned earlier he would have precipitated a crisis for which neither he nor Esau was prepared. As we have studied the story we have not thought about Esau. We may have assumed he would continue to be the kind of man he was at the beginning. But we underestimate the grace of God. He works His wonders in unexpected places, although not always in terms of salvation. The stories of Saul of Tarsus, Cornelius and Lydia for example all tell of the grace of God that goes on ahead, preparing the way for His word and work of salvation (Acts 9:10-16; 10:1-8ff; 16:11-14). The story of Abimelech (Gen.20:1-9) and of Joseph (Gen.50:15-21) tell of God's advance preparation for the safety and development of His work. That Jacob had no conscious awareness of this is evident in his over-humble approach to his brother. He was very aware of his guilty conscience. In v.4 we have the same picture as in the story of the Father of the prodigal. If ever there was undeserved grace it was here and Jacob found it hard to receive it. He urged gifts on his brother as if to say, "At least let me do something to make up for my wrongs." We are all a bit like that. We find it hard to believe that God really does forgive freely and fully. In v.10 it seems that Jacob was realising that Esau was dealing with him exactly as God

had done, in marvellous grace that opened a door of hope for the future. What a lesson on how to deal with those who have wronged us!

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33:12-20

Esau's attitude had reminded Jacob of the grace and goodness of God. Did Jacob's attitude and dealings with Esau turn Esau's thoughts to God? It is open to question. There are two ways to understand this story. We could see in it a return of Jacob's inbred deviousness and double dealing, whereby he agreed to meet his brother in Seir and then went in the opposite direction to Succoth. He could have said to his brother, who seemed very open to reason, that he was under oath to God to go to Bethel, but he did not do so. Was his deceit necessary or justified? Most of us know quite a bit about taking the easy way out of a difficult situation by being not quite honest. We salve conscience by saying that we meant what we said at the time but later it seemed wise to change, and the other party was too far way to tell them! The other way to read this story is to give Jacob credit for seeing in the warmth of Esau's welcome a real danger of being drawn into a lengthy stay and partnership with his brother; a partnership that could never be a spiritual one, and which would right from the start be a drag and a hindrance in terms of spiritual obedience. How much we need the New Testament warning about the unequal yoke (2 Cor. 6:14-7:1). Note what happened next. Jacob, having evaded the issue instead of taking his stand in faith, travelled on to Succoth and then to Shechem. And he settled down there and built cattle sheds (Succoth means "booths"). He also built an altar to God, the God of Israel. He was going to be a spiritual man. But he should have been at Bethel. Worship cannot be a substitute for obedience. What is more, disobedience is dangerous, as we shall see.

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34:1-12

With some obvious dedication Jacob, the returned backslider, built an altar and called it, "God, the God of Israel" or "Mighty is the God of Israel" (33:20). But the point is that Jacob had stopped short of Bethel. It was not a temporary hesitation nor one of those "slowing down" or "sticky" passages we all have from time to time in our Christian lives. He built a house as well as an altar and he was putting down roots. No doubt he would have protested that he was not committed in any way to staying there but actions speak louder than words. He built an altar and began to pray about his decisions after he had already made them. Now, Jacob was quite clear in his own mind that he was God's man, going into God's future, and this was his true desire. But for reasons that are not clear he stopped and settled in a place where he should not have been. We may say that he was not *far* out of God's will, and that is true. Every mistake is not a total disaster. But Jacob created a situation of harm and complication for others more than himself and it was the painful and indeed shocking developments that caused him to go flying back to God. Now, let us consider the story in its different aspects. It would seem that by settling in Shechem Jacob introduced his daughter Dinah to a society and culture she neither understood nor could cope with. She was not ready for it. She may have been precocious and too eager to go out and about too soon (1). On the other hand she may have been rebellious as her brothers were. There is no suggestion that she went looking for trouble or even thrill. Perhaps she just did not think. But look what happened and how it happened.

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34:1-12

We cannot tell if this was the first time Dinah had gone out and about in Shechem. We cannot tell if there had been several occasions when the prince and she had met. She may have been flattered by the attentions of such a man who would seem to be a "catch". On the other hand she may have been abducted by force or she may have been "invited" to the palace. It is not clear whether the man seduced her or raped her. Certainly she stayed on in the palace (17b, 26) and Shechem intended marriage. In v.3 there is the clear affirmation that the man fell in love with her. But there are two very important things to note. First, the language used in v.2, 5 (took and violated) makes plain how the Bible regards unchastity. It is a sin against personality and a sin against God. We

need the stark words of 1 Cor. 6:15-20. In Old Testament Law the severity of the punishments for sexual sins indicates the radical attitude of God in such matters (Deut. 22:22ff). Second, in this relationship the physical took precedence over the emotional, romantic and the spiritual aspects and this can lead only to complications. This is why it is so important before we allow ourselves to become involved that we should seek the mind of the Lord, and that very often means seeking the counsel of those whose human and spiritual judgment we have learned to trust. Always remember that in the first romance in the Garden of Eden God took the woman to the man and both recognised at once that it was God's will, and His gift for united service. In a day when even among Christians there seems to be a casual attitude to this side of human relationships we do well to consider this statement in a Journal of Psychiatry. "Co-habiting, far from deepening a relationship, curtails the possibility of the two people getting to know each other as persons." In our story the arrangements went ahead for a marriage. We must go on to consider the reactions of the parties.

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34:13-24

We must still read in from the earlier part of the story. Shechem acted according to his own nation's culture and asked his father to negotiate the marriage contract with Dinah's father. Jacob heard what had happened and at first it seems he held his peace until his sons came home, so that there could be a family discussion (5). But some suggest that Jacob was already considering the economic advantages of an increasing liaison with this kingdom (9, 10). Jacob's sons, however, reacted very radically. They were angry, not only about their sister but ostensibly on spiritual grounds because of a man who had worked "folly in Israel" (v.7 AV and RSV). But it is all too easy to set high standards in some things for other people and at the same time lose sight of our own wrongs. Jacob's sons made use of the holy sign of God's covenant (circumcision) and debased it by making it an instrument for deceiving the men of Shechem (14). The equivalent would be organising a baptismal service or a communion service and inviting people to take part with the specific objective of getting them into your power in order to get vengeance on them. On top of the deceit there is the fierce and savage lawlessness and vengeance that seems far too radical by way of punishment for the wrong that had been done. It is not easy to be angry without falling into sin, and all who name the name of God need to learn that it belongs to God to exercise judgment (Rom. 12:19). This story makes plain the need for the law later on to stipulate *only* an eye for an eye. It is all too easy to react more than is necessary, right or safe, and when we are hurt and wronged we need to hurry into the presence of God for our own safety. Of course we must also note that the king and the prince were also guilty of deceit (20-23). But then they were pagans, not lightened with the light of God. The sons of Jacob were God's men, and a higher standard was expected from them.

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34:25-31

This is a grim story that is also sad. Dinah's two closest brothers Simeon and Levi (all three being children of Leah) along with their men were the first to take action but the others seem to have joined in for the plunder (25, 27). The sons were the avengers, acting in fury. Jacob, the father, seems to have wanted the way of appeasement, acting possibly in fear. In this evil situation both were wrong. What we have to see is that Jacob, somewhat out of the will of God, was beginning to manifest his former weakness and lack of resolution. There is no sign here of the man who wrestled with the angel and discovered that nothing was worth having if it meant losing out in usefulness to God. We find Jacob here more than a little attracted by the material advantages of dealing with this situation in a "soft" way. But we see also fear rather than faith emerging as the dominant attitude of Jacob (30). We also see how little respect the sons had for their father (31) and that is never a good sign whether in respect of a natural father or a spiritual one. There is a deep lesson here and it is very practical. When we are not right with God it is the weakest parts of our personalities that come to the fore and assert themselves, stealing from us our spiritual dignity and capacity, and reducing us in our own eyes and in the eyes of others. Be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might and put on God's armour to defend yourself in your own vulnerable areas (Eph. 6:10ff.). The shame and the cost of this incident made Jacob able and glad to

hear the voice of God, as we will read in the next chapter. But it all made an impression that Jacob never forgot. He knew what he should have done, and he made plain what he thought of his murderous sons in Gen 49:5-7.

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35:1

One single verse is enough. God spoke to His servant right in the middle of his failure and shame, and He spoke of a positive future. It was as if to emphasise to Jacob that not even this blunder, on top of all that had gone before, had cancelled out God's gracious plans for his future service. This is of course part of the marvel of the story of the Resurrection. The Risen Christ came to the company of disciples who were broken and miserable in their failure and He recommissioned them, giving them fresh heart and hope. Of course, in our story here, we must recognise that sore circumstances had been the means of grace to get Jacob back to God, and there is no doubt at all that what Jacob wanted more than anything now was to get away from Shechem, where he should never have been in the first place. God does indeed move in mysterious ways His wonders to perform. We would seldom choose His methods and that is just as well since we are so clouded and prejudiced in our thinking, and our motives are not always free from self-interest. But God's ways are higher than ours (Isa. 55:9) and in His providence all things do work together for good (Rom. 8:28) even when we cannot see that it is so. Note also how God takes Jacob back in thought to his experience in chapter 28:13-15. That may be the word to some today. Is God saying it is time to get back to the place of renewed vows and to taste the sweetness of a new surrender? When God called Jacob to go to Bethel and *there* make an altar, it was not just a call to get back into the centre of God's will and back into the way of obedience. The altar is not only the place of worship, it is the place of fellowship with God. And, as we are drawn back into close fellowship with God, we are drawn nearer to each other, and together we are ready to go forward in service (1 John 1:3,4,6,7).

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35:2-8

Jacob was now far more decisive and he was no longer prepared to be tolerant in respect of his own household's idolatry. He insisted that all the "clutter" they had acquired and kept should be put away, since it was an offence to God and a hindrance to both their blessing and their service. It may well have been that Jacob had turned a blind eye to the existence of these idols and magic charms (ear-rings) just to please Rachel because he loved her dearly. But it is not love to allow a loved one to go on in a way that is contrary to God and to have in her life things that simply hinder her spiritual development. He called his own family, including his bad tempered sons, to a new dedication and fresh start on the road of spiritual obedience, and Jacob himself took the lead. Do not forget, as we have already indicated, that it was only the impending chaos of his human situation that brought Jacob to this attitude and action of spiritual realism. But now Jacob gives testimony to God (3) recognising that it was God's gracious deliverances that had brought him thus far. He also recognises that his lack of spiritual example and leadership had led to a poison spreading through his whole family. He sees now that evil idolatry should have been dealt with at its first beginnings, and we likewise must learn that situations that need to be rectified simply go from bad to worse if left alone. Both Jacob and his family had so settled down that they had lapsed into the spiritual state of being neither cold nor hot (Rev.3:15, 16). But God knocked loudly at the door and, mercifully, Jacob responded. It is wonderful to think, although it is not specifically stated, that God forgives and takes back the penitent. What a Gospel (Isa. 1:18; Hos. 14:1-7; Ps.103:10). Our God is the Father of the prodigal son.

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35:2-8

There are two further important points to note. It is clear from v.4 that Jacob's personal return to God resulted immediately in a new spiritual authority in his family and a new decisiveness in his thinking. Keeping ourselves in a right relationship with God is the only way to be an effective instrument of His will and a clear channel of His blessing to others. If we get spiritually confused it is highly unlikely that we will be able to guide anyone else clearly and safely. A clean heart and a right spirit are of the essence of witness and service, as David

expressed so clearly in Psalm 51:6-13. The second thing to note is the providential activity of God as Jacob and his family made their way to Bethel. By a sovereign work of the Holy Spirit a great fear and a compelling restraint fell on the cities round about and Jacob journeyed without harm or hindrance. Proverbs 16:7 states a general principle but it must not be pressed to extreme in the light of Jesus' words in John 16:33 concerning the tribulation that true disciples will inevitably meet. At the same time divine protection is not a fiction. God watches over His people whether or not they are aware of it. Usually it is only when we look back over the way that we have come that we realise that we were being watched over and guided all the time. Do not fail to see in v.5 the clear teaching that evil is always under the control of God. It is not free, and any opportunity given to it is solely in order to further the purposes of God. Jacob built his altar and called the place "God of Bethel". But the joy and peace of his new surrender to God was mingled with sorrow because Deborah, who had served the family for two generations, died. She had been nurse when Jacob's mother was only a child. The place of her burial was called the "Oak of Weeping" (8). Perhaps Jacob was being made aware of the shortness and uncertainty of life and being made to think of what little time he might have left (Ps. 39:4-5).

