

GENESIS

A STUDY OF CREATION AND PARADISE

The Book:

The name “GENESIS” is the Greek word used in the Septuagint for the first book of the Pentateuch. The Hebrew word is *reshiyth*. Both mean “beginning” or “origin.” In Genesis we read about the beginning of the universe, the beginning of man, and the beginning of sin and of redemption. It is a book of life and a book of death. In the first chapter we read how God created life, and the last line of the book says: “he was placed in a coffin in Egypt”¹

The Author:

Jewish tradition calls the Pentateuch “The Books of Moses.” The Old Testament was briefly called “Moses and the Prophets.” Jesus confirms Moses’ authorship several times in the Gospels. Some of His quotations are: “Now about the dead rising; have you not read in *the book of Moses*, in the account of the bush, how God said to him, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob?’ ”² And: “Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.’... He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’ ”³ “But do not think I will accuse you before the Father. Your accuser is Moses, on whom your hopes are set. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But since you do not believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say?”⁴ Jesus did not just call the Pentateuch *The Books of Moses*, but He emphatically stated that Moses wrote them. It is on His authority that we believe Moses to be the author of the book Genesis.

The time of writing and problems connected with this:

The fact that Moses is the author puts the time of writing during Moses’ life, which is approximately 1500 BC. Yet all the events in the book took place long before Moses was born. In the other four books of the Pentateuch, Moses was an eyewitness. But all the material in the book of Genesis must have been learned by oral and written traditions. That these existed has been proved sufficiently by archaeological finds. Documents with stories akin to the creation and flood story have been discovered. Also, in our own missionary career we have found that the Stone Age tribes of Dutch New Guinea (Irian Jaya, Indonesia) still have oral traditions about the creation and the flood. Even the name of Noah (Nuh) has been preserved. But when we say that Moses must have used outside sources to write the book of Genesis, we in no way put ourselves in the camp of the school of “Higher Criticism.” That school dissected this book and glued it back together after identifying the Elohim source, the Yahweh source, the Deuteronomy Source and the P-source (the Editor or Editors of the supposed sources were people who must have lived after the return from the Babylonian captivity).

CHAPTER ONE

THE BEGINNING:

Ch. 1:1 *“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”*

The only “beginning” that is not mentioned in the first chapter of the Word of God is the beginning of God Himself. In the first sentence we are confronted with the Eternal God, Elohim. The Bible does not make any effort to explain the existence of God or give us any kind of introduction to Him for the obvious reason that no explanation is needed. Doubt about the existence of God is a modern phenomenon. The

¹ ch.50:26

² Mark 12:26

³ Luke 16:29,31

⁴ John 5:45-47

psalmist says: "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.'" ⁵ The Bible does not want to treat us as fools! Trying to prove the existence of God to a human being would be the equivalent of trying to prove to a person that he is alive. If this has to be proved, we are in serious trouble. God has no beginning because He is the beginning.

If we deny God as the origin of everything we end up with nonsense. If the universe and life on earth are the haphazard result of a cosmic accident, we as human beings have no purpose. There would be no human speech, no logic, and no meaning. And yet we behave as if our lives are based on logic and meaning because we speak.

In his book *Miracles*, C. S. Lewis has torn apart the assumption of the Naturalists in a delightful way. If what we say is not supposed to have meaning, we should stop talking. If we are looking for answers, we should start out by marveling at the fact that we have questions. Without God there are not only no answers, there would be no questions!

So Genesis 1:1 shows us that God is the beginning. John, speaking about Jesus Christ, says: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."⁶ David puts it this way: "For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light."⁷

The truth that God is the beginning, the source, the fountain, is much more than a thesis to make atheists shut up. It is a compelling reason to worship. And that is what we should do at the beginning of this study. God created the heavens and the earth, this marvelous universe, this ocean in which we float. He thought it out and brought it into existence. For over a century there has been an ongoing controversy between "faith" and "science" about the beginning of the universe and of life. Much of this is based upon an incorrect interpretation of the opening statements of the Bible. It has been argued that science contradicts the Genesis version of creation. The age of the earth and of the universe is a point in question. The Bible does not pinpoint the "beginning" in terms of "how many years ago." So if geologists say that the earth is hundreds of millions of years old, we cannot say that they contradict the teaching of the Bible. It is hard to contradict something that has not been said. The only objection we can make is against statements like Carl Sagan makes - that this universe is all there is. As if astronomy proves the non-existence of God! If a scientist denies the existence of God and bases this denial on science, he moves outside the realm of his expertise. There is no scientific proof against the existence of God. It may be said that science does not prove the existence of God, but we could say with equal reason that geology does not explain the reasons for a person's high blood pressure. If evidence would belong to the domain of science, the Christian would be more of a scientist than the atheist.

The book of Genesis says nothing more about the creation of heaven and earth than that God did it. It does not even say how. The role of the Word of God comes only into view after the universe has been brought into existence. There are other parts of the Bible that ascribe the existence of the universe to the Word of God, but they are not found in Genesis. We find that in the book of Psalms: "By the word of the LORD were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth."⁸ Again in John's Gospel: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made."⁹ And the author of the epistle to the Hebrews says: "By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible."¹⁰

In his book *Gleanings in Genesis*, Arthur Pink says about the opening statement of the Bible that it "repudiates atheism... It refutes materialism... It abolishes pantheism." He goes on to say that it informs us that God is eternal, that He is a personal being, infinite and omnipotent.

"In the beginning God..." This is the foundational truth of all real theology. It is only further on in the Bible that we learn about some things that happened before 'the foundation of the world.' In Hebrews we read that there was a covenant between God the Father and the Son. It says: "May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great

⁵ Ps. 14:1

⁶ John 1:1

⁷ Ps. 36:9

⁸ Ps 33:6

⁹ John 1:1-3

¹⁰ Heb. 1:3

Shepherd of the sheep...”¹¹ And speaking about our salvation through the blood of Christ, Peter says: “He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake.”¹² In Revelation Jesus is called: “the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world.” And there is mention of “The inhabitants of the earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the creation of the world.”¹³ So together with the blueprint of the universe, God also prepared the plan of salvation in eternity.

Vs. 2 - “Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.”

Dr. Chalmers, a nineteenth century theologian, has pointed out that the word “was” in the above verse, should be translated “became.” *Strong's Definitions* agrees with this, saying that the word *hayah* means to exist, be or become, come to pass. The word is “always emphatic, and not a mere copula or auxiliary.”

Chalmers observation refers to a theory, which merits very serious consideration, which holds that the condition of the earth described in vs. 2 is not the condition in which God created it in chapter 1 verse 1. This concurs with Isaiah: “For this is what the LORD says; he who created the heavens, he is God; he who fashioned and made the earth, he founded it; he did not create it to be empty, but formed it to be inhabited; he says: ‘I am the LORD, and there is no other.’”¹⁴ The RSV brings out this point more clearly with: “For thus says the LORD, who created the heavens (he is God!), Who formed the earth and made it (he established it; he did not create it a chaos, he formed it to be inhabited!): ‘I am the LORD, and there is no other.’” It has been suggested that there is a huge gap between these two verses and that the event which changed the condition of the earth from what God had created in the beginning to the chaos in which we find it, is the result of the fall of Satan. Since the Bible does not specifically say this, we cannot say that this is proof; but the hypothesis answers a lot of questions. It is generally supposed that the prophecies in Isaiah and Ezekiel regarding the King of Babylon and the ruler of Tyre, are actually prophecies about the fall of Lucifer.