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35:9-15

When someone has been out of God's will and confused and then returns to God in a new dedication and desire, what is needed more than anything else is a new awareness of God. This is exactly what Jacob was now given and his heart must have lifted in gladness as he became aware that God was again speaking to him in a way that he could understand. We do not know how God appeared to Jacob but we know it was to bless him (9). There was also to be a change of name from Jacob to Israel, almost as if God was indicating that what Jacob was by nature was not going to be allowed to hinder or prevent all that God purposed by His grace. In John 1:42 and Matt.16:17-18 we find Jesus saying the same to Peter and there is great hope and encouragement here for all of us who straggle with our personalities and temperaments and our inbuilt temptations. "You are you shall be." God is in the process of fashioning us into the people we could be and should be, and His skill and determination are illustrated so clearly in the story of the potter in Jer. 18:1-5ff. In so many ways Jacob had been a vessel that had been spoiled. But God re-worked the material and Jacob now heard God speaking of future service and blessing. He may well have wondered in doubt if all this could possibly be true of *him*. It seems almost too much to believe that a man who had been so foolish, stubborn, weak and wilful could have such a glorious future. But then, God said that He was God Almighty, the El Shaddai God, the All-Sufficient God. Jacob may well have been aware of the story of his grandfather Abraham in Gen. 17:1ff and this would have quickened his spirit, realising that the God of Abraham and Isaac was indeed *his* God. What Jacob did (14-15) was a repetition of 28:18-19 but much had happened in the intervening years "to make the second inwardly richer than the first. God's repetitions, if this is a sample, are turns of a spiral rather than a wheel." (Kidner)

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35:16-20

The name El Shaddai (All Sufficient) (11) stands over against human frailty and limitation to give assurance, comfort and encouragement. It is found in Gen. 17:1; 35:11; 43:14; 48:3 and 49:25 and we do well to grasp its significance because all too often when the pressures of life are great and the difficulties loom large we tend to lose heart because our concept of God is too small. Jacob's story moves on and we find him now in the school of sorrow for his much loved wife Rachel died in childbirth. But why was Jacob on the move again? Could he not rest at Bethel? Was this a journey taken at the command of God or simply set in motion by his own restless spirit? We need to be careful before committing ourselves. Whatever is not of faith is sin (Rom. 14:23). Was the journey too much for Rachel in her condition so near the time of the birth and had she been still at Bethel would the child have been born safely? Had Jacob's thoughtlessness led the wife that he loved into danger? Was Jacob too fond of his wife? Remember his tolerance about her idols (31:32). He had only one son by Rachel (Joseph) and the expectation of another son may have been a distraction. On the other hand, the death of Rachel in these circumstances may have been "just one of these things" that happen to all of us in this world. When Rachel was dying it was the sadness of her past life which was uppermost and she called the son, Ben-

oni, which means son of my sorrow. But Jacob, humbling himself under God's mighty hand, spoke in faith and re-named the child, Benjamin, son of the right hand. Perhaps Jacob was learning at last that his times really were in God's hand, and that God was indeed round about him planning his future (Jer. 29:11) and working it out in perfect love and method. But it was very sore for the man when his wife was taken from him. It was sorer still if the man sensed that God *had* to do this to preserve his future usefulness. Jesus' words in Matt. 10:35-39 are very searching.

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35:21-26

Jacob was certainly travelling through a valley of sorrow at this stage of his life. You can imagine how he would wish that he had never stayed in that area of Eder (21). We are told nothing of the circumstances leading up to this terrible breach of family honour (incest). Bilhah was Rachel's maid but according to custom she was regarded as a wife to Jacob and the shock of what was done must have shaken Israel (Jacob). Hopefully it also sobered and restrained others, although we cannot be sure of that. That Jacob should suffer such a blow from his own son is terrible and tragic, and it could well have broken him. What blame must attach to the woman we cannot tell but, if she enticed the man without being unduly interested in him save only as a "capture", she would not have been the first to do so, or the last. The enormity of Reuben's sin, and what it cost him in terms of his future life and work is made plain in 49:3-4. Already two of Jacob's sons had revealed their cruel passions (34:25) and now his first born son revealed his carnal lust and insensitivity, indifferent to man and to God. Of course, without minimising his guilt, we must see this as a direct assault of Satan on a family chosen and ordained in the sovereign grace of God for future service in the cause of the plan of salvation. We are not told of any sense of shame, let alone repentance on the part of Reuben and this is a sign of great significance. Remember that this man Reuben bore in his body the mark and sign of God's covenant. In like manner we who believe bear the mark and sign of the covenant of baptism. How wise a guard we must set on ourselves lest we give opportunity to the Devil to blast our lives, hinder our service and dishonour the name of God. We must guard also lest we break the hearts of those who love us and to whom we owe a great debt. Read 1 Cor. 10:1-13.

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35:27-29

For Jacob it was one blow after another: the death of Deborah, the death of Rachel, the incest of his son. In that context it is now recorded that Jacob's family stands complete. His twelve sons were born and the future lay ahead and the saga of the twelve tribes of Israel was ready to begin. But now Jacob faced the death of his old father Isaac and the break with the past generation was complete. As Jacob stood by the side of that grave would he not have sore regrets as he thought of how he had deceived his father; how he had left home and been away for so very long; and how there had been so little opportunity to show his father that he was a changed man?

Calvin comments that v.29 indicates that Isaac is well spoken of and that his long, full life suggests that the blessing of God rested on him, and that he was ready and willing to go. This may well be the case, and many a man who has been foolish and indulgent and worldly in his earlier days has been drawn back to God so that his last years are the happiest and the most spiritual. A footnote in Calvin's commentary points out that though recorded here the death of Isaac did not in fact take place until fifteen years later, after the events of chapters 37-38 and the selling of Joseph. That would mean, contrary to what we said earlier, that God in His mercy granted father and son a time of fellowship together during which Jacob no doubt would have recounted the dealings of God with him. Perhaps Isaac learned something of what it meant for a father to welcome back a prodigal. Heb.11:20 speaks of Isaac in terms of faith, but old Isaac must have had many regrets about things he could not put right. It is best to live so that you are ready to go at any time.

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36:1-43

A chapter full of names is not inspiring reading but what is recorded in the first eight verses gives the key to the chapter. As the next stage of God's work of salvation begins we are told of the family of Esau disappearing from

the picture. They are no longer a relevant contribution to what is going on. Esau is Edom, and far into the future we find the prophet Obadiah speaking God's judgment on Edom. Four times in our chapter (1, 8, 19, 43) it is emphasised that Esau is Edom, as if to make plain he does not change. This is the hard, impenitent spirit that despises all spiritual values, and we need to go back to 25:31-34 to see this mans contempt of his spiritual heritage. In Heb.12:16-17 we are told that Esau *wanted* the blessing but had no change of heart. His tears were those of anger and frustration rather than repentance. In 28:6-9 we see the deliberate perversity of Esau in taking a Canaanite for his wife, and as the years went past he did not change That is why in today's verses we find Esau taking the deliberate decision to move himself and all his people away from Jacob (6). The "official" explanation in v.7 is given materialistic terms, but underlying this is the deliberate choice to move away from the way of faith, and away from the man and the family on whom God's hand rested for purpose and blessing. Esau either could not or would not see that God was with Jacob in a way that He was not with himself. No doubt the deceit and duplicity of Jacob caused some of Esau's contempt, but we need to be careful before we blame the sins of others for our own backsliding. There are many reasons why some people contract out of their place in a work that is blessed by God. God knows the truth of every situation and we must judge nothing before the time (1 Cor. 4:1-5). Esau is Edom, and he fades from the scene. Jacob is Israel, God's man who, in spite of all his sins and failures, is to be the instrument and servant of God in days to come.

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36:1-43

Ponder this chapter again and think what has happened to some people you knew in the past. Where are they? Are they still in contact with Christian things? Are you disturbed to discover sometimes just how totally pagan they and their children have become. Here in v.9ff. we are told of Esau's sons and grandsons as if to emphasise the succession of unbelief. Think of families where for generations no one has had any interest in God let alone faith in Christ. Think of areas of our land, once blessed in Gospel ministry and salvation, where now there is a hardness that seems beyond influence. We seem to be being told here that Esau made his choice for himself and his people after him and God confirmed them in their choice (Rom. 1:28). If we look at v.12 we see the name Amalek, and that name echoes in the Old Testament in terms of bitter enmity to Israel. We have already commented on Esau moving away out of the main line of significant history, but we must also think of this in terms of the work of God moving forward and onward and leaving behind those who, because of unbelief and totally materialistic considerations, have declined to go on. This is something that is being repeated wherever there is a work of God's Word bearing God's blessing. If we do not give diligence to make our salvation and our service sure we will be left behind. Think of the warning in Hebrews 2:1-4 regarding drifting. Remember that as we drift so the truth drifts away from us and we are less and less aware of it. Little wonder Heb.4:1-2,11-13 urges us on, as does Heb.6:1-3. We have to be serious. Esau went away and became the source of opposition to God's people that lasted for generations. Read Heb.3:12-14.

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37:1-2a

The mention of Jacob here serves to bridge the story over to Joseph and begins the long saga of events that brought the whole family of Israel into Egypt and finally into slavery just as God had foretold many years previously (Gen.15:13-16). That early reference in Genesis indicates something of the context of the story we are to study because it spoke of the iniquity of the Amorites developing and being allowed to develop. Added to this, as we have just seen, is the fact of the disaffected family of Esau, disaffected from God and from God's people, who are the "carriers" of God's purposes. As the story goes on we will be faced with the bitterness, jealousy and scheming of men but we have to see it all as being under the hand of God. In due time we shall come to the glorious statement of Joseph as to how God over-ruled the very real wickedness of the brothers (50:20) and we do well to pause and to ponder the workings of God's providence. His ways can baffle at times, just as the disciples were baffled by the "disaster" of the Cross until they saw it in its true light (Acts 2:22-24). Viewing the situation from a distance (and being wise after the event), we shall see very clearly the follies and errors of even great men. But we must also be amazed that God uses those who are so very far from perfect,

refusing to allow His servants' sins to frustrate His purposes. He deals with His people, but He saves and uses them in and through all His discipline. We do not excuse people's sins, especially our own, but we must see that God is greater than our sins (1 John 3:20). Read Heb. 12:3-11; Jas. 1:2-4; 1 Pet. 1:3-9. God is dealing with us and working through us. This makes sense of a lot of things.

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37:2-4

We could entitle this section "The life of Joseph" even though the story of Jacob is not quite finished. Indeed he does not disappear from the scene for a long time yet, but the significant focus is now Joseph. The context of the story is the atmosphere of evil and unbelief, with pressures upon the children of Israel from various alien cultures. They lived in a real world, just as we do, and they were infected by the spirit of worldliness just as we are. There was the clash of personalities and tensions between the older sons and the younger ones, a tension complicated by the foolish favouritism of an old father and older grandfather. Remember that Joseph had grown through his first seventeen years of life with both Isaac and Jacob in the background. Remember that the birth of Joseph had signaled the beginning of a significant move in Jacob's life (30:25) and it seems that Jacob had always doted on that particular son. But he did not seem to have grasped the fact that his son was to be significant in God's work, nor did he realise as he should have done that if the boy was significant, then he would be the target for Satan's attacks to seek to spoil or prevent what God was planning. This is something we must remember about our own children and should make us pray with earnest faith. It should also make us careful lest we "spoil" or hinder them. What a tragedy if our attitudes or example were to turn one of our own children away from God. How tragic if our self indulgence in respect of our children drew on them the enmity of others as it certainly did in Jacob's family. We cannot tell from these verses if Joseph was simply a "tell-tale" or if his reporting to his father was the right and necessary exposure of evil being done behind Jacob's back. There is a time to speak, a time to tell whoever is in authority, and when that time comes it is not only wrong but sinful to adopt the "don't tell" attitude.

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37:5-11

Keep clearly in mind that Joseph was a chosen man for God's service. But he was also proud, precocious, spoiled and arrogant and far too aware of his spiritual destiny. Without doubt he needed the fires of trial to purge him of these graceless attitudes and to work in him that balance and dependability that would fit him to be the long-term servant of God, the work of God and the people of God. Of course, the brothers and the father were not free from criticism. Why was it that they had no awareness of the significance of Joseph, no willingness even to entertain that thought, and apparently no thought of God being in the process of developing and furthering His work? Were they all too busy with their flocks and too occupied with the mere business of life? We shall see soon that in their spiritual slackness their moral convictions were far less real than they should have been. But concentrate on Joseph. He had a dream, and God was in it. But should he not have kept this to himself until he was clearer as to what it meant? There is a time to speak out plainly and to declare the will of God. But there is a time to wait on the Lord and to look to Him to open the way and to make the path plain. Joseph obviously had very little awareness of his brothers' deep feelings or he would not have thrown in their face their spiritual inferiority compared to his superiority. This will be a fascinating story to follow and we learn from it to consider well what God may be planning for us. If we begin to see this more clearly and are willing to do His will, then be careful not to spoil it by presumption or by undue reticence or fear. God prepares us for our future. See to it that we learn.

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37:12-24

We were introduced to Joseph when he was seventeen years of age and we need to remind ourselves that by the time he was thirty he was Prime Minister of Egypt. But at the beginning of the story he was so consumed with a sense of his own importance that his attitudes set in motion what had all the appearances of a work of the Devil

that endangered his very life. Youth is the time to learn to bear the yoke and to learn discipline. If we do not learn it in the comparative security of home then God must use other methods, and these methods can catch up on us rather suddenly, as Joseph discovered. We are not told about the young man's reactions when he was set upon by his brothers. He may have been angry or self-pitying and he was very aware his father was not there to take his side. It is an unpleasant story but it would have been even sadder in the long run if this young man, so full of potential, had never fulfilled that potential. There were no dreams or visions now. There seemed to be no word from God and no intervention by God. It may have been that Joseph had to think things through as he lay in the pit, to see whether his dreams had been simply a projection of his own day-time thoughts of ambition. That ambition may have been instilled into him by his mother who had for so long been denied motherhood that she may well have indoctrinated her son to think himself better than all his brothers who, after all, were not sons of Jacob's favourite wife. We cannot be sure of these things. But there is good reason to believe that it was through this sore experience that Joseph began to be the man of God he was destined to be. So very often it is when we are "down in the depths" that we begin to look up to God. After all, when we are really down, there is no other direction that we can look. But do not forget there is a Devil. Remember 1 Pet. 5:8. Peter remembered.

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37:12-24

Consider Joseph's s brothers because they had grown up in the same atmosphere and with the same pressures as their younger brother. There were all sorts of passions and prejudices at work within them, as we saw in the story of Shechem (Chap. 34). These men were in a precarious spiritual condition and the attitude and actions of Joseph simply accentuated this. He may have been the most spiritually minded of the sons but he was no help to his weaker brothers. In his proud and precipitate words and actions Joseph not only brought danger to himself and to the purposes of God which centred on him, he caused the latent evil in his brothers to flare up in an almost uncontrollable way. He proved a stumbling block to them (Rom. 14:13). The murderous plan was made and it is quite amazing to see it that it was Reuben (think of 25:22) who exercised restraint. If he had not weakened his spirit by his sin he might well have been able to take a far more decisive stand against this unrighteousness being done against his brother. Of course, as v.22 says, Reuben had good intentions. But they came to nothing. That is a problem that many people have. We mean well, but somehow never get round to it. Turn back again to Joseph and see in this anointed servant of God something of a fore-shadowing of the experience of the Saviour. Joseph was devalued and rejected by his own. His significance as a chosen vessel unto the Lord was totally unrecognised. We must accept that even if Joseph's behaviour had been full of the grace of God (as Jesus was full of grace and truth) his own brothers would still have hated and refused Him. Such is the blindness and bitterness of unbelief.

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37:25-36

We shall take two days to study this passage because it is full of instruction. We said yesterday that Reuben's good intentions came to nothing but it is still true that he prevented the death of Joseph. His motives may have been mixed. He was out of favour with his father for obvious reasons and he may have thought a "good turn" to Joseph would reinstate him. He was also aware that as eldest son he would be held responsible for any wrong done if a brother's blood was shed. The picture in v.25 almost points forward to a similar situation when Jesus was crucified: "And sitting down they watched Him there." At first there seems to have been total indifference to the distress of their brother even though they were aware of it (42:21). Then Judah spoke, and we see that in some measure a spirit of disquiet was operating. Possibly he knew he could not win over his brothers to free Joseph and what he suggested was in measure self-interest (26) but later on we see the emerging of a real greatness in this man (43:9; 44:33). But here there is no greatness. Kidner points out that the word "profit"(AV v26) means "rake-off", and in this calculating attitude there is certainly no sign of any concern for their old father and his reaction. The deed was done and the brothers collected their money and went home. It was the Midianites who carried Joseph forward to his next place of service in the cause of God. Very soon Reuben, who no doubt had been on duty with the flocks, and who had been trying to work out a rescue attempt, returned to

find the treachery completed and his reaction was one of self--centred agitation. No-one seemed to be bothered about Joseph. How easily "self" can dominate our whole life.

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37:25-36

Kidner points out that there is irony in the fact that it was a goat that was chosen for the means of deceiving Jacob. Remember it was goats that were used by Jacob and his mother to deceive Isaac (27:9, 16). When the brothers reported back their father would have been well aware of the cold indifference of their words in v.32 when they spoke of "your son". But that hurt was nothing compared to the distress of losing Joseph, and Jacob made no attempt to hide his grief. He made it plain that losing Joseph could not be compensated for by all the rest of his family. That shows just how unbalanced Jacob had been in his family love and in some measure explains, though it does not excuse, the sons' contempt for their father. The New Testament says fathers are not to provoke their children (Eph. 6:4) nor must neglect on the one hand or over-indulgence on the other be allowed to distort their developing personalities. Of course we must allow for Jacob having some turbulent thoughts of regret about his own life and its spasmodic backsliding. In our original notes on this story (away back in 1969) we said "How often we hear old men who have been changed and transformed by the grace of God late in life when their active days are over, mourning the wasted years and wishing it had been different." We cannot call back the past and we rejoice in the comfort of grace that forgives and brings so much sweetness when it seems humanly impossible. But we can do something about the present. True repentance as to the past will bring the present and future into focus and consecrate them to the service of God. Have you more than your share of perplexities and disappointments just now? God is in it. He always is, and He works wonders.

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38:1-30

What a grim and ugly story this is and how it exposes the atmosphere and morals of society in general and Jacob's family in particular. We begin to see how good and providential a thing it was for Joseph to be away from that situation and atmosphere lest he be tempted and contaminated. Yes, we know the story, and how Joseph was tempted in Egypt but God had a remedy that would not have operated in the homeland. Would it not be sad if someone had to be sent away from us in order to preserve their persons and their usefulness to God? But there is another solemn lesson here. We are shown the potential for degeneracy when faith ceases, when men and women are at cross-purposes with God, and when people are no longer consciously aware of God. We shall soon read how very different it was with Joseph compared with his brother Judah. It is amazing just how quickly Judah went down into the morass. His Canaanite wife is not even named. But should he have drifted into this kind of marriage? Was his wife in any sense a "believer"? Did he even bother to find out what kind of person she was or was it just a case that Judah was desperate to get married in order to have children and so guarantee the family succession that was so important? One thing is clear. There seems to have been no reference to God and no attempt to seek His will and His blessing. That is no way to get married! The years went past and the sons grew up. Was the marriage reasonably happy so long as God was not mentioned? We are not told of the wickedness of Er, but it made God very angry. The story of Onan conforms to standard practice (cf. Deut. 25:5ff) and the word "when" (9 AV) should read "whenever" (NIV). The man's attitude was one of deliberate refusal of all that was expected of a son by his father and his brother's widow. We must remember that it was Tamar's right to be the mother of Judah's heir. The story must develop further.

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38:1-30

The practices of these far off days are strange to us but the continuance of the family name was of vital significance to all in Israel. In v.11 Judah made a promise he had no intention of keeping. In time Tamar realised she had been deceived and decided on her course of action. Judah by this time had degenerated to the level of living for immediate carnal satisfaction, and he seems to have had neither hesitation nor shame. It was a casual liaison that meant nothing. For Tamar it was a means to an end; the end being revenge, or motherhood,

or both. In v.24 Judah, the hypocrite, acted the part of an indignant man of God until he was exposed and only then did he confess his sin and shame (26). It is a shock when sin finds us out, and the nature and value of the shock is seen in whether or not there is repentance; and the evidence of repentance is a change in life. We are given here only the facts of the story and no moral assessment is made. As we go on with the story of Joseph we shall see that there is a very different way of dealing with temptation and injustice. Joseph will show us how to do so, even though he paid a high price. Some observe that Judah's words in v.24 indicate the tendency to set one standard for men and another for women (cf. Hos. 4:14). The amazing thing in our story is that God, in sovereign grace, over-rules and works through the most glaring wrongs of men and women to bring to pass His good and perfect will. In Ruth 4:18-22; Matt. 1:3; and Lk. 3:33 we find the names of Tamar and Perez in the genealogy of the royal line of Judah. Where sin abounded, grace much more abounded (Rom. 5:20). This should make us worship, with godly fear.

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39:1-6

The story again focuses on Joseph, but we see at once that it is very different Joseph we are now dealing with. His sore trials had worked a new grace in him (Rom. 5:3-5; James 1:2-4; 2 Pet. 1:3-11). Joseph was a slave, but God was with him, and Joseph knew it. It was also evident to Potiphar that God was with Joseph and that he was a man to be trusted. In a very real sense Joseph was the best thing that had happened to Egypt for a long time, and that nation was blessed for Joseph's sake. But as yet no-one, not even Joseph, knew just how significant it was to prove that this handsome young man of faith was among them. It seems that the Devil was still very aware of the significance of Joseph and a fierce attack was being prepared. But before we go on to that part of the story take time to think back over what Joseph had come through. Think of the pit his brothers threw him into and their indifference to his pleas. Think of the slave train with its humiliation and privation. He was sold as a mere chattel and must often have felt that he was totally forgotten by all, including God. Perhaps there even faded from his conscious thinking the intimations God had given him of a significant spiritual future. After all, there was no sign at all of that coming to pass. But it seems right to say that Joseph, like Jesus, learned obedience through the things he suffered (Heb. 5:8). Read Psalm 105:16-22 which emphasises the cruel experience Joseph suffered. But remember, he did not become bitter. "Out, of the presses of pain comes the soul's best wine." It makes all the difference to the outcome when our attitude accepts sore situations and yields to God in them. Joseph came out of his sufferings a man of strength and grace.

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39:7-10

We need the end of v.6 to set the picture. Joseph was a fine figure of a man and it may well have been that the woman had "noticed" him in an interested way right from the start. But her attraction was a carnal one and the time came when she went after Joseph with specific intent. She did the chasing, and this is very different from what happened in Gen. 2:22 when God brought the woman to the man. Of course in Joseph's situation the woman was not entitled to start a relationship. She was not free. But even if she had been, it is the man who should take the initiative, not least to persuade the woman that it is both safe and right for her to open her heart to respond to love. It is quite thrilling to see how Joseph reacted to this situation. He had opportunity because his master would never suspect him, but Potiphar's trust awakened a glorious response of righteousness in Joseph. How could he deceive and despise and deal wrongly with the one who had treated him with such goodness and grace? But the real anchor and inspiration for Joseph was God. This was what really mattered. He was determined he would not sin against God. All he had gone through had worked this grace in him. He was God's man and as such he would have no trifling with sin. Now notice that after the first blatant temptation was resisted the woman persisted, and we see the crafty technique of the Devil at the end of v.11 when the house was empty. We can imagine the woman saying, "We won't do anything wrong. I respect your convictions; but we can be good friends; surely there is nothing wrong in that?" But Joseph would not even be with her. He made it his business to make sure, as far as he could, that their paths did not cross. This is indeed walking in the

light (1 John 1:5-7) out in the open where it is safe. This is why we need to watch as well as pray (Matt. 26:41). "Lead us not into temptation" is a prayer that we can answer by refusing to be stupid.

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39:11-23

Remember that Joseph could not change his place of work or residence. He was a slave. The day came when circumstances favoured the woman. No one was near, and the temptation came with sudden power. Joseph did the only thing a sensible man of God could do. He ran. That was the way of escape (cf. 1 Cor. 10:12-13). But in a sense there seemed no escape and the woman's shrill voice slandered Joseph. "Hell has no fury like a woman scorned". And when that woman is a tool of the Devil there is no limit to what she will say and do. Note how cold and calculating she was. This was no momentary cry of frustration, it was the cold deliberateness of Hell. The interesting thing is that Potiphar, although recorded as being angry, did not have Joseph put to death as he might well have done. Perhaps the husband had suspicions of his wife! Ending up in jail, Joseph's public reputation was in shreds because he was a well-known man and this "story" could not be hid. But perhaps the woman's reputation was more public than she imagined. Things have a habit of getting out when we are acting contrary to God's servants and His work. Jesus spoke of things being shouted from the housetops (Lk. 12:1-3). But the Bible also speaks of our sins being covered and put out of sight and out of God's remembrance (Rom. 4:6-8; Jer. 31:34). Learn from Joseph's story. When we are set to do God's will we will know what to do. Joseph stood firm when it was necessary and reasoned his case. When it was necessary he took to his heels and ran, not waiting for explanations. As he ran, he must have looked to God. How many can understand the intensity of his prayer? Who can understand his desolation as the prison door clanged shut? What a challenge to faith: Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him (Job 13:15 AV).

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39:11-23

God's ways are perfect. Sooner rather than later Joseph must have become aware of the fact that he was in the only place in Egypt where that evil woman could not get at him. He was safe. God had organised it. What a sense of relief must have come to him. But what of the future? What of the service to which he believed God had called him? Joseph may well have looked back to think over the way God had led him. He had been delivered from his brothers' murderous intentions. He had prospered in Egypt and had learned many things regarding administration of business in Potiphar's house. He had been delivered from the fierce attack of evil that was so manifestly contrary to God. Would God do all that simply to let it all be undone and to leave him in the lurch? It cannot be so. Paul affirmed this in Phil. 1:6 and also discovered that the things that happen work out for the furtherance of God's purposes (Phil 1:12-14). Of course, it is not easy to see and even less easy to feel that all things work together for good when everything seems to be going wrong (Rom. 8:28). Now, without minimising Joseph's human hurt (the saints of God are intensely human) read the last three verses of the passage. God was with Joseph. How could it be otherwise? Later in history God was to say, "Them that honour Me, I will honour" (1 Sam. 2:30). Whatever circumstances may be, and no matter what criticisms are levelled, when God is pleased with a man and his work it will be obvious. But remember Psalm 105:17-19: there was a grim spell. There was the death before the resurrection. The two go together. The truth is that whatever his circumstances, Joseph was the same man. He did not have to adjust. This is integrity.

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40:1-23

Read the whole of this well-known story to get the thrill of it and then look carefully at the details. It was not a brief weekend that Joseph spent in the dungeon (15). The chapter begins, "Some time later.. ..." and at the end we find that yet another two years go past (41:1). Having tasted the bitterness of losing his high position and being left in jail, Joseph was well qualified to share with the butler and baker, who were high-ranking court officials, the hurt that came to them. Of course, it seems that their "offence" was something real and deserving of punishment whereas Joseph was without guilt. Again and again in the story we are constrained to think about

Jesus who had no sin and who yet tasted the feelings of human experience to the full (Heb. 2:17-18; 4:15-16). It may have been some comfort to Joseph that the captain of the guard (some suggest it was Potiphar) saw to it that these important prisoners were put under his charge. It may have been to make sure they were carefully supervised or it may have been an act of kindness on the jailer's part to give Joseph some congenial company. God thinks of all the needs of His children. He is kind, and any wounds He causes are for our good and our blessing (Job 5:17-18). We must learn to see our sore experiences in terms of our fruitfulness in service. "All corn must go through the mill before it can become the bread of life to others." Joseph certainly went "through the mill" but the amazing thing is that wherever he went he was a blessing to others and not a "drain". This is all the more amazing when you remember that all along he seems to have had no-one like minded with whom to have fellowship on a human level, let alone a spiritual level. What a man he was! And what a transformation from the rather unpleasant young man he was at the beginning of the story.