Isaiah writes: “You will take up this taunt against the king of Babylon: How the oppressor has come to an end! How his fury has ended! The LORD has broken the rod of the wicked, the scepter of the rulers, Which in anger struck down peoples with unceasing blows, and in fury subdued nations with relentless aggression. All the lands are at rest and at peace; they break into singing. Even the pine trees and the cedars of Lebanon exult over you and say, ‘Now that you have been laid low, no woodsman comes to cut us down.’ The grave below is all astir to meet you at your coming; it rouses the spirits of the departed to greet you; all those who were leaders in the world; it makes them rise from their thrones; all those who were kings over the nations. They will all respond, they will say to you, ‘You also have become weak, as we are; you have become like us.’ All your pomp has been brought down to the grave, along with the noise of your harps; maggots are spread out beneath you and worms cover you. How you have fallen from heaven, O morning star, son of the dawn! You have been cast down to the earth, you who once laid low the nations! You said in your heart, ‘I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of the sacred mountain. I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.’ But you are brought down to the grave, to the depths of the pit. Those who see you stare at you, they ponder your fate: ‘Is this the man who shook the earth and made kingdoms tremble, The man who made the world a desert, who overthrew its cities and would not let his captives go home?’ All the kings of the nations lie in state, each in his own tomb. But you are cast out of your tomb like a rejected branch; you are covered with the slain, with those pierced by the sword, those who descend to the stones of the pit. Like a corpse trampled underfoot, You will not join them in burial, for you have destroyed your land and killed your people. The offspring of the wicked will never be mentioned again.”¹⁵

¹¹ Heb. 13:20

¹² I Pet. 1:20

¹³ Rev. 17:8

¹⁴ Isa. 45:18

¹⁵ Isa. 14:4-20

And in Ezekiel we read: “The word of the LORD came to me: ‘Son of man, say to the ruler of Tyre, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: ‘In the pride of your heart you say, ‘I am a god; I sit on the throne of a god in the heart of the seas.’’ But you are a man and not a god, though you think you are as wise as a god. Are you wiser than Daniel? Is no secret hidden from you? By your wisdom and understanding you have gained wealth for yourself and amassed gold and silver in your treasuries. By your great skill in trading you have increased your wealth, and because of your wealth your heart has grown proud.’ Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says: ‘Because you think you are wise, as wise as a god, I am going to bring foreigners against you, the most ruthless of nations; they will draw their swords against your beauty and wisdom and pierce your shining splendor. They will bring you down to the pit, and you will die a violent death in the heart of the seas. Will you then say, ‘I am a god,’ in the presence of those who kill you? You will be but a man, not a god, in the hands of those who slay you. You will die the death of the uncircumcised at the hands of foreigners. I have spoken, declares the Sovereign LORD.’ The word of the LORD came to me: ‘Son of man, take up a lament concerning the king of Tyre and say to him: ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: ‘You were the model of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. You were in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone adorned you: ruby, topaz and emerald, chrysolite, onyx and jasper, sapphire, turquoise and beryl. Your settings and mountings were made of gold; on the day you were created they were prepared. You were anointed as a guardian cherub, for so I ordained you. You were on the holy mount of God; you walked among the fiery stones. You were blameless in your ways from the day you were created till wickedness was found in you. Through your widespread trade you were filled with violence, and you sinned. So I drove you in disgrace from the mount of God, and I expelled you, O guardian cherub, from among the fiery stones. Your heart became proud on account of your beauty, and you corrupted your wisdom because of your splendor. So I threw you to the earth; I made a spectacle of you before kings. By your many sins and dishonest trade you have desecrated your sanctuaries. So I made a fire come out from you, and it consumed you, and I reduced you to ashes on the ground in the sight of all who were watching. All the nations who knew you are appalled at you; you have come to a horrible end and will be no more.’”¹⁶

Most of the above quotations are a combination of what happened on earth and in heaven. The text simultaneously deals with what happened to Satan, who is the actual power behind the powers on earth, the human being, who sits on the throne of Babylon and Tyre, as well as the man who is still to come and who is known as the Antichrist. But it does give us some indication about what may have happened in heaven, before the story of Genesis begins. “How you have fallen from heaven, O morning star, son of the dawn! You have been cast down to the earth, you who once laid low the nations! You said in your heart, ‘I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of the sacred mountain. I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.’” This verse can hardly refer to anything else but what happened to Lucifer. “You were the model of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. You were in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone adorned you: ruby, topaz and emerald, chrysolite, onyx and jasper, sapphire, turquoise and beryl. Your settings and mountings were made of gold; on the day you were created they were prepared. You were anointed as a guardian cherub, for so I ordained you. You were on the holy mount of God; you walked among the fiery stones. You were blameless in your ways from the day you were created till wickedness was found in you,” seems a perfect description of the condition of Lucifer before his fall. It does not take too much imagination to see how the fall of a sublime creature from such a position in heaven would have dragged with him that part of creation for which he was responsible. The chaos on earth could very well have been the result of this cosmic catastrophe.

If this is true the “hovering of the Spirit of God over the waters” acquires a new depth and meaning. The Holy Spirit is there to prepare the restoration of the original creation of all that was ruined when Satan fell. The Spirit broods over this chaos as a hen sitting on eggs, to stimulate the germ of life inside and to bring it to birth. Evidently the fall did not completely destroy everything. In the following verses the Word of God which will sound in order to call to life that which is dormant.

Vs. 3- *“And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light.”*

¹⁶ Ezek. 28:1-19

We will find the phrase “and God said” eight times in connection with this new creation.¹⁷ The first thing the Holy Spirit deals with is the darkness. When we read that the earth was ‘formless’ it probably means that there was no order. There was no logical connection between elements and no orderly arrangement. There could not be an earth that would be literally formless.

But the worst of the earth’s condition was the darkness. More often than not darkness has a spiritual meaning in the Bible. It is connected with evil and demonic power. This is the first time we see the Word of God in action. “God said ... and there was...”

Next to the miracle of life, one of the greatest miracles is that of speech. In human speech, thought and emotion are expressed in sound. By God’s speaking things come into being. There may have been sound or there may not have been. This is immaterial.

We realize at the same time that although our speech is derived from the Word of God, our speaking also separates us from God. Our ability to express ourselves is akin to God’s revelation of Himself, but there is no comparison between what happens when we speak and the result of the Word of God. Yet our words have meaning, because we have meaning and it is this value that is derived from the value of God.

There are, of course, in the whole of creation, different levels of expression. Animals have the ability to express themselves with varying degrees of clarity. And even among humans there is a great difference in the clarity, content and depth with which we express ourselves. Some people never go farther than to mumble clichés and then there are the Shakespeares. It would be incorrect though to draw a chart of speech and to simply put God on top, because the Word of God is infinite and eternal and perfect.

The first result we see of God’s speaking is that light comes into being. We only know two sources of light: the light of the sun and the light we make ourselves with fire or electricity. The light of vs. 3 fits in none of these categories. We all know what light is, yet light is one of the great mysteries of creation. Obviously the light God created here is not the light of the sun because the sun is not mentioned until the fourth day of creation in vs. 14-19. We may suppose that when God created the universe our sun came into existence at the same time as our planet. But either the relationship was not established yet because of the distance being different from what it is now, or some other unknown factor caused the sun to have no direct influence upon our planet earth. The difference between the first day and the fourth day is emphasized for the purpose of showing that the light God created was not sunlight.

Maybe we should say that what we call “light” is not the real thing, but an image of reality. The Apostle John identifies light with God when he says: “This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.”¹⁸ We have a tendency to suppose that John uses an image here, comparing God to light. But we turn things around when we say this. John speaks about the real light, but the light we know is only an image of that. So when God said: “Let there be light,” He imparted something of Himself to the chaos of the earth.