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40:1-23

There are deep practical lessons to be learned from this chapter concerning spiritual service. By the providence of God Joseph was in the place where he was needed to serve the future purposes of God. There was little obvious evidence of God being in the situation and little indication that important issues were being worked out. But it is clear that Joseph maintained his spiritual life and kept in fellowship with God so that when the butler and baker had their dreams Joseph was so in tune with God that he was able to interpret the dreams. Note also, and this is an indication of spiritual rightness and stature, Joseph was human enough and interested enough to notice the troubled faces of the two men and he cared enough to ask them about it. The men in turn had learned enough about Joseph to know that he was a man it was wise to talk to, and they did. Immediately Joseph related the whole situation to God. He witnessed to his faith in God, and it seems he had a real awareness that God was in this situation in a significant way. That is why Joseph not only interpreted the dream but made his plea in v.14-15, making it plain as he did so that he was an innocent man. There is something of a grandeur about Joseph in his manifest spiritual maturity. In his earlier days, as a result of his dreams, he had been a young man totally absorbed with his own spiritual experiences and his own interpretation of them. But now, he was aware that when God's hand is on a man, and when His blessing attends a man, it is in order to make him a servant of God and of others. This was something Jesus' disciples took a long time to learn (Matt. 20:20-28). But keep in mind in our story that the positive fruit of Joseph's service here did not become evident for another two years (40:23; 41:1,9).

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40:1-23

The great thing about Joseph is that he was ready, willing and able when opportunity for service came. This was to be true two years later when Pharaoh had his dreams. Now it is not easy to keep spiritually fresh in the long dreary spells when everything seems negative and even contradictory of all your prayers and hopes. Proverbs 13:12 speaks of hope deferred making the heart sick but it did not do so to Joseph. Did he still think of those earlier intimations from God that he had a significant future? We, who have read the story through, know that he had but there was very little confirmation of this to Joseph in his grim circumstances. What is more, he had to be the messenger of gloom and doom to the baker and that could not have been easy. The Lord's messengers do not always have good news to deliver. Indeed, if we are faithful to God and His Gospel we will be at one and the same time a messenger of salvation to some and judgment to others (2 Cor. 2:15-16). No doubt Joseph would often have prayed earnestly to God that his circumstances might be changed and that he might be set free to serve God as his heart so much desired to do. But his important service at that time was to be done in prison, and in that prison he was being kept safe and prepared for service far greater than he yet realised. Think of how Paul pleaded with God to remove his "thorn in the flesh" (2 Cor. 12:1-10). How we need to wait upon God, accepting the dispositions of His providence, so that we might serve Him the better. Did not Jesus speak about the fruitful branches being pruned with the sharp knife, cutting them back with seeming harshness, so that they would bear more fruit. (John 15:1-2). When the knife cuts, God purposes a crop.

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41:1-13

Sometimes God seems to be very slow. We in turn tend to be very superficial assuming that when there is much "happening" it must be a time of spiritual significance. One of our hymns says,

"But the slow watches of the night
Not less to God belong." (Hosmer)

Another hymn, seldom sung, says,

"For while the tired waves, vainly breaking
Seem here no painful inch to gain,
Far back, through creeks and inlets making,
Comes silent, flooding in, the main." (Clough)

Joseph may not have been aware of it but it was getting near high tide. But it was two full years of waiting for Joseph. How long did he cherish hopes that the butler would remember? It would have been so easy for God's man to react in bitterness. The temptation was greater than it had been at the beginning. He could have been bitter about the past and his brothers' wrong dealing with him. He could have been bitter about both Potiphar and his wife. Should not the man who had been so well and faithfully served have known Joseph would not be a traitor? He could have been bitter about his present circumstances, their long continuance and the manifest ingratitude of the butler. It is easy to become bitter and we are warned against it in Heb. 12:15 because it poisons ourselves and others. It is not easy to learn faith, patience, endurance and continuance, but according to Rom. 5:1-5 trials and tribulations are the things that produce these graces. We need to learn to wait upon God (Ps. 27:14) and to humble ourselves under His mighty hand (1 Pet. 5:6-11). But we must also see to it that we are doing right (1 Pet. 4:19). Make sure you are doing what pleases God. This is vital because what is not of faith is sin (Rom. 14:23).

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41:14-24

When God's time comes everything can happen very quickly. But remember that Joseph's story began when he was seventeen (37:2) and he was now thirty (41:46). Did it take all that time to make him ready? Joseph's heady speech at the beginning of his story suggests that he felt himself ready then. In Luke 22:24-34 Peter was quite sure *he* was ready and able, but in spite of the warning Jesus gave him, when the time came he collapsed. In the story of Abraham twenty years elapsed from his call to the significant birth of Isaac and of that spell there were thirteen years about which nothing is recorded (Gen. 16:16- 17:1). In Jacob's story twenty years were spent in the irritating but refining service of Laban before the real advance of service began. In Moses' case, two-thirds of his life were past before he was ready to lead God's people at the time of the Exodus. In the case of Paul there were the silent years in Arabia between his baptism and his mighty missionary labours. What is the lesson? If God has a work for you to do in the future there will be secret preparation under His providence and you must make sure you are learning what God is teaching. If the work God calls you to is to be a long-term work, that is a work that lasts rather than a "flash-in-the-pan" commotion, then there must be a well-laid solid foundation. This is what was happening in Joseph's life. We are not told how much he realised this at the present stage of his experience. But then, God often does not explain in detail in order that we might learn to trust Him. He puts us in positions where the only thing we can do is to trust. The extent to which we learn this and are prepared to go forward with many unresolved problems is the extent to which we will be ready for God when the time comes.

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41:14-24

These seemingly slight verses are truly instructive. The details in v.14 make plain that Joseph's time in prison had not been easy and had indeed brought a real degree of personal humiliation. But the verse also makes plain

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that it was to Pharaoh that Joseph was brought, right to the throne of the ruler of Egypt. Now, if the butler had remembered earlier, Joseph might well have been released two years previously to go back to the relative obscurity and real danger of Potiphar's house. There is always "reason" in God's dealings and His plan is to lead us to greater rather than lesser service. But we need to be prepared. Now, for Joseph there had been much suffering. Was it all necessary? No. He brought some of it on himself by youthful arrogance. Some of it was the result of the butler's lack of gratitude, and his self-centred forgetfulness added colossally to Joseph's suffering at a time when he seemed to have become a true man of God. Perhaps there may have been some hidden necessity for this, because God does not afflict unnecessarily. He remembers our humanity (Ps. 103:13-14). But think of Jesus' "extra" suffering in Gethsemane (Matt. 26:40) and the words of the Psalmist, (Ps. 142:4; Ps. 69:19-20) and Paul's words in 2 Tim. 4:9-17. At the same time we must never forget that God is always present. Pharaoh had a dream that worried him and that was instrumental in bringing him to deal with God, just as a bad bout of sleeplessness brought another king to a similar crisis (Esther 6:1). On another occasion a king got a terrible fright and learned that he was not "seeing" things as a result of alcohol delirium but was being dealt with by God. How we underestimate God. How we need to affirm again and again, "I believe in the Holy Spirit." He knows no limitations and He works to bring to pass the will of God.

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41:25-36

Try to imagine the thrill and amazement Joseph must have felt when his situation changed so swiftly and dramatically. He must have been a man of much prayer and close walk with God to have coped so magnificently. Think of the many opportunities for witness that we allow to slip past unrealised. Now look back to the immediate and confident answer in v.16. Joseph had no desire to have the centre of the stage. He made it plain that he was only a servant of God and he pointed Pharaoh to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But Joseph went on to stress that God is not just the interpreter of worrying dreams. He is also the God of providence, active in the affairs of men and nations, not only on a personal level but also in the realm of agriculture and national economics (28:32). This is important for us because almost unconsciously we have been so indoctrinated with materialistic philosophy that we tend to interpret national and world events solely in terms of economic factors and the pressures of international finance. We forget that there is a God who is active in human affairs and that all the "happenings" of life have to be related to Him. But we must be careful in "interpreting" events and must not jump to conclusions. The years of plenty ("we've never had it so good") did not necessarily mean the nation was in good heart and in favour with God. The years of famine (economic collapse, unemployment and food relief schemes) did not necessarily mean that the nation was evil and under God's rebuke. Of course these interpretations must not be excluded. The Bible makes it plain that it is God who gives or withholds the rain (Deut. 11:13-17). The Bible also makes it plain that we live in a fallen world so that irregularities, complications and disasters must be expected (Gen. 3:17-19).

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41:25-36

Note how accurately Joseph assessed human experience in v.30. How quickly we forget our many blessings and deliverances when our circumstances change, and how quickly we complain against man and against God when our immediate satisfactions are restricted or denied. Note also that it was made plain to Pharaoh that the nation's circumstances would get worse and worse. This was not going to be a brief "hiccup" of economic distress. It would last and God was to be in it all the way through. But what was God doing? He was using Egypt and its circumstances (as He is entitled to do) to further His purposes, and by means of international complications He was speaking to His own people, Jacob and his family, (the church) to awaken them to righteousness, to recover them from backsliding, and to prepare them for future generations. We must not lose sight of the fact that Jacob and his family were also to suffer under famine. We may talk of "coincidences" and there are things that just seem to happen, what one commentator calls "life's irregularities" in a fallen world. But we must always remember that God's ways, though mysterious, are higher and better than ours (Isa. 55:8-9). A word of warning is necessary. All dreams do not necessarily have deep spiritual significance. Some

of them are the result of too much coffee or toasted cheese late at night.. Nor must we evaluate every "famine", accident or disaster in specific terms or give them significant meanings. What we must do is to remember that God is in charge, and power belongs to Him (Rom. 11:33-36; Ps. 62:11 AV).

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41:37-45

Our chapter, which began with Joseph a forgotten prisoner in jail, now tells of Joseph as Prime Minister of Egypt. It all happened very quickly, or so it seemed. But if we look back to v.33-36 we see the wise words of a man who had learned well the principles of business administration in the service of Potiphar, and who knows but that he may have been able to do post graduate studies with his books in jail? Never think that what is happening now (although it may seem remote from spiritual activity) is irrelevant in respect of future life and service. God is the great Master-craftsman, and is wonderfully good at training apprentices. Read, for example, Heb. 12:5-11. When Pharaoh spoke in v.38, mentioning the Spirit of God, he was no doubt far from clear as to the full significance of what he was saying. He was a man who was head of a nation that believed in many gods. But Joseph's testimony in v.16 had made an impression and it was manifestly clear to Pharaoh that Joseph's God was with him. In spite of all that had been said and done against this man God was pleased to let His blessing rest on him, and God does not bless that which is not of Himself. This is one reason why we should be careful about criticising any person on whom the hand of the Lord rests. It does not mean they are perfect. But it does mean they are chosen and anointed of God and that must determine our attitude (cf. Ps. 105:12-15; Isa, 54:17). Joseph is set second only to Pharaoh and the ring, the garments, and the giving of a wife were all elements intended to conform Joseph to the culture of Egypt, as indeed was the shaving referred to in v.14. No doubt these "robes" and chain of office were necessary and Joseph did not refuse to wear them. Perhaps he had no option for Pharaoh was totalitarian and Joseph had been a slave and a convicted prisoner. But, after his clear confession of the God of Israel, no-one would think he had adopted Egypt's religion. Would that we all stood out so clearly and recognisably as God's servants.

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41:46-57

Joseph began his administration of Egypt's affairs and there is still no mention or sign of this having anything to do with his father Jacob, his family, or God's plans and revealed purposes for his life. Though he lived as an Egyptian, married to an Egyptian wife, he gave his sons Hebrew names. He had not forgotten his true identity nor would he deny it. His first son was named by way of testimony to the fact that he refused to let the past embitter him. He saw now the hand of God in it all, just as he saw more clearly his own wrongs and failures. But he allowed the past to go, and that is a lesson we all need to learn. Granted there are times we must make restitution to those we have harmed and hurt, but if we believe truly in forgiveness then we must believe that our sins are blotted out and forgotten. They may not and must not be allowed to call the tune in the present or to hinder the future. Forget the past: the good and the bad; and press on for the prize (Phil. 3:12-14). The second son was named by way of testimony to the goodness and faithfulness of God who had blessed him in the land of his affliction. Is it not true that very often we can look back to the times of sore battle and tearful trial and see that in these days God blessed and enabled us to make significant spiritual progress? How often the valley of weeping becomes a door of hope (Hosea 2:15), provided our tears are those of repentance and not just self-pity (2 Cor. 7:8-11). What a testimony there is to Joseph in v.55! He was a man tried and proved and to be trusted. He was God's man, and he makes us think of God's other Man. We do well to say, "Go to Jesus: what He says to you, do."

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42:1-5

The end of the previous chapter tells how widespread the famine was and it appears that it was more severe in Canaan than in Egypt, or at least that it had started earlier. By and large we have forgotten about Jacob and his family but we need to remember now that they had lived these past years with Jacob's inconsolable sorrow over

the assumed death of Joseph and with the tensions and unease that must have troubled the consciences of the sons. It seems nothing had improved, because Jacob now had another *favourite* son, Benjamin. Thirteen years had gone past during which the brothers kept their guilty secret, and perhaps Jacob had his suspicions. But now, all was going to be brought out into the open. Although they did not realise it their past actions would confront them. Be sure your sin will find *you* out (Num. 32:23) even though your actual sins may never be known. What a man sows he reaps, plus the increase (Gal. 6:7). Of course it all takes time and we may well say at a certain stage of life, "Why is this happening to me?" We all tend to take too short a view of life. We know only in part (1 Cor. 13:9) and that is why we should be slow to pass judgment, especially on others. In today's verses we have the beginning of the story of how the past caught up on a group of wilful men. On the face of it, it had all to do with circumstances, famine and the need for food supplies to be negotiated. But God was in it all, not concerned merely with this divided family as individuals, but with the creating and fashioning of a people who were and would continue to be His instrument of salvation for the nations in future generations. This is how we must think of the life of the church and of the individual congregation. God's hand is on us and we must see to it that there is appropriate commitment and willingness to be led. Too many Christians nowadays are "doing their own thing", forgetting their debt both spiritual and material to the church that has nurtured them.

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42:6-17

In yesterday's verses we should have noted Jacob's scant respect for his sons who all seemed to be waiting for the other to do something to deal with their situation. It was the old man who gave the lead and the sons went to Egypt. Now, lest we think Joseph unnecessarily harsh, look down to v.24. Sometimes a weeping heart has to conceal itself so that stern but necessary words can be spoken. Real love is costly, and is often misunderstood. The proud brothers, who by nature did not find humility easy, came and bowed down to the Egyptian (as they thought) administrator. It is amazing what real hunger can do! Amongst other things, a touch of spiritual hunger can make us see how gracelessly we take regular spiritual diet almost as if it was our right. Joseph recognised his brothers and he remembered the dreams he had had about them (37:5-8). How exactly God's prophecy had come to pass. But the emphasis on Joseph remembering may indicate that this had more or less been out of his mind. Had he forgotten the intimation of destiny and service which God had given him? It is so easy to lose vision and to let the pall of ordinariness cloud everything. Think how Paul said that he was not disobedient to the heavenly vision (Acts 26; 19). Joseph must also have remembered that these were the men who resented God's plans and worked against them, and it may have been that he was aware that there was little sign of repentance or even troubling of conscience. They did not recognise him. Joseph had not been in their thoughts. It was necessary for Joseph to sound hard and be formal so that he could be God's agent to sift their hearts. Joseph already knew what he would do.

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42:6-17

Stay with these verses in order to consider the immense amount of human feeling that must have been involved in this encounter. It is important to do so because it is all too easy to be insensitive to what people feel, especially in situations of stress, and when our main concern is to get out of our own predicament. Note how much information Joseph gained in what may have been a lengthy questioning. He learned that his old father was still alive and that his little brother was at home. That must have caused a welling up of emotion. It may well have affected the brothers also to have to rehearse their family history and to say that one son was missing. Joseph would certainly have noted their protestation that they were honest men (11) but the truth of that was not yet evident. He was well aware how deceitful people can be and he was aware of how an immediate need can make even the nastiest of people affable for a time. If we want something, we can be very nice, and we can be deceivers, just like the Devil. Against that background consider the reaction of the brothers to the terms stated in v.14-17. They may have known that their father had his suspicions about their guilt in respect of Joseph's disappearance and they had little hope of getting him to part with young Benjamin. They may have felt that Jacob would not grieve unduly if *they* did not return home. They were a troubled lot and they

were given three days in prison to do some realistic thinking. They may well have spent part of the time blaming each other for what had happened, or blaming their father for giving such strict orders to go down to Egypt. They were learning, what all of us must learn, that they were in God's hand, that they were being searched and tried, and that there was no escape (Ps. 139:1-12, 23- 24). Everything is open to the God with whom we have to do (Heb. 4;12- 13). There are no secrets.

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42:18-28

The passage begins and ends with reference to God. Imagine the effect on the brothers of hearing this "Egyptian" governor confessing his faith in God. Had they any experience of coming across government influenced by godliness? We have seen little of this kind of government in our nation for a long time! Were they amazed by a powerful governor apparently changing his mind and changing conditions of negotiation in favour of the other side without any pressure? We see little of this from any side of negotiations, political or industrial.

In v.16 one brother was to go home but now only one was to remain in prison, and even more astonishing they were to be given an allocation of grain. The brothers agreed to the proposal (20). Almost at once (21) it seems they were convicted and troubled, almost as if their evil was being overcome by Joseph's good (Rom. 12:21). By the Holy Spirit these men were convicted of sin, righteousness and judgment to come (John 16:8-11; Acts 24:25 AV). For years their consciences had been under control and unmoved either by their father's grief or the memory of their brother's tears. But now their guilt came home to them. Their day of reckoning had come, and Reuben spoke up, reminding them of his advice and abortive attempt to save Joseph's life (37:21-22, 29-30). There is a time to say to people, "I told you so!" There is a time to point out to people that what is happening to them *now* is the direct, long delayed, but inevitable consequence of earlier decisions and actions taken deliberately. Remember that while they talked among themselves in their own language they did not realise that Joseph understood every word. What character and discernment he had not to reveal all too soon; but to let God's gracious though painful discipline have its full effect. This is one of the costliest aspects of pastoral counselling.

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42:18-28

No discipline is easy to accept (Heb. 12:11) and at times we may feel we do not deserve it. But in all that the Lord brings to us He is concerned to correct us, to bring us to Himself, to life and to future service. Think how the Father of the prodigal left his son to the rigours and miseries of the far country in order to bring him home (Lk. 15:11-24). Although spoken harshly and critically the words of Job 5:17 are true. Sometimes our own wickedness will correct us (Jer. 2:19). Sometimes we pray to be corrected, casting ourselves on the goodness of God (Jer. 10:24). The time comes when we speak the often quoted words of Ps. 119:67-71. If time permits read Lam. 3:19-39. But to return to the immediate experience of the brothers, consider these words of C.S. Lewis: "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world." (The Problem of Pain) Joseph's tears were caused by seeing his brothers' miserable spiritual condition and also by becoming aware of how Reuben had tried to save him these long years ago. Perhaps this is why Reuben was not kept as a hostage, but replaced by Simeon the second in seniority. Secretly Joseph replaced the money which they had paid for the grain, possibly to make sure that they would not be held back from returning to Egypt through lack of resources. In the event the cash was discovered on the journey and at once these backslidden men were even more aware that they were being dealt with by God. They believed in God, but they had lived their lives a long time without reference to God. It is a common error, and we do well to pause and to consider our own lives. Are we doing right by God? Are we listening to what God is saying to us? Are we responding to what He is saying and to His dealings with us?

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42:29-38

When the sons returned home they gave an accurate report of what had happened. Then when they *all* emptied their sacks and found the returned money they were shattered. The interesting thing is that the sons had already related their circumstances to God, but there was no such response in Jacob. He was not going to move or change. His self-centredness had hardened against God and men ever since his favourite, spoiled son had been lost. He had not forgiven his sons nor had he submitted to God, to whom he owed everything he had. How easy it is when our proud wills have been crossed to lapse into a spirit of total non-cooperation. Self-pity and wilfulness become a spiritual "ball and chain" that prevent progress or development. In v.36 Jacob was really saying, "Everything is against me." But he could not have been more wrong. For the first time for ages his whole situation was developing in a positive way. He just did not recognise it to be so. He was so wrapped up in his own resentments and fears that he was just not aware of how God was working. We have not been told anything about Jacob's family life during the years Joseph had been in Egypt but it could not have been all that happy with the cloud of God's displeasure over it. After all, even Jacob had resented the interpretation of Joseph's dreams (37:10-11) even though the truth had lingered in his mind. We do not need to be radical and obvious backsliders to be out of tune with God. There can be a disaffection from God, an estrangement or withdrawal of relationship, that both strains and tires out the spirit. When this is so a sourness creeps into the spirit and makes us critical of God and man. Sometimes it needs shock treatment to resolve it. Sometimes it takes famine. Jacob was meeting both.

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43:1-10

When people sulk with God He has plenty time to wait until circumstances stir them into action. Having stated his position and made his decision to refuse negotiations with Egypt, Jacob dismissed the matter. For all we know he may well have day-dreamed about his "great" and "successful" days in the past, patting himself on the back as the man who wrestled with the angel and prevailed. But past spiritual victories do not validate present experience nor can they be a substitute for continuing obedience. This chapter opens with an emphasis on the increasing famine. God was speaking more loudly and putting on the pressure. Imagine the feelings of the families as they watched supplies decreasing, but being afraid to raise the subject with their domineering father. In the end Jacob spoke but Judah stood up to him. Then Jacob, true to type, was petulant, blaming others, accusing his sons of lacking regard for their father, and making it plain that Benjamin was the only one who really mattered to him. Isn't it amazing how the old nature, given a chance, asserts itself even after many years of dealing with God and receiving His blessings? On the other hand note how the fear of the Lord had made the sons of Jacob far more manly and realistic than they had been at the beginning. They had got a fright and were beginning to see that dealing with God was serious business. Judah spoke again (8-10) and he prevailed whereas Reuben had failed (42:37-38) possibly because Jacob was now more aware of the fact that he had little option. He was jeopardising the whole family of Israel. In fact, if he was going to have Benjamin at all, he must first give him up. In the end Judah said to his father that if he had not been so unwilling to go forward when God was making the way plain, then the whole situation would have been resolved, This was plain speaking and it was necessary.

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43:11-15

It is difficult to say whether Jacob simply bowed to the inevitable because the alternative was to die in the famine, or yielded to the pleadings of Judah in the submission of faith. Perhaps we should give the benefit of the doubt until it can be shown to be otherwise. This is a good principle to work on and it keeps us from judging, especially on the basis of limited information or understanding (Matt. 7:1-2; 1Cor. 4:3-5). It is interesting that the historian gives Jacob his new name Israel, perhaps indicating that there are signs of the man rising to his true dignity of faith. The gift to be taken seems to have been luxuries rather than staple foods because, after all, it was a time of famine. The gift may have been the accepted thing when approaching a man of high station like Joseph, but there was no gift the first time. Was this then a bribe to curry favour, as had been

the case when meeting Esau (32:13-21). If so, it signifies that there was still deep pride in Jacob's heart and he had not yet yielded his cause to God. At the same time Jacob seems to have been clear in his thinking, sending back the money to make plain they were in fact honest men. Jacob was not a poor man but in time of famine gold cannot buy food and no amount of material affluence can ever compensate for or meet spiritual hunger. The hardest thing for Jacob to yield was his pride, and that centred on his youngest son Benjamin. This too he yielded, committing all that might happen into the hand of Almighty God, the All-Sufficient God, the covenant-keeping God of Abraham (Gen, 17:1). It seems that Jacob, in the silence of the time of suffering, had made his way back to the higher spiritual ground on which he once stood (35: 9-15).

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43:16-25

There is a new sense of anticipation in the story. A new stage has been reached. But do not fail to sense the apprehension the brothers must have felt, and do not forget old Jacob at home waiting, wondering and perhaps praying. Sometimes we need to be deprived of everything, so that God can begin to give us more of His goodness. Make the following words a prayer for today:

"O for a closer walk with God,
A calm and heavenly frame;
A light, to shine upon the road
That leads me to the Lamb!

"Where is the blessedness I knew
When first I saw the Lord?
Where is the soul-refreshing view
Of Jesus and His word?

"What peaceful hours I once enjoyed!
How sweet their memory still!
But they have left an aching void
The world can never fill.

"The dearest idol I have known,
Whate'er that idol be,
Help me to tear it from Thy throne
And worship only Thee.

"So shall my walk be close with God,
Calm and serene my frame;
So purer light shall mark the road
That leads me to the Lamb." (Cowper)

In spite of all his weakness, pride, failures and stubbornness Jacob still had a future. God's stern discipline of him was in fact redeeming love that refused to allow Jacob to waste the last section of his life or lose out on his spiritual service. That kind of God is a God to be trusted.

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43:16-25

Note how great a part fear played in the lives of the brothers even when they were being treated with generous hospitality. Their fear made them draw very wrong conclusions from their circumstances (18) but at the same time it impelled them to take action and to speak out. Now, fear can be a very good thing at times. It can hold us back from sin, warn us of real danger, and turn us back to God. In this sense fear is good and pure (Ps. 19:9; Prov. 1:7; 9:10; 14:26-27) but without doubt fear is one of the Devil's most constant and most destructive

weapons. It paralyses emotions and actions, distorts judgment and blinds to spiritual realities (2 Kings 6;15-17; 2 Tim. 1;7; 1 John 4;18). It is not our love for God that dispels fear but His almighty love for us which is the ground of all His gracious plans and intentions. You cannot but be sympathetic towards these brothers when you see their terrible apprehension regarding what might be the significance of events and what might be the consequences. But no-one can deal with hypothetical situations and the drumming persistence of the word "if" brings only torment. The steward of Joseph's house showed them what to do. They must look to God and trust their God, the God of their fathers who does all things well. It must have surprised these men to find such a confident testimony to faith in the upper realms of the Egyptian Civil Service. But this is just one other testimony to the fact that God was with Joseph. People were being brought to faith at their work through the influence of a godly man whose whole personality had been refined through suffering. True to the promise made earlier, Simeon was released and you can imagine that he may well have asked with some asperity why they had taken so long to return. His imprisonment had lasted longer than necessary because of the spiritual and human obtuseness of Jacob. How we influence people, hurt and hinder them, when *we* are out of sorts with God!

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43;26-34

Note how the early verses of this passage tell again (42;6) of the accurate fulfilment of Joseph's teenage dream that the brothers would bow to him. But this is a different Joseph. He is a big and important man, a veritable spiritual giant, the key figure in God's purposes for that whole generation, and yet he was totally human (30). There are times when you see before your eyes the outworking of God's purposes for those you love, and you sense their hurt. Then when you feel again the deep hurt they have caused you, and when there sweeps over you the memory of the costly road you yourself have trod, the only response or reaction is tears. But Joseph was aware that his tears had to be private. They could not be shared with his brothers, at least not then, because the gracious, disciplining work of God's grace had to go on to its completeness. While Joseph regained his composure in private the brothers may well have been again filled with fear, misunderstanding completely Joseph's sudden departure. The meal began with the Hebrews and Egyptians at separate tables, as custom decreed, even though Joseph would no doubt have preferred to sit with his brothers. But then, our preferences must not be allowed to dominate nor to take precedence over what the work of God and the good of others requires. Joseph knew full well that a human reconciliation with his brothers without their returning in faith and obedience to God would be futile. He arranged for them to be sitting at table according to family order, and this amazed the brothers. They were being made to think of divine intervention. They were being made to ask, "What does it all mean?" At the end of the chapter they had begun to relax. Did they see the gracious concern that must have shown on Joseph's face? The story makes you think of how the Risen Christ dealt with His confused disciples in Lk. 24:41-43; John 21: 9-14.