Then there is the mystery of the separation between light and darkness. This, too, seems to have a deeper meaning. In our experience, light and darkness never mix. Evidently, at one point they did. And if the images of the realities mixed, the realities themselves could mix also. In separating the light from the darkness God drew a line between Himself and Satan; a line that could never be erased. Something of this separation we find in Jesus’ story of the rich man and Lazarus. Abraham says to the rich man who is in agony in hell: “And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.”¹⁹ This kind of separation must have taken place in eternity when Lucifer fell into sin. And when Satan causes the same destruction and annihilation he tried to bring about in heaven, God draws the line anew on earth. That is why in our day we see that light and darkness do not mix.

God uses the darkness to draw lines between day and night. As we read in vs. 5 “God called the light ‘day,’ and the darkness he called ‘night.’ And there was evening, and there was morning; the first day.” This is another mystery of creation. God does not abolish darkness. He creates light to conquer darkness. He keeps it to serve His purpose. At the first day the line is drawn, the limits are set and the game is played according to God’s rules.

¹⁷ Vs.3,6,9,11,14,20,24 and 26

¹⁸ I John 1:5

¹⁹ Luke 16:26

Once again, what we call day and night, light and darkness are only images of the real thing. The Apostle Paul draws a parallel between God's creative intervention in ch. 1 and the work of the Holy Spirit in a human soul. He says: "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ."²⁰ We find this parallel all through the week of creation. Every creation day has its spiritual counterpart in the heart of the person who is born again by the Holy Spirit through the Word of God.

The phrase "And there was evening, and there was morning; the first day" sounds strange to us. We are used to starting the day in the morning, although we count the new day to start at midnight. The Jews count the starting of the day at sunset that is 6 P.M. Vs. 5 does not really say where the day starts and where it ends. It only marks two points during the day, evening and morning.

Vs. 6- "*And God said, 'Let there be an expanse between the waters to separate water from water.'*"

Evidently, the whole planet was submerged in water. God takes two days to create order to this situation. On the second day, part of the water is drawn as a canopy of atmosphere around the globe. A thick layer of moisture and air wraps itself around our planet to create conditions that would be favorable for the appearance of life. It has been suggested that this thick layer of atmosphere which is described here was quite different from the atmosphere we know now. It may have been much thicker, thus creating a stable and uniform climate and temperature over the whole globe. It may have served as an effective filter to keep out harmful ultraviolet rays in the sunlight, which would account for the much longer life of our ancestors. It would be impossible to prove this, but it sounds quite plausible. This ideal condition could have been destroyed in the flood in Noah's days.

Vs. 9- "*And God said, 'Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear.' And it was so.*"

The separation continues on the third day. This must have been the day the mountains were born, causing the ocean floors to rise and fall and thus drawing the water away from a large part of the planet. In C. S. Lewis's book *Perelandra*, the planet Venus is described with islands floating on the ocean and some parts of solid land. It is of course pure guesswork to suppose that our planet would have had large stretches of unstable land that would not have been able to support life and civilization to any extent. But it is an interesting thought. Immediately the dry ground starts to produce vegetation at God's command.

Gordon Talbot in his book *A study of the Book of Genesis* suggests that there may have been seed preserved in the ground, left over from the first creation. Whether this is true or is not important. It is on the third day that we find the first sign of life on earth in the form of plant life. This suggests that the earth must have been warm enough to sustain life, in spite of the fact that the sun has not entered the picture yet. It may have been heat that radiated in moderation from the core of the planet. Actually, the fact that the planet was initially covered with water and not with ice would prove that the absence of the sun had not caused a major freeze; such as would be the case now, if all of a sudden the sun would disappear.

The emphasis in this section is upon seed. In vs.11 and 12 the word 'seed' is mentioned four times. The seed guarantees the continuation of the species and obviously it creates conditions in which animal life can sustain itself. All this makes the impression that the Creator is preparing a house for His other creatures.

Besides food for the hungry, there is also a preparation for the emotional and aesthetic needs of man. Without trees, human and animal life would eventually have exhausted the oxygen supply of the world. All breathing animals, man included, inhale oxygen and exhale carbon dioxide as a waste product. Trees do the opposite. They absorb carbon dioxide and produce oxygen. We need one another. That is why it is important that the ecological balance be preserved.

But man has other and deeper needs than those of his body. Animals may too, but we do not know enough about them to make definite statements along this line. David does more than use an image of his spiritual relationship with God when he says: "He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, He restores my soul."²¹ There is nothing more rejuvenating and emotionally uplifting

²⁰ II Cor.4:6

²¹ Ps. 23:2,3

than to walk through the forest and smell the leaves or to stretch out in the meadow and see our reflection in the quiet waters. Our Creator placed us in a world of color and beauty. What is more beautiful than a tree? What matches the color and smell of a rose? In the same way as an expectant mother prepares the crib for her baby to be born, so our heavenly Father prepared this place for us to live. In spite of the mess we have made of it, there is still an enormous amount of beauty to enjoy. What must it have been like when God first saw it and pronounced it good.

Verses 14-19: ***“And God said, ‘Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as signs to mark seasons and days and years, And let them be lights in the expanse of the sky to give light on the earth.’ And it was so. God made two great lights; the greater light to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night. He also made the stars. God set them in the expanse of the sky to give light on the earth, To govern the day and the night, and to separate light from darkness. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening, and there was morning; the fourth day.”***

As we said before, it would be hard to understand how the earth could have existed by itself without other heavenly bodies. It would have been like a single atom without a molecule. It seems more reasonable to suppose that when God created heaven and earth, as vs. 1 states, this included the whole solar system and all the other constellations, at least in their basic form. The creation of the fourth day seems to establish a new relationship between heavenly bodies that were already in existence.

A possibility would be that, if the theory about the catastrophe that took place between the verses 1 and 2, is correct, the earth would have been thrown out of her original orbit. This would certainly account for the chaos in vs.2. The act of creation on the fourth day would then exist either in the re-establishing the orbit or creating a new relationship with other stars and planets. The way this is described is as if a human being was standing on the earth and telling what he sees happen before his eyes without fully understanding what he sees. It could very well be that God showed these events by way of a revelation as a replay, either to Moses or to Adam, who orally would have passed on what he saw to his children. A lack of understanding of the facts by the author of Genesis does not necessarily imply that the facts he records are not true or incorrect.

There had been a separation between light and darkness in vs. 4. At that point, God Himself introduced the concepts of ‘day’ and ‘night.’ But probably the day and night then were of a different nature than what we know now. The speed, rotation, orbit and direction of the axis of the earth is also established because at this point the seasons and the calendar are introduced. We should rule out the possibility that the author backtracks in his account, as he does in the report about the creation of man, in the verses 26 and 27 and then in ch. 2:7, since we are given a neatly marked sequence of days here. It would not make sense to call days one, two, three and so on and then place day four before day one. Moses may have been a poet but he was not a fool.

We mentioned before the probability that the atmosphere created on day two was much thicker than the one we know now. It must have been thin enough to let the light of the sun, moon and stars shine through but thick enough to create a greenhouse effect which would keep a steady humidity and temperature over the whole of the globe. It is also possible that moon was in a different orbit so that there would be moonlight every night, instead of the new moon and full moon we know now.

In his book *Worlds in Collision*, Emanuel Veliskovsky proposes the theory that the rotation of the earth was drastically changed and maybe reversed by the appearance of the planet Venus into our solar system. Venus came in as a comet, the tail of which swept over the earth, causing a serious disturbance of earth orbit and rotation. He quotes the book of Joshua,²² and also some ancient South American Indian traditions which say that, for one day and one night, the sun never came up. Veliskovsky’s theories are very controversial in the world of science, but they have ever been rebuffed.

Verses 20-23: ***“And God said, ‘Let the water teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the sky.’ So God created the great creatures of the sea and every living and moving thing with which the water teems, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. God blessed them and said, ‘Be fruitful and***

²² Josh.10:12-14

increase in number and fill the water in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth.’ And there was evening, and there was morning; the fifth day.”