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44:1-13

While we marvel at how Joseph master-minded this whole process of sifting and testing his brothers to see if there was any change of heart in them, we must at the same time set a guard on ourselves lest we try to "play God" in our dealings with others. Remember Jesus' words about seeing specks and ignoring planks (Matt. 7:3-5). Joseph was aware that human nature is not easily changed or disciplined and his brothers, feeling that the strain was off and that everything had worked out better than expected, could well have reverted very quickly to their former pattern and attitude of life in which God was simply forgotten. We all know what it is to pray earnestly during a crisis and then go back to an easy-going, superficial Christian life-style. Be quite clear that in the whole of this story there is no suggestion at all that Joseph was seeking revenge. His motivation was love, as is clear from 43:30 and 45:1. The brothers had already in measure been brought to a conviction of sin (42:21) but now they had to learn their total helplessness. There was nothing they could do. They were trapped. But this time there was no selling of the young brother. They all stood together and returned with Benjamin to Joseph. Of course, they still misunderstood the motives of Joseph, being sure he meant them harm. In the

same way we often accuse God of wrong motives, of being harsh and inconsiderate, denying us things for which we cry out when there seems no need for denial. This again is the work of Satan, just as it was in the Garden of Eden when he suggested that God was intent on denying man his rights (Gen. 3:1-5). It takes a life-time to learn the kind of faith that says, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him" (Job 13:15 AV) and, "He knows the way I take. When He has tried me I shall come forth as gold" (Job 23:8-10).

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44:14-34

What a story! And how the pressures of life reveal how men have been purified. Joseph's frightening words in v.15 evoked a very humble response from Judah, especially in view of his pledge in 43:8-9. Joseph's response must have solemnised all of them, because they would still remember the former occasion when they went home and told their father about a lost son. Whatever else they could look for there would be no peace. There never is for those who do evil (Isa. 57:20-21). Their foot slides in due time (Deut. 32:35 AV). But consider Judah as he is revealed in this passage; culminating in wonderful words in v.32-34. Think back over his story. In 37:26-27 we see a man of compromise, not principle. In chapter 38 we see a man of stupid carelessness and moral wrong, admitting his wrong in the end (38:26). In 44:16 we see Judah as the great confessor, laying his own sins and that of his brothers before the judge. Now, we see him as the great intercessor, yielding his person and his life to stand surety for Benjamin and his brothers; and this he did all for love of his father Jacob. Judah offered to take the place of the condemned Benjamin. Such thoughts should lead our hearts on to the coming of the great Son of the tribe of Judah, Jesus Himself. But of course, Judah did not become this kind of man overnight. True character and saintliness do not come easily. The fiery furnace must be used to purge the dross so that the true gold will be seen and be useable. Consider Malachi. 3:1-4 and 1 Cor. 3:10-15. Compare Moses' prayer, so similar to that of Judah's, except that he was innocent and the people guilty (Ex. 32:9-14,30-35). We must remember that forgiveness does not always allow us to escape the consequences of our sins. Remember also that the God who changed weak Judah into a mighty man of God can do the same for us. Think of Jer. 18;1-4.

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45:1-8

This was the day of revelation when everything became clear and plain. We see in Joseph "strong feeling and sound spiritual argument" as he explained to his mystified brothers the significance of what had been happening these long years. They had forgotten God, fought against God, and resented His dealings with them. But God had over-ruled and He had not given them up. What tenderness of love is seen here in Joseph! It is indeed love to the loveless. And it did not waver or hesitate even when it was regarded with suspicion and mistrust. Joseph called them nearer to himself, just as God calls us to Himself in Christ. We are indeed dealing with and being dealt with by everlasting love which ever seeks our good by leading us, even by hard roads, into God's good and perfect will. Read the wonderful passage in Hosea 11:1-9 where God's love is in agony at the thought of giving up His backsliding people. Read Rom. 5:6-8 where we are told that God does not wait for us to become a little better and a little more worthy before He loves us. The picture here in Genesis makes us think of Jesus weeping over a Jerusalem that did not want Him. Joseph said, "Come near," and that may be the word that many who read this note need this very day.

"Today Thy mercy calls us
To wash away our sin,
However great our trespass,
Whatever we have been;
However long from mercy
We may have turned away,
Thy blood, O Christ, can cleanse us,
And make us white today." (Allen)

Though our sins are scarlet they can be white as snow (Isa. 1:18) and where sin has abounded, grace abounds much more (Rom. 5:20).

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45:9-15

Take two days for this study with its various references and comparisons. Everything about this passage points to the future, and Joseph interprets the past as being the instrument of God in His providence to bring them all to the present in order to make the future possible. There is a wonderful example of this same interpretation of God's disciplining His people in Jer. 29:10-14 where God is speaking to His people in their exile and shame. But for the future there must be a good foundation (1 Tim. 6:19) and to that end God provides all that is needed (1 Cor.3:21-23). In our passage for today Joseph's words come in a torrent, almost as if he was only then seeing clearly all the significance of the years that lay behind him, years when so many things seemed to be without significance and totally negative. We can all quote so easily that all things work together for good (Rom. 8:28) and we believe it. But in the actual situations of life it can be difficult to see it and even more difficult to feel it. Of course we must recognise that there is and always will be an element of incompleteness in our life and experience. We and our work are only part of the ongoing story. We enter into a work that others have begun (John 4:38) and in due time we pass the work on to those who must carry it a further stage. This is very evident in the "Roll of Honour" of the men and women of faith in Hebrews 11. They knew themselves to be strangers and pilgrims and that they had to live and die in faith (Heb. 11:13-16,39, 40). Read the New Testament account of our story in Acts 7:1-6; 9-19ff. Go on to Acts 13:36 and read the summary of David's whole life and then read Paul's words in 2 Tim. 4:6-8. At all stages, but especially at the end, how important it is to know that you have been faithful. It is doubtful if Joseph was looking much beyond the remaining years of famine. But God was looking much further than that.

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45:16-28

Such was the standing of Joseph in Egypt, and such the impact of his personal, moral and spiritual integrity, that Pharaoh was open-hearted and enthusiastic about bringing the whole family of Jacob to Egypt. Perhaps he assumed that they would all be of similar calibre to Joseph. They were not, because they had not responded to the disciplines of God in the way Joseph had. Joseph had grown in grace. But some have neither desire nor appetite (1 Pet. 2:1-3; 2 Pet. 3:14-18). Of course, we must not suggest that Joseph was perfect, and it is disturbing that the man who had discovered in his own experience the danger resulting from favouritism now singled out Benjamin and made him very different from his brothers. Perhaps the emotional "mountain top" of recent days had drained him more than he realised, and the Devil, who is always on the watch for opportunity, was beginning to sow seeds of complication. How we need the whole armour of God to stand in the evil day (Eph. 6:10ff). The picture of preparation and journey is drawn very vividly but when there is a lot of commotion there can easily be something of a spiritual dust-storm in which God gets concealed. Perhaps culture required it, but it seems as if all the gifts were too lavish. All the problems were not yet solved and this new stage of the history of the Hebrew people had a solemn as well as a glorious element in it. We are dealing with history, which is guided and determined by the will and promises of God. We must learn the lessons of history and take a long-term view of all things, a very long term view. Look back to Gen. 15:13-16. What we are about to read of was to lead to long years of slavery. But that too had its manifold purposes. The Hebrews would have opportunity to grow to a great people, to maintain their identity, and in due time learn what it really meant to be a redeemed people.

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46:1-7

Look back to 45:24 and note Joseph's wise warning to his brothers. Did he think they would fight over the rich gifts? At first Jacob could scarcely believe the story (26) but as the details were recounted and when he saw the wagons and the provisions his spirit revived. Jacob was always a calculating man, but this time he could see that

God was indeed in all this situation. The decision was made and the journey started without delay. But it started with worship and there is a suggestion that Jacob was seeking the face of God and His confirmation because, after all, he was moving; out of the land he had been told to live in. Perhaps he was recalling the complications to Abraham's life when he went to Egypt during famine (Gen. 12:10ff). It is always good to seek the mind of God before we move, no matter how conducive the circumstances are. All Jacob's natural impulse was to go to Joseph, and he had made up his mind to do so, and yet he paused. Sometimes we hesitate through unbelief and fear, and we hold back from God's future which is greater than the present. Sometimes we hold back because by temperament we are slower than others to cope with change, and God is long suffering and understanding. Sometimes our hesitation is that of faith because when big decisions affecting the future are about to be made we must have His seal of approval. This Jacob received. Read v.3-4 very carefully and see how God committed Himself to Jacob. God was very aware that it had taken this man twenty years to adjust to and to overcome his disappointment over the loss of a son. If ever Jacob needed reassurance it was then, and God gave it to him in glorious measure. God said, "I am ... I will make you ... I will go with you... I will bring you again ..." Little wonder the Psalmist says the man is blessed indeed who has the God of Jacob for his help (Ps. 146:5).

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46:8-34

The first part of this passage (8-27) simply details the names of the household of Jacob who came to Egypt. Sixty-six travelled (26) and when Jacob, Joseph and Joseph's two sons are added the total of seventy is reached. Their arrival in Egypt would not have been an impressive one because, apart from Joseph and his two sons, they were an unknown, and outwardly an unimpressive company. Who would ever have guessed that in days to come these were the people whose descendants were to bring about the downfall of Egypt and change the course of world history? Perhaps at first the appearance, the strange behaviour and the religious scruples of this people were a cause of amusement in Egypt, but they were accepted for Joseph's sake. It may have been that after the first ceremonial welcome they were largely ignored and this could have been a relief to the whole family who had gone through quite a traumatic experience and needed time to come to terms with their new situation. Everything was done correctly. It had been arranged for Jacob and his family to go to Goshen (45:9-11) and Judah was sent ahead to be the formal escort to bring Joseph (representative of Egypt) to meet Jacob. No doubt there were many other official representatives present. The meeting was emotional (29) and Jacob's words are reminiscent of old Simeon's utterance of faith in Lk. 2:25-32. After all, it is quite an experience when you see before your very eyes the fulfilment of what God has promised and has been working towards for many long years. How we need to learn that we are dealing with God and being dealt with by God right through our *own* story.

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47:1-6

Take note of the closing verses of yesterday's passage (46:31-34) to see how wise Joseph was in the counsel given to his family. They were to emphasise to Pharaoh that they were keepers of livestock, so that he would agree gladly to their settling and living in Goshen rather than being drawn into the life of the capital city with its dangers. Joseph may well have realised just what a dangerous temptation that would be to the greedy natures of his father and brothers. It may also have been an awareness on Joseph's part that it was vital for his family to keep their identity as a separated people, because after all they were a people laid hold on by God, named by His name, and existing for His service. How wise we need to be in ordering our lives. We must understand what the will of the Lord is (Eph. 5:17) so that we will not place ourselves in positions, in relationships, and under obligations that limit severely our availability for God and obscure our identity as the people of God. Be wise. Faith is not blind and should not go blundering on. Be attentive to God's leading, by whatever means it comes, and He will lead you to the right place (Acts 16:6-10).

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47:7-12

The earlier verses of this chapter show how wisely Jacob's family followed Joseph's advice, and their bearing before Pharaoh (a mighty totalitarian ruler) was all that was expected. "The interview is a good model of straightforward, peaceable dealings between, a pilgrim people and the temporal power. (1 Pet. 2:11-17)" (Kidner) The amazing thing is that when old Jacob was presented in court there was no resentment expressed when the aged Jew blessed the mighty Pharaoh. The Egyptian courtiers might have been astonished, perhaps thinking this was an act of discourtesy. But it was not so. All the Egyptians, Pharaoh included, may have regarded this action of Jacob's as merely a cultural thing on the part of the leader of a new (in Egypt) immigrant community. But for Jacob it was much more. This is yet another occasion in his life when he recognised his true identity as God's man, and rose to full stature. We may feel that Jacob should have been more reticent in view of the many failures and imbalances of his past life. But should we not rather marvel that, in spite of all that had been, here is God's man witnessing a good confession before the powers of the world? Jacob identified himself with his pilgrim fathers before him, and indeed he compared himself unfavourably with them, not claiming to be a giant of faith. It does however seem strange that Jacob spoke only of evil days because, although there had been plenty of them (often as a result of his own folly and stubbornness) there had also been many days of plentiful grace and blessing. It may well have been that Jacob, feeling he was not far from death, was more aware of his failings as a man of God than ever before. But Scripture records twice that Jacob blessed Pharaoh.

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47:7-12

Jacob who was now 130 years old was 70 years old when he had been at Bethel (28:20). "All his spiritual greatness was in the second part of his life, and even that was, in part, spoiled by his stubbornness. His early years were those of a young man who would not learn and could not be taught. Young men be careful! Older men take heart: God can still take up your life, if yielded. Old men look back and ponder what your testimony would be to such as Pharaoh. Each day passes quickly. Make sure its hours are filled with what will last and leave no regrets!" (Quoted from the Daily Notes of Nov. 1970). The last two verses of the passage tell of how God supplied all their need on the scale of the riches of His grace (Phil. 4:19). It is not an empty religious phrase to say, "The Lord will provide," because He does. But His ways vary tremendously. In Jacob's story it was by way of a long story of human wrong and providential over-ruling, in which God's chosen instrument suffered hardship and shame. When Paul spoke of this supplying of need it was through the kind thoughtfulness and practical, sacrificial giving of other Christians. Joseph recognised that his great advancement in political and economic power was given him by God in order to serve God's people and to preserve them for the future. But more often, the provision is by ordinary people in difficult situations through their costly offerings which are given, not on the basis of what they can afford but in sacrificial service to the Lord who bought them (2 Cor. 8:1-7). Indeed Paul says this kind of liberality is the proof of genuine love to the Lord (2 Cor. 8:8-9). Read also 2 Cor. 9:6-15. In so many ways we are a blessing to others by the overflow from our own full hearts. A dried up Christian is a sad sight. Joseph's heart must have rejoiced to be able to do so much for those who had treated him so badly.