The fifth day brings the beginning of biological life. Plant life had been introduced on the third day (vs.11-13). As we mentioned, there was a possibility that the seed which produced the grass and the trees had been left in the ground from the first creation. It would have been impossible for animal life to survive the great catastrophe. So the fifth day is the day of life. It begins in the water and rises up to the sky. On the second day God separated water from water: the ocean below and the firmament above. It is in these two layers that life makes its first appearance. It starts in the water and then it takes wings. Evolutionists would agree with this sequence, but they have no explanation for the appearance of plant life as separated from animal life.

The remarkable feature of the fifth day is the abundance of life. God did not only create life in the water, but He ordered the water to be teeming with living creatures. This reminds us of Jesus’ words in John: “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”²³ Abundance is typical of God’s gift of life.

We know very little of the secrets of the ocean. In a certain way water is our enemy. We cannot live in water. In creating creatures that live in water on the fifth day God created life in the middle of death. Life is victorious and abundant. The creation of birds is a kind of victory also. Wings defy the law of gravity and in many cases this is for us the law of death also. The flight of a bird symbolizes victory for us. To fly through the air is a form of victory. Here is abundance also. Even as I am writing these words, my fine feathered friends outside testify to the fact that there are many. The fifth day is the first day of blessing. So far we only read that God pronounced what He created good,²⁴ but now we read: “God blessed them.” There can only be a blessing when there is similarity between the one who blesses and the ones that are blessed. The lives of fish and birds do not express the image of God the way human life does but there is something divine in it. There also seems to be a relationship between the blessing and fruitfulness.

The blessing is fruitfulness. Sin has made overpopulation a problem and a curse, but in God’s economy this was not so. The whole of creation glorifies God: the majesty of the whale and the color of the coral reef and the song of the bird. The French composer Olivier Messian incorporates a lot of “bird song” in his music. Birds excel in color and coloratura. It has been remarked that all the animal sounds we know presently are in a minor key. I doubt that this would have been so before the fall. Albert Schweitzer was right in his “Reference for Life.”²⁵ God created the life of the fish and the birds, and we should stand in awe before it. Where Schweitzer was wrong was that he did not take sin into account. There is ambiguity in our relationship with all the animal life God created; and as Christians in a fallen world, we can only be pragmatic in our approach to it.

After bringing the fish and birds into existence by the power of His spoken Word, God speaks to them and orders them to “be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth.” God has put the sex urge in every living being on this planet. One commentary says that for the animals this meant an obeying of instinct. Human desire at this point barely rises above instinct. But let’s not run ahead.

Verses 24-31: “And God said, ‘Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds: livestock, creatures that move along the ground, and wild animals, each according to its kinds.’ And it was so. God made the wild animals according to their kinds, the livestock according to their kinds, and all the creatures that move along the ground according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good. Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.’ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.’ Then God said, ‘I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. And to all the

²³ John 10:10^b

²⁴ Vs.3,9,12,19 and 21

²⁵ “Erfurcht vor dem Leben.”

beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air and all the creatures that move on the ground; everything that has breath of life in it; I give every green plant for food.' And it was so. God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning; the sixth day."

When the sixth day breaks upon us our planet is alive. There is color and sound and movement. From our perspective, and probably from God's also, the sixth day is the crowning achievement. There is also an important change in the mode of creation. In vs. 11 we read "Let the land produce vegetation." We mentioned the possibility that the seed had been left over in the ground from a previous creation. When vs. 20 states: "And God said: 'Let the water teem with living creatures' it sounds as if the water is indicated as habitat, not necessarily as the source of life. But vs.22 says: "And God said: 'Let the land produce living creatures.'" Here it seems that God used the earth as building material for the making of animals. It is true that animals are not created "ex nihilo." This is an undeniable fact, as far as the creation of man is concerned in vs. 26 and 27. The animal world is described as from a post-fall perspective. "Livestock, creatures that move along the ground and wild animals" were probably not differentiated as such before sin came. If, under the reign of the Messiah, "the wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat (and) the calf and the lion will feed together with the yearling,"²⁶ we may suppose that this is similar to the pre-fall conditions. Wild animals will not have been wild in the sense that they ate other animals. The term livestock speaks of agriculture, of man using animals for his own benefit. But man was not there yet to milk a cow or use the animal. The dog's best friend was not born yet! It does not say here how the land produced the animals. Whether it was a spontaneous formation or whether God formed animals out of the dust of the ground, like He made Adam, we are not told. We only learn that animals were made "according to their kind." This would seem to exclude that one animal evolved from the other.

In the creation of man we can distinguish three parts:

- 1 The plan
- 2 The execution of the plan
- 3 The blessing.

1- The plan

For the first time we read that God conferred with Himself. All the other acts of creation were done by executive order. The creation of man is done after consultation. This shows in the first place how important the act is. It is also the first time we read of the plurality of God. "*Let us make man*" indicates that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit were equally involved in the process. This was true for the whole of creation, but here it is repeated in connection with one item of the whole: the creation of man. In vs. 1-3 we read how God (the Father) created, the Spirit hovered and the Word was heard. All three Persons are concentrating upon this last act of creation.

This Council of the Holy Trinity may have been a war council also. If we cling to the hypothesis that the creation of the verses 3-31 was a re-creation of that which was destroyed in the fall of Lucifer, the creation of man takes on greater significance. We will get back to this later in connection with the word "subdue" in vs. 28 and ch. 3:15. The enemy was at bay, and God's new creation needed to be protected against Satan's intrusion. This seems to have been part of the mandate given to man. So man had to be a being that was superior to the rest of creation. He needed moral and spiritual insight. He needed to be equipped to rule over his fellow creatures: the fish, the birds and all the other land animals.

So the Council of the Holy Trinity comes to the decision to create man in the image and likeness of God. Man was to be modeled after the character of God to make him a spiritual being with moral insight. This feature may refer to "the image" of God. In the "likeness" God may have anticipated the Incarnation and modeled Adam to the body that would be given to Jesus Christ. God is Spirit and as such He has no discernable physical attributes. But spiritual attributes can be expressed in physical forms. In the same way as a piece of stone can be made into a masterpiece by a Michaelangelo or a Rodin, so can the human body express a vast array of spiritual and emotional realities. And we should not forget that the human body we know now is preliminary to the spiritual body which we will become in the resurrection.

An interesting twist in God's decision to make man is the switch in vs. 26 from singular to plural. In the same breath God says: "Let us make man and let them rule." The next verse makes clear what is meant

²⁶Isaiah 11:6

with the plural. Man, as an expression of God's character, is not a single individual. Man, created in the image of God is both male and female, husband and wife.

In the biblical sense of the word, man stands for man and woman. This makes the new vogue to call a male a man and a woman a person ridiculous. Of course the "them" stands also for the offspring of Adam and Eve. When God created Adam, He created all of mankind. The Apostle Paul explains this to the audience at the Areopagus in Acts: "From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live."²⁷ The very economical way in which God went about this is amazing. He imparted His image to one single being and the result was first another individual, a woman, and then millions upon millions of people. The plan was perfect. It could not have been done more efficiently.

God's plan was for man to rule. The fish, the birds, the livestock and all the other creatures were put under man's dominion. At this point there is no indication as to what man's relation to other spiritual beings would be. It is only later in the Bible that we find out that man ranks higher, in the hierarchy of created beings than angels, who are in many respects superior to him. In Hebrews we learn that angels are the servants of men who are saved from their sin. "Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?"²⁸

God does not tell man who he is. He remains a mystery to himself. It looks as if God expects us to find out for ourselves. Or maybe better, He wants us to seek fellowship with Him so He can tell us.