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47:13-26

This is the account of Joseph's economic policy and, no doubt, each will evaluate it according to his own political philosophy. So long as people had money to spend they had to pay for their food. After that, they had to barter their goods and eventually they had to sell their land and forfeit their independence. It meant in practice that Pharaoh owned the whole of Egypt. We may feel this was unjust but the people said otherwise (25). The fact of the matter is that we are reading the story of how Egypt became the mighty power that soon was to persecute and humiliate the people of Israel (Exodus 1:1-14). The story is by no means finished. This chosen family was still not ready for the future that God had planned for them and for their service. Do not fail to see that at present the Israelites were living and increasing by permission of the world power of Egypt. They

had been received graciously because God in His providence had prepared the situation. But they must have been aware of the need to walk very carefully because totalitarian rulers do not hesitate to use their power when they feel threatened. From v.23-24 it seems that the agricultural and economic situation was beginning to return to normal and it is a fact of history that when the tensions and social restraints caused by crisis begin to ease, public and political opinion can change very quickly. But at the same time we must see clearly that it is in the world as it really is that God works out His sovereign designs. It is the Most High God who rules in the kingdoms of men and, without consultation but not without purpose, He gives power to kings and empires so that through them His will may be done. It is only faith that can see this, rest in this, and act upon it (Heb. 11:8, 17, 23-28).

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47:27-31

Thus Israel dwelt in Egypt. Do we see how contemporary the application is? Egypt had the grain (nowadays it is oil that certain countries have) which the world needed, and the world had to pay the price. In Egypt the situation was that the state controlled every aspect of human life. This may not have been too much of a problem so long as a man of faith and integrity like Joseph was in control. But that can change quickly and another man's finger can be on the controlling button. At least it *seems* that men have control but we emphasised yesterday that power belongs to God alone (Ps. 62:11 AV). On one level the children of Israel seem small, insignificant and irrelevant, and that may well be an indication of how far they had slipped spiritually. In our reference to Exodus 1 we stopped at v.14 but the story there goes on to tell of government legislation to control the birth-rate and to exercise a political selection in the matter of which babies were to be allowed to live. Nowadays people interfere with life before it is ever actually born and it is done in the name of human rights. At this stage of the developing story you can imagine both Egyptians and Israelites commenting on the national situation and agreeing that things were getting better with every passing year. But there was much more going on than was immediately obvious, and some of the things that were happening were beginning to have a sinister effect on the Israelites. For seventeen years they dwelt in Egypt and they began increasingly to enjoy Egyptian food and Egyptian life-style, both of which had a spiciness that appealed to the natural carnality of fallen human nature. Yes, the people of God became more and more worldly, and perhaps their lifestyle was scarcely different from that of the Egyptians. Worldliness is a dread disease in the life of the believer and one cause of concern in modern evangelical life is that there is no longer the kind of preaching that calls for separation from the world. Worldliness affects us and dulls our spirits, and it does even more harm to our children after us (cf. Exod. 16:1-3; Num. 11:4-6).

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47:27-31

When we lapse into worldliness we need to be reminded that our days are numbered (Ps. 39:4-5). We need also to be reminded of the story Jesus told about the man who gave all his best effort and time to his career, with considerable success (Lk. 12:13-21). Life does not consist in having things to enjoy. Jacob knew he had not long to go and it is marvellous seeing him rising to his true stature of faith. He asserted his real identity as one of God's company who live and die by faith (Heb. 11:13, 39-40). He wanted even his funeral to be a testimony to the fact that he was one of God's chosen people and that he would die as he had lived, in the faith of the covenant made by God with his fathers. He affirmed that he was a pilgrim whose home could never be in this world. He made it plain that his thoughts and his heart were on the future, God's future, and not on his own past, with all its fluctuations and failures. After all, why should Jacob or we ourselves want to brood over and be anchored to the past with its miseries if we believe that there is indeed forgiveness with God? If God has forgiven us, we are under obligation to forgive ourselves and to refuse to be held back by even the most painful memories. How can God have pleasure in our company if we are perpetually bowed down and saddened by sins that He has forgiven and forgotten (Jer. 31:34)? The truly spiritual reaction to our failures and sins is to learn through them to draw nearer to God and to walk more closely with Him. This is what God wants. Is it what we

want? Jacob bowed on the head of the bed or on his staff. He was at prayer before God. He still had work to do, and he was determined to do it.

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48:1-7

There is always a great deal to learn by the bedside of dying saints because they are too near eternity to be interested in anything but the truth. When a man knows his work is virtually over and he must hand it on to his successor he will speak well and wisely if he is near to God. Read also at this point the counsel of Joshua when he was old (Josh. 23:1-3, 6-14); the challenge of Samuel in similar circumstances when his leadership had really been rejected (1 Sam 12: 1-5); and the sense of spiritual responsibility in Paul's words to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:17-20,27. Go to Paul's dying words in 2 Tim. 4:5-18 and see the realism, free from bitterness, the desire to give young Timothy all the wise advice and guidance he needed for the safe continuance of the work of the Gospel. Jacob, knowing he was near to death, had the same concern for the future and it was with his heart exercised about the future that he allowed himself to look back over his years. His testimony was that the explanation of his whole life was to be found in the Almighty God (El-Shaddai) who appeared to him and spoke to him at Bethel (Luz). Read again the story in Gen.28:10-17. It was indeed a significant crisis in Jacob's experience, even though it took years for the reality of it to be worked out in his life. At long last Jacob saw clearly that the work for which he had been laid hold on by God was infinitely more important than he was. He was still intensely human as the reference to the death of his beloved wife Rachel makes plain. But the future had to be prepared for and provided for, and to that end he formally adopted the two sons of Joseph and gave them prior place over Reuben and Simeon. Jacob knew what he was doing, and that he was doing it by the inspiration and command of God, as tomorrow's passage makes plain.

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48:8-16

The full significance of Jacob's actions here is recorded in Heb.11:21. This was Jacob at the peak of his faith, holding to the promise of God, looking to the future, and yielding gladly to the sovereign will and purpose of God. He may well have been remembering his own youthful stupidity and pride, aided and abetted by his mother, in stealing the birthright from Esau (Gen.27). He was determined that he would not be foolishly stubborn as his own father had been. God's will and God's choice once made known must not be trifled with. The question in v.8 links with the statement in v.10 and must have reminded Jacob of his own father Isaac. The old man knew he was dealing with things belonging to God and, even though Joseph seems not to have noticed, Jacob had already named Ephraim before Manasseh. It may have been that Joseph regarded this as a mere slip of the tongue on the part of his dear old father and he did his best to "arrange" that the blessing should go to the elder of his two sons. But it was not to be. God does the arranging. Even Joseph has to be reminded that the covenant blessings are not secured by natural succession but by the sovereign gift of God. Joseph had proved himself a man of stature and capacity both humanly and spiritually but no man is ever perfect. All have blind spots and areas where their wisdom and discernment fall short. This does not in any way diminish Joseph's stature. He too is mentioned in Heb. 11:22 as a man with the vision of true faith. What we must all do is to give thanks to God for the way in which He does in fact over-rule in the decisions and dispositions of life so that His people and His work will be led on in His good and perfect will. All things do work for good, even though it may not seem or feel to be so at the time (Rom. 8:28).

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48:8-16

The blessing pronounced by Jacob on Joseph's two sons is a mighty utterance indeed and gives new meaning to the words, "God bless you," which we tend to use with little awareness of their dynamic. Set this "blessing" in the context of our studies in which we have been reminded of the work of God spanning the generations. We have been shown the glory of God's grace overruling hopeless situations and making them vehicles of salvation and purpose. In all of this we have seen God's forbearance and forgiveness, taking people with all their

complications of heredity and personality and making them men and women of God. What we must do is to look to the God of Jacob, whom Jacob recognised as the God of his fathers. This is the God of the covenant, the God who cannot lie, who never breaks His word and with whom there is no shadow due to change (Heb. 6:18; Jas. 1:17). This is the God of great faithfulness (Lam. 3:22-23). The thought of past dealings with God steadied Jacob's heart. He went on to speak of the God who had led him all along the way. This is the God who is the shepherd of Israel (Ps. 80:1; Ps. 23); who knows His sheep by name (John 10:1-5, 14); who seeks for the straying one to bring it back (Matt. 18:12-13), and who carries the lambs with exquisite tenderness (Isa. 40:10-11). But Jacob's God is also the redeeming God, the One who interferes in human situations to work deliverance and to reclaim for God and for His service lives that could well have been wasted (Ps 103:1-5). Read Isa. 63:7-9; Exod. 14:19-20; 33:12-15. It is this God of Jacob we want to bless our children and our children's children after them. It may be that all of God's dealings with us are designed to make us the kind of people who can bless our children in God's name.

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48:17-22

We are dealing here with three generations and their ages are approximately 145, 56 and 20. Those who want to check the figures can consult Gen. 37:2; 41:46,50; 45:6; 47:28. The two young men would have been very aware of all that was being done but the focus is not on them, nor on their possible reactions to their promotion or demotion, but on Joseph. We see in him the same spiritual overconfidence that marred his life when he was young. He was too sure of his own assessment of the will of God and at the very moment of significant blessing he tried to interfere. It may have been that Joseph had been so accustomed, for so many years as Prime Minister of Egypt, to giving orders that were never questioned that he just assumed he knew best. But Jacob did not allow interference, and he gently but firmly checked his son. No longer did Jacob give unquestioning preference to this son whom he had loved too much and to whom he now owed so much. Jacob was now fixed on God. But at the same time he recognised that the burden of leadership now fell to Joseph (21), and he encouraged his son. The words, "Behold, I am about to die, but God..." remind us of the words in Joshua 1:1-2. No man is indispensable and no man should try to hold on when the time comes to hand over the work to God's next man. But it is vitally important that those whose work is nearly over should encourage the next generation by seeking to anchor them in God, whose purposes go on to their fulfillment in spite of men or devils. All of us, of course, are working for the future and it may be that the real test of our "success" (whatever that may mean) is in what stands and lasts after we are gone. Peter spoke of how the prophets spoke and worked far beyond anything they were aware of (1 Pet. 1:10-12) and affirmed his own intention to guarantee, as far as possible that his basic ministry would not be forgotten (2 Pet. 1:12-15). Over against all our weaknesses, failures and fears we must place Jacob's words, "BUT GOD".

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49:1-7

Jacob's dying words outline prophetically what the future of his sons would be: a future that would be the fruit of the character already formed in them. What we *are* determines the nature and quality of what we do. As a man thinks so is he (Prov. 23:7 AV). What is in a man comes out (Matt. 7:16-18; 15:15-20). Jacob had observed his sons carefully and shrewdly, and he knew that people would be true to their character and would be seen for what they were when crisis and stress came. This is why it is so important to make full use of all the opportunities given to us to learn and to grow in grace when circumstances are reasonably good (2 Pet. 1:3-11). Of course in studying these "prophecies" about Jacob's sons we must be careful in applying the lessons to ourselves. There is nothing fatalistic about God's dealings with us. Nothing in the past or the present need necessarily keep us back from going on into God's future, even though we may have to live with some of the complications we have introduced into our human situation. But God is greater than all we are and have done, and His grace can triumph gloriously. When God on one occasion promised to restore the years that the locusts had eaten He was saying that the future would be as if there had been no locusts at all (Joel 2:24-26 AV). Now think of Reuben described in v.3 in terms of his opportunity and capacity, and then in v.4 in terms of how he

forfeited it all because of one obsessive action of evil passion (35:22). The flaw in this man's make-up was that he had become unstable, lawless, impetuous and, like water, could easily become an uncontrollable torrent. He was essentially a man of impulse, and therefore quite unpredictable and indecisive. Think of Reuben's "deep meditations" in Judges 5:15-16. But he never got round to doing anything. But lest we be desolated, remember that water can be harnessed and channeled and made mightily powerful in service.

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49:1-7

Remember that all the sons of Jacob were listening to their father's words. The story of Reuben calls us to consider, especially if we are young, whether we are wasting our potential for life and for God by refusing to allow our personalities to be brought under the good yoke of God (Matt. 11:28-30). The story of Simeon and Levi tells again how the past, possibly forgotten, can determine the future in terms of service. Jacob counselled others to be very wary of getting too involved with them. In Rom. 16:17 we find Paul giving the same kind of warning, and the apostle of love does the same (2 John 9-11). The story of Simeon and Levi's fierce vendetta is told in chapter 34, and Jacob made plain that their anger took possession of them and robbed them of sense, balance and compassion. The tribe of Simeon was reduced from 59,000 in Numbers 1:23 to only 22,000 in Num. 26:14. Levi, though no different from Simeon, had a different experience. It may well have been that Jacob's rebuke cut deep into Levi's heart and began a process of godly sorrow which led to repentance (2 Cor. 7:10) because in due time there was restoration for the Levites. In Exodus 32:25-29, in the context of the story of the golden calf; at a time of great crisis for the whole people of Israel, the Levites heard the challenge and took their stand publicly on the Lord's side. Of course, the Levites were still scattered throughout the tribes of Israel in Canaan and they had no territory of their own. But God's judgment was mixed with amazing grace and mercy because the Levites were given holy service to perform. It was true of them as of so many others that they were drawn out of a fearful pit of their own making, set on a rock and given a new song and a new service (Ps. 40:1-3).