Ruling over the animal world is the first task given to man. This, in itself, should be deeply satisfying and rewarding. Man was to be the animals' guide for behavior. I still see something of this in my dog's guilty looks; it is as if he is asking me if he did something wrong. But our ultimate task will be infinitely higher. In the book of Revelations Jesus says: "To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne."²⁹ This thought is far beyond me. I understand why David says in the Psalms "What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?"³⁰ The fact is that He is mindful and He does care!

2. The execution of the plan.

Vs.27 sounds like a poem: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." The word "created" occurs four times in this chapter. Three times in this verse alone. It is as if Moses cannot overcome his amazement when he ponders this crowning act of God's creation. He must have realized that he was part of this mystery himself.

The first sentence: "So God created man in His own image" puts the emphasis on God's act of creation. This is the third time the word 'created' is used in this chapter. (vs.1 and 21 are the other two instances.) In the first two cases it clearly means that God called something into existence out of nothing. But man was not created 'ex nihilo,' at least not in the physical sense of the word.

The word is used here to indicate the spiritual aspect of God's making of Adam. God imparted His image to what otherwise would have been an animal. We can discuss later whether man is the product of evolution or not. But we have to state here that man is the product of a revolution as far as his spirituality is concerned. The change from an animal without God's image to a man bearing God's image was instantaneous.

It will take us all of eternity to find out what it means that God created man in His own image. We have to know God in order to know what His image is. A modern fad is to talk about our self-image being poor or good. We can only have a poor self-image if we deny the fact that we are created in God's image. It is sin, our separation from God, that started this preoccupation about self-image. When Adam separated himself from God he found out that he was naked. Since we were created in God's image, it is of vital importance for us to know Him.

"God created man in His image." This puts the emphasis on the original, God. "In the image of God created He him," puts the stress on the image, the copy, man. God did not make a clone. He made a picture of Himself. The picture and the original have a lot in common, but they are not the same. A picture or portrait may represent a living person of flesh and blood, but the image is paper and chemicals or canvas

²⁷ Acts 17:26

²⁸ Heb. 1:14

²⁹ Rev.3:21

³⁰ Ps. 8:4

and paint. God made a living picture of Himself, but this does not mean that man is God. A picture never says everything. There is quite a difference between the creation of man and the Incarnation. God created Adam in His image, but in Jesus Christ, the Word became flesh. Jesus Christ is not a picture of God, He is God. It is true that Paul says: "He is the image of the invisible God,"³¹ but further on we read: "For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him."³² The writer to the Hebrews puts it this way: "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven."³³ It is hard to grasp that we will be like Him, as the Apostle John states in his First Epistle.³⁴ When God created man according to His image and likeness, this was just the beginning.

"Male and female created He them." It is true that God made man initially as male only, but on the day of creation, the female was included in Adam. We shall see in the next chapter how God developed Eve out of Adam. But the point is that a man alone is only part of the image. The complete image is male and female.

There is a strong suggestion in this verse that not just the male and female character express the image of God, but the unity of the two gives the more complete expression. After all Adam and Eve were a married couple. Human sexuality is part of the image, but the image goes much further; marriage is more than becoming "one flesh."

Incidentally, this verse is the first and foremost argument against homosexuality. God expresses His character in the unity of male and female.

3. The blessing.

God blessed them, says vs. 28. The blessing is composed of two parts: fruitfulness and authority. "God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.'"

We know that fruitfulness and multiplication is the result of physical unity. So the first thing God blesses in man is his marriage relationship. This poses all kinds of questions in connection with marriages without children and singleness and celibacy. In modern times the problem of overpopulation should be mentioned.

There are all kinds of reasons why married couples would not have children. The physical inability to have children was, in biblical times, always seen as a shameful thing. It was always blamed on the women. Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, says in Luke's Gospel: "'The Lord has done this for me,' she said. 'In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people.'" In modern times the criteria have changed. In some families the bearing of children has been the undoing of the mother. The physical burden can be too heavy. Obviously there is place for planning and consultation between spouses. But if we lose sight of the basic command of the Lord to be fruitful, and we decided for reasons of comfort to remain childless, we will have to give account of this at the day of judgement. The Lord may be less kind and understanding than we anticipate.

I know from experience that there can be compensations in childless homes. After the death of my parents, I was taken into the home of a family who had no children of their own. They had adopted one girl. They became a blessing to me that a family with children could never have been. But according to vs. 28, it is God's plan for married couples to have children. For any disobeying of this command, we will be held responsible.

A person does have the liberty not to marry. Jesus seems to give this option when there are other compelling reasons, such as the Kingdom of Heaven. He says: "For some are eunuchs because they were born that way; others were made that way by men; and others have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it."³⁵

We should never forget that the marriage bond is a wonderful expression of the fellowship and unity with God. The church is, after all, called the bride of Christ. But the oneness between husband and wife is an image of the real thing, not the reality itself. That is why single people can lead fully satisfied

³¹ Col.1:15

³² in vs.19

³³ Heb. 1:3

³⁴ I John 3:2

³⁵ Matt. 19:12

lives. We do not always need the picture to express the reality of full fellowship with God. If God withholds marriage from us, we should seek if He did not have in mind to introduce us to the real thing immediately, without going through the preliminaries. If we are not interested in reality, but just want the shadow, we will miss even the beauty of the picture.

The verses 29 and 30 make clear that man was originally meant to be a vegetarian and that all animals were herbivores. It is not until sin comes into this creation that man starts to eat meat. The reason for this was of course that eating meat is connected with death and without sin there is no death, so no animal could be killed. After the flood God says to Noah: "Everything that lives and moves will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything."³⁶ God gives man everything, but at what a price! There is presently no virtue in being a vegetarian. There is nothing against vegetarianism, but it is impossible to maintain that the Bible teaches vegetarianism. In many instances vegetarians deny the reality of sin. Mahatma Gandhi did this, as do many Hindus. It is also wide spread among Seventh Day Adventists. Hitler was a vegetarian! There is virtue in being sensitive to the fact that the killing of animals is a calamity, but it is a calamity God wants us to live with. We may even enjoy some of the results of it, such as a chicken dinner or a good steak. But in the millennium this will end. In spite of what my daughter Viviane hopes, there will be no Arby's Roast Beef sandwiches in heaven.

Sin must also have made a fundamental change in the behavior of certain animals. Those animals that prey on others must have developed this habit and grown the equipment necessary to kill after man fell into sin. The lion and the lamb no longer lie down together. The picture that Isaiah paints will only become a reality when sin is removed from this planet and the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD. "They will neither harm nor destroy on all My holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea."³⁷

At the end of the creation God pronounces His judgment upon everything He made. In Vs. 31 we read: "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning; the sixth day." That means that this creation was a true expression of God's perfect character. It was not imperfect man who gave his opinion but the eternal, holy God, who gave the highest grade to what He saw.

CHAPTER TWO

But the best is still to come. We will see in ch.2:2,3 that God instituted the Sabbath, the day of rest and enjoyment. Part of chapter 2 is a recapitulation of the first chapter. Moses goes over some of the details and explains what happens. There is no reason to believe that we are dealing with a different source here than in chapter one. There is no repetition. Some parts of the picture are enlarged.

Vs.1 starts out by saying: "Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array." The KJV and RSV say "and all the host of them." The reference is probably to the whole universe with all its constellations.

Then comes the seventh day. This seventh day, the Sabbath, runs as a scarlet thread throughout the whole Bible. The fall into sin changes the character of the Sabbath completely. From a day of rest and what we would now call "recreation," (a remarkable word in this context) it becomes a forced remembrance of what could have been. We find countless references to the Sabbath in the Pentateuch. Trespassing the Sabbath was punishable by death. In Numbers we read the story of a man who gathered wood on the Sabbath and was put to death on account of his deed.³⁸ Jesus ran into trouble with the authorities about the Sabbath. It was probably the main cause for His death.

In the epistle to the Hebrews the writer brings out the spiritual significance of the Sabbath for us New Testament Christians. He comes to the following conclusion: "There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; For anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his."³⁹ The realization and full enjoyment of our salvation in Jesus Christ runs parallel with God's experience of rest and enjoyment after He finished the work of creation. The creation of planet earth

³⁶Gen.9:3

³⁷ Isa.11:5-9

³⁸ Num.15:32-36

³⁹ Hebr.4:9,10

reflects the new creation in Jesus Christ. There is a subtle danger that we do not enjoy what we possess. In the book of Ecclesiastes Solomon says: "I know that there is nothing better for men than to be happy and do good while they live. That everyone may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all his toil; this is the gift of God."⁴⁰

In creating the Sabbath God gives us an example as to how to experience the joy of living. Joy is a divine characteristic, a part of the image He has shared with us. There is a lot of emphasis throughout the Bible on joy as an integral element of the life of a child of God. The devil has come up with all kinds of surrogates to substitute for the real thing. This has warped our conception of the function of joy in our lives. There is no real joy outside God.

The following quotations are just a few examples of the role joy should play in the life of a Christian:

- Nehemiah said, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."⁴¹

- David said: "But let all who take refuge in you be glad; let them ever sing for joy. Spread your protection over them, that those who love your name may rejoice in you."⁴²

- Jesus said in John's Gospel: "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete."⁴³

- And: "Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete."⁴⁴

- And again: "I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them."⁴⁵

In Matthew's Gospel Jesus declares himself "Lord of the Sabbath." "For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath." And in Mark we read: "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath."⁴⁶

Sin has completely distorted our perception of this point. This all has a special application to the joy of our salvation, of which the Sabbath is a picture. We enter into God's rest, which means that we enjoy our salvation. The expression originates with David, who says in the Psalms: "Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me."⁴⁷ His fall into sin had taken the joy out of it.

Many people are saved by the grace of God and go through life without rejoicing in it. That is why Paul admonished his disciples in Philippi: "Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you. Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!"⁴⁸ We should all keep the Sabbath!

There is a lot more to say about this. Obviously the Old Testament command in Exodus, "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy," does not apply in the New Testament. All the commandments of the Ten Commandments are repeated in the New Testament, with the exception of this one.

It seems to me that chapter 2:1-4 actually is the end of the first chapter. Beginning with vs.5 Moses zooms in for some close-ups. The first one is about the condition of the earth. This must be a flashback of the third day, in chapter 1:11-13. There we read that God did command the earth to bring forth

⁴⁰Ecc1.3:13

⁴¹Neh. 8:10

⁴²Psalms 5:11

⁴³John 15:11

⁴⁴John 16:24

⁴⁵John 17:13

⁴⁶Mark 2:27

⁴⁷Ps. 51:12

⁴⁸Phil.3:1; 4:4

vegetation: plants and trees. The importance of vs. 5 seems to be that it had not rained and that man had not yet made his appearance.

There is a theory in connection with the flood that rain was an unknown factor up to that time. The atmosphere may have been much heavier, creating high humidity and equal temperatures over the whole earth and there may have been vast underground water reservoirs. Ch. 7:10-12 seems to indicate such a situation: "And after the seven days the floodwaters came on the earth. In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, on the seventeenth day of the second month; on that day all the springs of the great deep burst forth, and the floodgates of the heavens were opened. And rain fell on the earth forty days and forty nights."

The second absence mentioned is that of man. Here the Scripture goes back to ch. 1:26,27. The obvious intent is to lead into the story of vs. 7 of how man was created, which was not recorded in detail in the previous chapter.

Scientists have been puzzled by the striking similarity between man's anatomy and that of animals, especially certain species. It is mainly out of this similarity that the theory of evolution was born. The answer that both were made by the same God, leaves too many questions unanswered. After all God made the trees too and the analogy is completely absent there.

If we compare ch. 1:24 with ch. 2:7, we see that the basic material for the creation of land animals and man is the same. Ch. 1:24 says "And God said, 'Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds: livestock, creatures that move along the ground, and wild animals, each according to its kind.' And it was so." But in vs. 7 we read: "The LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being."

In my opinion this leaves open the possibility that God would have used one of the existing animals and added to him His own Spirit, thus making him a man created in His image. The phrase 'and the man became a living being' seems to indicate more than that there was a dead body lying on the earth, and that it came to life after God had breathed into his nostrils. The Hebrew seems to indicate spiritual life not just physical. As we mentioned before, such a creation would not be the result of a process of evolution. The way our text puts it there was no slow seeping of God's Spirit into man resulting in a growing awareness of self. This is a revolution similar to the resurrection from the dead of our Lord Jesus Christ. This hypothesis would explain the absence of the "missing link," for which the evolutionists are still searching. So maybe man does have an ape in his ancestry. Who knows!? I am inclined to think that some scientists do!

From what we read in vs. 18-23 we understand that God created a male human being and that the female was taken out of the man. This could be an indication of the probability of the above hypothesis. There would be a definite chain of events, if God would have taken an existing animal to make a male human being and then make a female out of the male. It seems to me that if God did use an existing animal to create Adam, this would in no way diminish his intrinsic value, in the same way that Eve's creation out of Adam makes her no less than her husband. Most of this will remain a mystery to all of us till we receive the answers above.

In verse 8-14 we are given a description of man's future home. It sounds as if in the wealth and riches of the whole of the planet God had created, He chose a special spot for man to live. Moses indicates the location as being "in the East, in Eden." The only thing this tells us is that Moses was West of it. We do not know when Moses worked on the material for the book we know as Genesis. It could be that he had started on it before his encounter with YHWY at the burning bush in Exodus.⁴⁹ He could have been in Midian, or maybe even in Egypt. There is no record that he would ever have been East of the place which is the traditional site of paradise. Of the four rivers mentioned (Pishon, Gihon, Tigris and Euphrates), only the last two are still existing and called by the same name. But these four were not the rivers that flowed through Paradise itself. We probably make a mistake if we place Paradise somewhere between the Tigris and the Euphrates. It is more likely that the actual site was more to the North, toward what we now call Turkey. This would mean that Noah's ark, which landed on mount Ararat, according to ch. 8:4 ("And on the seventeenth day of the seventh month the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat") had not drifted too far from the cradle of man. The name of the original river that flowed through Paradise is not mentioned. But the praise of the first of the headwaters is song in the verses 11,12. "The name of the first is the Pishon; it winds through the entire land of Havilah, where there is gold. ("The gold of that land is good; aromatic resin and onyx are also there.*)" The flood must have changed the face of the earth considerably. And it is quite possible that the original Paradise mountain disappeared when the waters of the deep reservoirs burst

⁴⁹ See Ex.3

open. There is an almost mythological suggestion that the gold and aromatic resin that could still be found in the land of Havilah in Moses' days, originated from Paradise. The suggestion is, that if what is left of it is still so good, how good must the whole garden have been!

In vs.15-17 we see how God places man in the garden and gives to him the use of all the trees. In ch. 1:29 we saw already that all the seed bearing plants, that is all sorts of grain, was included in man's diet also. The intent of the mention of the trees is obviously to focus on the two main trees in Paradise: "the Tree of Life" and "the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil." The NIV places both trees in the middle of the garden. The KJV and RSV seem to give a more prominent place to the "tree of life." ("The Tree of Life also in the midst of the garden, and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.") This slight shade of difference may be an important distinction. "The midst of the garden" could not be determined by calculating the distance between the boundaries; there was no fence. So the center must have been the most prominent place because of its beauty or because everything else seemed to lead towards it. And there was "the Tree of Life." I think it is important to state this because later Eve will tell the serpent that "the tree of knowledge of good and evil" was in the center of the garden. (Ch. 3:3). This slight shift in position seems to be a shift in emphasis. As if "the tree of knowledge" all of a sudden had gained more prominence than "the Tree of Life."