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49:8-12

This is a glorious prediction about a future of leadership, together with an element of prediction of someone coming to whom the sceptre of God rightly belongs. Taking v.9 and 10 together we cannot but think of the Lion of the tribe of Judah (Rev. 5:5-6) and of His sceptre stretched out over the nations and their generations. This is a picture of wonderful assurance because it makes us think of Jesus as king, who exercises that office by "subduing us to Himself, in ruling and defending us, and in restraining and conquering all his and our enemies." (Shorter Catechism) In v.11-12 we have words that signify the sheer abundance of the blessing of the kingdom of this descendant of Judah. All this is more important than we realise, because in our day we too should be looking for the coming of the promised King, and this is what we tend to lose sight of. This is why we so often get hemmed in by mere circumstances, and we need to lift up our heads and eyes because the kingdom is coming near (Luke 21:28). But one more lesson remains in the blessing of Judah. In the earlier story (Gen. 37) Judah seems to have sinned the same kind of sin as Reuben with the same grim aspects of the defilement of human relationships. Why was Judah dealt with differently from Reuben? Perhaps the answer is that Reuben's sin was a true and deliberate expression of the kind of man he was, whereas Judah's sin was a ghastly disaster and a contradiction of all that he truly was by nature and by grace. Some people are bad by choice, and some get involved in badness because for a season, as a result of many influences, they have drifted away from God. How we need Jesus' counsel to watch and pray so that we do not enter into temptation (Matt. 26:41). We need also to remember and to use God's promised way of escape (1 Cor. 10:11-13). There is no point in praying not to be led into temptation if we go barging blindly into situations where we are bound to be tempted.

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49:13-18

Zebulun was to have a place and life of opportunity and affluence, and that has its dangers. It seems from Deut. 33:9 that prosperous trade was to be the pattern of life, and not many can cope with abundance. Paul learned how to cope through the hard disciplines of his life (Phil. 4:11-13) but no doubt all of us need the prayer of Prov. 30:8-9. The description of Issachar suggests he was un-refined and coarse and perhaps lazy. He was strong and able, and yet always eager to take the easy way of comfort rather than the demanding way of duty. Issachar was willing to lose his liberty and even pay tribute by way of work rather than lose the enjoyment of the present situation. Such is the attitude of those who say, "I know I should, but I can't be bothered." The first verse to describe Dan (16) indicates calling and possibility but this gives place immediately to a way of life and activity that is far from admirable (17). Dan's calling was to judge, vindicate and deliver, and in due time Samson emerged from the tribe of Dan. But as a tribe they chose the way of deceit and double-dealing. Judges 18 (a long story) is an example of their serpent-like, behind-the-scenes way of operating. Being secretive is seldom if ever a good sign. It is interesting to note that in Rev.7:4-8 there is no mention of Dan. Some suggest that antichrist would emerge from the tribe of Dan. Whether it was such thoughts as these or a recollection of his own past duplicity that evoked Jacob's cry in v.18 we cannot tell. It seems that everything was now making Jacob look to God. That can do nothing but good.

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49:19-21, 27

Here are four sons and their tribes who get but a single verse each while others get a considerable passage. Does this devalue them in comparison to others? We must be very careful before passing judgment on any because we know only part of the story (1 Cor. 4:1-5; 13:9,12). And we must always remember the significant teaching of 1 Cor.12:20-22 to the effect that the least honourable are *necessary* for the true functioning of the whole body. We must also remember that in the providence of God some are called and appointed to more obvious and more distinguished service than others. But, while this is privilege it is also great responsibility. Much is expected from those to whom much is given (Luke. 12:48). Gad was to have a turbulent life of fighting, but he would fight and would not be overcome. Asher, on the other hand, would be rich in produce and in such blessing would be a blessing to others. Of course, a life that is made a blessing to others can be demanding and draining. But read Deut. 33:24-25 and the promise there which is glorious. The counsel to all who feel life is a case of giving all the time is, "Stay at the fountainhead, and you will never run dry." Naphtali would be a free mountain people; active and zealous, and they would breed truly and keep their character. Barak, whose name is linked with Deborah in Judges 4-5, was from Naphtali. Benjamin was to be warlike, a people with capacity and drive. From this tribe came Saul, King of Israel and also Saul, who became Paul, the mighty missionary apostle. It is interesting to note that in Deut. 33:12 Benjamin is spoken of in a very tender way. The stern words of Jacob are however borne out in the story of Benjamin in the Book of Judges. When we think of our own story being written are we not aware of how much we need the saving, keeping grace of God to counteract the natural, destructive potential of our human nature.

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49:22-26

The first verse speaks of the fruitfulness of Joseph and the picture is of a tree sending its roots down to life-giving water and, in proportion as the roots go down, so the tree bears fruit (Isa. 37: 31-32). Depth of spiritual character and range of influence and blessing go together. But none of this comes about without cost, and Jacob looks back to Joseph's earlier days that were so marked by suffering and dishonour (23-24a). It had been warfare, and it is rightly described as such, because being a man on whom God's hand rested significantly Joseph was the target for the fiery arrows of the evil one. Think back over the story we have studied and see how again and again he was assaulted by the Devil. There was no let up, and the battle went on right to the end. Think of the significance of the comment at the end of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness (Luke 4:13). The Devil gave intimation that he would be back with further assaults, and the voice and influence of the Devil can be traced right through the life of our Lord. Joseph; like Jesus, remained unmoved. This is one of the most

impressive aspects of Joseph's life. No matter his circumstances he remained constant, first when everything was against him and then when everything was in his favour and his faith had been vindicated. He was indeed a man separated from his brothers, not in the sense of being sold by them, but rather in the sense of being singled out by God and set apart for holy service. To be chosen for service is privilege indeed (Eph. 3:7-8). But it can very often lead to a particular kind of loneliness because it involves leadership. Pray for all who lead.

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49:22-26

We must take one more day with this passage in order to consider the comprehensive description of the God who strengthened and enabled Joseph, giving him an ability and pliability that were needed for his life's work. God is the Mighty One of Jacob, the champion of His cause, who makes it His business to deal with the principalities and powers that wage war against His people. Joseph's God is the shepherd who leads, feeds and guards the flock, for the simple reason that it is precious to Him. He is also the Rock, the foundation and the head of the corner (Ps. 18:2, 31-32; Isa. 28:16). Paul speaks in 1 Cor.10:4 of the Rock that followed Israel. Jacob goes on to address Joseph, speaking of "the God of your father" and that is a wonderful way for any father to speak to his son. It is as if Jacob was saying that the God who helped him would help Joseph. He was also reminding Joseph that he was not the first in the line nor the last, but one of the succession of those chosen by God in sovereign grace to do His will and to be blessed in the doing of it. Finally Jacob spoke of God Almighty, the El Shaddai God, the all sufficient God whose desire it is to bless His people exceeding abundantly above all they can ask or think (Eph. 3:20). Such references to the God of our salvation should bring to mind such Scriptures as Isa. 40: 21-22, 27-31 and Deut. 33:26-27, and such hymns and Psalms of praise as, "The God of Abraham praise," and Psalm 100, "All people that on earth do dwell, sing to the Lord with cheerful voice." The paraphrase of that Psalm ends,

"Wide as the world is Thy command,
Vast as eternity Thy love;
Firm as a rock Thy truth must stand.
When rolling years have ceased to move."

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49:28-50:3

Look back to 47:29-30 to sense again the calm composure with which Jacob faced the fact that his life was well nigh over. Compare this with reference to David in Acts 13: 36. It is a beautiful picture of a man falling asleep when his work is finished. Think also of Paul in 2 Tim. 4:6-8 where the word "departure" has some reference to a ship casting off its moorings to go on the tide. Abraham had also been referred to as being "gathered to his people." Although the context here seems to be that of a burial place, it seems certain that Jacob had at least some thoughts of a continued existence even though the idea of resurrection may not have been clearly formulated. Without doubt a man who had dealt with angels and had seen the ladder between earth and heaven believed that there was a world beyond this world and that it was real. Certainly we who live in the full light and truth of the Gospel must believe with glorious assurance in the reality of the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. Indeed, if in this life only we have hope in Christ we are to be pitied (1 Cor.15:19). Having charged his sons and blessed them each one with an appropriate blessing, and having made arrangements for his funeral so that his very burial place would be a symbol of his share in the family of God, Jacob lay down and died. Joseph was totally human in his sorrow and, even though he may have been well aware of all his father's failings and failures, he honoured him before the court of Pharaoh. There was official mourning for Jacob for seventy days, and that is believed to be only two days shorter than the official mourners period for a Pharaoh. So ended the life of Jacob.

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50:4-14

It was Joseph who made and carried out all the arrangements for the burial of his father. It was both natural and necessary for this to be done by him because Pharaoh's permission was needed for the journey to Canaan. The fact that Joseph was in charge also guaranteed the return of the whole family to Egypt. The presence of a large company of official Egyptian mourners at the funeral also helped to guarantee the return, even though they were present as a genuine token of Pharaoh's sharing with Joseph his very real sorrow. Note also (8) that the children and the flocks were left in Goshen and that was yet another guarantee that all the brothers would return to Egypt, even though there was now no famine to put pressure on them. In all these details we see yet again evidences of God's over-ruling providence. By His own careful methods He shepherds His people into the place where they need to be for the sake of their future. It may well have been that Joseph had influenced his brothers regarding the need for them to return to Egypt and it is likely that Joseph was aware that his brothers still had a significant lack of trust in him. Be that as it may, all the arrangements were made and carried through without complications. Then Joseph returned to Egypt where he would continue to render to Pharaoh the things that were Pharaoh's, but would give to God what was His by right, the first love and loyalty of his heart and life.

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50:4-14

Since death and bereavement are things we all must face eventually, we do well to think about it while we are reasonably detached from the actual experience. For the believer there is both comfort and hope. Jesus' words at Lazarus' grave give the ground on which we stand (John 11:25-26). His words in John 14:1-3, 27 were spoken to comfort and reassure His disciples. Paul's great cry of victory in 1 Cor.15: 55-57 has eased the grief of many a heart by the side of an open grave, and has proved then and afterwards that indeed we do not sorrow as those who have no hope (1 Thess. 4:13-18). Our God is the One who wipes away the tears from our eyes (Rev.7:17). It is a pity that we do not talk more openly about such matters. If we did, Heaven would be more real to us, the world to come more near, and we would live in a different kind of way. But what of loved ones who, so far as we know, are not believers, not "in Christ"? We should be much in prayer for them and seeking by the whole tenor of our lives to point them to the Saviour. Of course, only God by His Spirit can convict and convert them, and for this we must pray in faith, encouraged to recognise by our own conversion that the grace of God has broken into the family unit. Remember too that old people do not find it easy to change nor to speak of the things of eternity. And there may be faith deep down, brought into being by some Gospel influence many many years previously but overlaid by the malicious activities and entanglements of the devil. What hope of spiritual growth could there have been if people had no church to go to but one that was empty of grace, and was barren with lifeless formal religion. Look to God and pray for salvation for young and old alike. The old may not have long to go.

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50:15-21

When you consider how much Joseph had done for his brothers and how generously gracious he had been, it must have hurt him deeply to be aware of their continuing lack of trust. How could they possibly think he would want to hurt them? They must have thought Joseph was like themselves! Of course irrational fear like this is usually the work of the Devil, because fear, more than anything else, introduces confusion and tension into a situation. Joseph's grief was only increased by the fabricated speech in v.16-17. How little these men knew about forgiveness. Had they learned anything at all under God's discipline over the years? The truth and grace of Joseph's reply are wonderful to read (20-21). There is marvellous and mature faith in the three aspects of what he said. "To leave all the righting of one's wrongs to God (19 cf. Rom. 12:19; 1 Thess. 5:15; 1 Pet. 4: 19); to see His providence in man's malice (20, cf. 45:5); and to repay evil not only with forgiveness but also with practical affection (21; cf. Luke 6:27ff.), are attitudes which anticipate the adjective 'Christian' and even 'Christlike'." (Kidner) It is certainly not easy to face up to and to speak of the wrongs that have been done to you personally without being hard and bitter. But if we can at the same time recognise that, in and through all the wrongs that others do and that we ourselves do, God is able to work His gracious purposes in us,

for us and through us then our attitude will be changed. Our capacity to cope and to forgive and to help will be increased immeasurably. What a comfort it is to realise that in all the business of life we are in the school of discipleship and that our teacher is God Himself.

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50:22-26

Almost reluctantly we come to the end of Joseph's story, at least part of his story that has to do with this temporary world. This man, who had such a disastrous start which seemed to bring his usefulness to God to an abrupt end, lived to the fullness of days and saw his children's children. We are not told anything about the last spell of his life and indeed he seems to fade from the picture. This is not surprising because the stage is already set for the next phase of the story of redemption as recorded in Exodus. But time had to pass before that was set in motion. No doubt it was what we would call an ordinary spell with little or no excitement because with the famine past everything would return to normal. Perhaps things were so normal that the family of Jacob would gradually become accustomed to their worldly life in Egypt and forget that they were a people called to significant destiny. How easy it is to forget the spiritual dimension of life. How dangerous it is! That gives great importance to Joseph's dying words to the gathered representatives of his brothers and their families. He sought to fix their thoughts, hearts and expectations on God and on the promise of God. He pointed them to the future, and in the instructions about his bones he was bearing testimony to Egypt and to his family that his faith and trust were in God (Heb.11:22). What Joseph said that day was remembered, as Ex. 13:19 and Joshua 24:32 make plain. We end with Joseph's great affirmation of faith: God will visit you. We must see to it that we are ready for Him in the day of His power (Ps. 110:3 AV). All sorts of experiences may well overtake us but this much we have learned from our long story. There is nothing in all creation that has the power to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:31-39). On this basis we go on to do His will.

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