At this point nothing further is said about "the Tree of Life." God commands man not to eat from "the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil," but he is allowed to eat freely from all the other trees, including "the Tree of Life." It is only after man has sinned that "the tree of life" is out of bounds for him. In ch. 3:22 we read: "And the LORD God said, 'The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the Tree of Life and eat, and live forever.'" From this last verse we learn that something of eternal consequence would have happened to man would he have eaten from "the Tree of Life" first. There is no indication that God gave any instruction regarding this tree. But we may suppose that Adam and Eve both knew the name of the tree and so they could have asked themselves the question what the tree stood for. We know that eating from "the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil" separated man from God eternally and death entered to reign. Eating from "the Tree of Life" would most likely have had to opposite effect. It would have bonded man to God in a relationship of eternal love and life would have reigned eternally. In as much as eating from "the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil" was a matter of choice, so eating of "the tree of life" would have been a definite choice also. God meant man to enter into a special relationship with Him by choice. And for reasons we cannot determine now, man never made that choice while he had the opportunity.

The question could be asked if these two trees were real trees or whether they were only symbols that stood for spiritual truths. I believe they were real trees and that they were loaded with real fruit that could be eaten. Since man is a unity of the spiritual and physical, our spiritual choices are always expressed in physical acts. What mattered in the act of eating was not the eating but the choice. Adam and Eve chose not to eat from 'the tree of life,' just as they chose to disregard God's command and eat from 'the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.' Humanly speaking God must have waited with bated breath to see what man would do. He wanted him to come and choose to love his Creator and surrender to Him.

Love is always based upon choice. We cannot be commanded to love. Love that is forced upon us is not love. In spite of the ideal conditions in which Adam and Eve lived and the open communication they had with God, they never told Him that they loved Him. From our perspective this is hard to understand. Again, humanly speaking, it must have been hard for God to understand also. It is true that in Deuteronomy we find the commandment: "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength,"⁵⁰ but this was because sin had taken away man's liberty to choose. In our present condition it is a command that cannot be obeyed unless the Holy Spirit creates this love in us. We find, however, that on a human level love is a matter of choice. This must have been the original intent when God created man in His image and likeness. For man who has been redeemed by Jesus Christ, his love is the answer to the love of God for him. As John: "We love because he first loved us."⁵¹

In vs.17 God warns man against the consequences of eating of "the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil." The NIV sounds rather weak when it says "But you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." Both the KJV and the RSV are stronger in saying "But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it"(KJV), and "But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you

⁵⁰ Deut. 6:5

⁵¹ I John 4:19

shall not eat" (RSV). Death was, of course, an unknown entity for man at that point. But he must have had some premonition of what it would be to die.

Here again something is lost in the NIV's rendering "for when you eat of it you will surely die." Both KJV and RSV say: "for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die" (KJV); "for in the day that you eat of it you shall die" (RSV). It was the very day they ate that death entered, although physically they remained alive for years.

Vs.18-23 paints the picture of the first romance in the Bible. We read already in 1:27 that God created man as male and female. This meant, first of all, that initially man was a combination of male and female. It does not state specifically that God created Eve on the sixth day. But we may presume that Eve came upon the scene before the Sabbath. So vs.18 and following are a flash-back of the sixth day. The creation of Eve was no afterthought. When we read in vs.18 "The LORD God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him,' " it is not as if God had overlooked this detail of His creation.

The beauty of these verses is in the way God goes about making Adam aware of his need and putting in him the desire to have a companion. It was God's idea that Adam should have Eve. But the idea came to Adam as if it was his own. I wonder how long it took Adam to catch on. It often takes us a long time before we realize that our good desires come from God.

For the first time in the story of creation we read that God says: "It is not good." Six times we read in chapter 1 that God pronounced something good. (vs. 4,10,12,18,21,25). But here God calls Adam's loneliness "not good." This does not mean, of course, that at this point sin had crept in already. The "not good" indicates that Adam's awareness had not come to full maturity yet.

The ultimate purpose was not that Adam would have a wife. He was alone because he had not yet come into a full and perfect fellowship with His Creator. God wanted Him to get married in order to develop a taste for this fellowship on the human level so that he would want to progress into the perfect fellowship with God, of which the human relationship would be a shadow. At the end of this section we read: "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh." (vs.24). Paul quotes this same verse in Ephesians: "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. This is a profound mystery; but I am talking about Christ and the church."⁵² The ultimate purpose of the experience of human fellowship, especially within the bonds of marriage, is to know God, to love Him and to be united to Him.

Another aspect of the "it is not good" is that Adam had not developed the desire for this kind of fellowship yet. And from the rest of the story we know that he never came to this point. God created Adam with the seed of perfect fellowship in him, which was to grow to full maturity. "No good" in this instance, means "not fully matured." God meant Adam to grow so that he would come to the place where his desires were the same as God's desires. The way this is to be developed is through a learning process of intelligent discovery.

Vs.19 shows us the first school in the Bible. God lets Adam attend a seminar where he is confronted with the world in which he lives and where he begins to learn where he is and who he is and where he studies how to relate to fellow creatures.

The first thing he discovers is that he is not alone. He is surrounded by creatures who were born the same day he was. He also learns that he is superior to the other creatures and that he has authority over them. He becomes their leader and gives them names. This giving of names includes more than sticking a label of identification on each of the creatures, but it probably means that they are assigned a place and a task in God's creation by Adam. It is hard to imagine what this first organization of the animal world included, but it is obvious that Adam occupied the most important place in this.

It is in the understanding of the similarity between himself and the animals that surrounded him that he realizes that they have something he does not possess. They consist of pairs but he is alone. That is where the desire to have a female companion awakens in him. He must have recognized the difference between male and female among the animals and identified himself as a male. So the question arose "where is my female?"

He will have asked this question of God. And God answered the first prayer that was ever sent up by man to Him. This first prayer ever uttered by man teaches us a lot about the principle of prayer. Prayer starts by God. It was God who said: "It is not good for the man to be alone" (2:18). Through the leading of

⁵² Eph. 5:31,32

the Holy Spirit man became aware of the fact “It is not good for me to be alone,” and He asks God for a helpmate. So through prayer man becomes what God intends him to be.

We will find this underlying principle in every prayer made according to the will of God. Here, it is the basis of the first great miracle in the creation of human relationships both with fellow man and God. In the life of each individual this principle is repeated again and again. At some point in the life of a young man or woman, the thought comes that he or she is alone. This thought is of divine origin. Sin has altered the situation considerably in that not every individual will turn this growing awareness into a prayer. So in many cases relationships will not develop according to the will of God.

Sin has also created a situation where marriage will sometimes be superseded by the needs of the kingdom of heaven. Jesus says: “For some are eunuchs because they were born that way; others were made that way by men; and others have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it.”⁵³ But this is the exception, not the rule. If we are exceptional people, we should know this. But in most cases people will get married simply because they fall in love or they recognize the urge of the body without understanding why they feel this way. Only the praying Christian knows what he is doing when he marries and he can understand why he does it. Marriage where God is left out is not marriage in the real sense of the word. The shipwrecks we see all around us testify to this.

Vs.21 and 22 picture for us the first operation on a human body. God Himself is the surgeon. It is an unusual act in many respects. Although there is great similarity between operations performed by human surgeons on human bodies, nothing like this has ever happened since. First, man is put under anesthesia. This probably means that Adam had a capacity for pain even in his sinless body. Then part of the body is removed: one rib. We cannot say that God cloned Adam because the human being that is built out of this rib is not an exact copy of Adam. As a matter of fact she is different and in many respects she is his opposite. Calvin supposed that since man and women have an equal number of ribs, originally Adam must have possessed one more than men do at present. Not being a medically trained person, I cannot say anything authoritative about this. At an earlier age I had heard that men have one more rib than women, but that turned out to be a folkloric tradition. What God does with Adam is unique. There is no indication that when God created animals, that are in many respects akin to man, he created the male ones first and then produced females out of them. In the account in ch. 1:24,25 we read that God ordered the earth to produce animals and in the preceding verse the order is given to the fish and the birds to be fruitful. All this makes us believe that God created them in different sexes so they were able to reproduce immediately. But in Adam’s case God includes Eve in him at his creation then separates her from her husband and orders them to become “one flesh” again.

The obvious intent is that God wants Adam to be aware of what is going on and how different his relationship with Eve is in comparison with that of two animals of different sexes. Everything seems to point in the direction of a willing, conscious relationship in which both parties understand the mystery and are able to enjoy it. When God introduces Adam to his wife, he recognizes her immediately, not only as being of the same species as he is, but as part of himself. Parents have a similar experience when they see their child being born. They say to themselves: “This is part of me,” and that creates a bond that is unparalleled in all other human relationships. We still do not fully understand who we are, and we have only scratched the surface of the mystery of the marriage bond. But we learn that this is part of what it means to be created in the image and likeness of God. “Male and female created He them!”

Adam had spent the day giving names and designated places for animals. When he sees Eve, he realizes that his work is not finished yet. The Hebrew word for “man” is *Ish* and Adam calls Eve *ishshah* which literally means “she-man.” So Adam is the ‘he-man’ and Eve becomes the “she-man.” Since the naming of animals included a designation, we may presume that the giving of the name “ishshah” implied a certain task also. Unfortunately things went wrong before we had a chance to find out what it was.

Vs.24 “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh,” is quoted four times in Scripture. In Matthew: “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh”⁵⁴ In Mark: “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, And the two will become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two, but one.”⁵⁵ Paul says: “Do you not know that he who unites himself with a

⁵³ Matt.19:12

⁵⁴ Matt 19:5

⁵⁵ Mark 10:7,8

prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, 'The two will become one flesh.'⁵⁶ And in Ephesians we read: "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh."⁵⁷ With the exception of what the Apostle Paul writes to the Corinthians, all references are positives affirmation of the bond of marriage.

From the quote in First Corinthians, we understand that sexual intercourse plays a decisive part in this unity. This does not mean, of course, that the unity of marriage is mainly physical. The physical part is an expression of the totality of unity. Paul's argument is that prostitution involves more than a "one night stand," but that a man, who goes to a prostitute pollutes himself with the whole world she represents.

The quote in vs. 24 could hardly have been pronounced by Adam himself. It would have been impossible for him at this point to see himself as the parent of a child that would leave him and Eve to marry another human being. The words are obviously an interjection by Moses to trace the riches of the heritage of human marriage. Here is where it all began.

Vs.25 is probably a similar interjection. Adam and Eve knew no shame, because shame is the fruit of sin and sin had not entered their lives yet. These words were written by someone who was fully dressed and who had lost the sense of innocence his parents possessed. Even in our present condition shame between husband and wife is overcome by love. And so we could interpret the words of this verse as an indication that Adam and Eve loved each other.

Here ends our study on creation and the beginning of the human race. Here also end the era of innocence, beauty and Paradise.

⁵⁶ I Cor. 6:16

⁵⁷ Eph 5:31

CHAPTER THREE

THE FALL AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

Chapter 3:1 – 6:8

With this chapter ends the period of which God said that it was very good. This is the end of Paradise and the end of the Sabbath, the rest in which God enjoyed His work. Here sin enters into the world and the result will be that God says that He is sorry he made man. “And the LORD was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the LORD said, ‘I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the ground, man and beast and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.’”⁵⁸ All this is hard to understand for us in the light of God’s omniscience, but we will have to look at that later.

We are not introduced to the serpent that makes its appearance in this chapter. Only at the end of the Bible is he identified as Satan. In Revelations John says: “The great dragon was hurled down; that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him.”⁵⁹ So it is Satan himself, who penetrates into the garden in an effort to get man over to his side.

It is probable that at this point he took possession of the body of an existing animal, that was under the jurisdiction of Adam. We will come back to this at a later point. So far the Scripture has revealed nothing to us about this existence of evil, either on the planet God created or outside it. The only hint, was the command to Adam and Eve not to eat from ‘the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil,’ because it would bring about death. We are given pieces of the jigsaw puzzle, before we get the whole picture.

For people who have read the Bible, this does not present a problem. We can read Genesis 3 and understand what happened. But the question is, what did Adam and Eve know? They had the command of God, and that was all. It should have been sufficient. But how much did they understand? We could ask the question that was asked in connection with The Watergate Affaire: “What did the Adam know, and when did he know it?”

It seems that here the element of faith was introduced. God had told Adam what he needed to know and if Adam would have trusted God, which is what faith is, he would not have fallen into sin. God had presented man with life, in the form of “the Tree of Life,” and with a command, which he could obey or disobey. There is no indication that Adam or Eve knew who Satan was. It seems that God trusted man more than man trusted God.

If our hypothesis about the fall of Lucifer between Ch. 1 vs. 1 and vs. 2 is correct, and if the chaotic condition of the earth was the result of this fall, and the account of ch. 1:3-31 is the report of a restoration of a ruined creation, the creation of man may be of much greater importance in the cosmic scheme than only the appearance of a new species. We may presume that when God created Adam He had the Incarnation of Jesus Christ in mind. And so the role of Adam, which is described as being fruitful, to fill the earth and subdue it and to rule the fish and birds and every living creature, would include keeping the serpent under his dominion also.⁶⁰

What I mean to say is, that part of Adam’s job description may have been to protect the planet from the influence of Satan. This would have made man a formidable opponent to the devil and his strategy is to bring man over to his side before he has grown into the role that God had in mind for him. We are dealing with matters of cosmic and eternal proportions.

So in vs. 1 we are introduced to the serpent. We read: “Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made.” There are two possibilities: the first one is that Satan had taken possession of one of the animals that God had created. The second would be that Satan disguised himself as a serpent. In view of the fact that God pronounces judgement on the serpent, which carries over to all the snakes on earth, it seems that the first was the case. Since Adam had been given the task to rule over all the animals, the snake could have run to Adam for protection, when Satan wanted to take

⁵⁸ Ch. 6:6,7 (RSV).

⁵⁹ Rev.12:9

⁶⁰ See ch.1:28

possession of him. The fact that he did not do this, gives ground for the punishment that is pronounced over him in vs.14.

Most likely the serpent may have been one of the most intelligent animals even before Satan took possession of him. Otherwise his speaking to Eve would have startled her too much and this could have aroused suspicion. Initially, she would not have suspected that she was dealing with a supernatural phenomenon. Probably we are given a condensation of a prolonged dialogue between Eve and the serpent. It must have taken more time than our text allows to convince the woman and bring her to the point of eating the forbidden fruit.

It is hard to read this account without thinking of C. S. Lewis' masterpiece *Perelandra*, in which the green woman is tempted by Satan in the form of Dr. Weston. The dialogue there covers several chapters and ends in victory for the human race.

Here Satan sets out by twisting the truth and presenting it as truth with a question mark to Eve. He acts as if he wants to know and needs instruction. It is not without reason that the Bible says that the serpent was more crafty. He knew exactly that human beings love to teach and share their superior knowledge with those who do not possess it. "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'" The KJV says: "Yeah, hath God said...?" The misquote does not only ask for a correction, but in a very subtle way it throws doubt on anything else God might have said. The implication is, that if this is true, if God put man in a garden and condemns him to starve to death, what kind of a God are we dealing with.

The question puts Eve immediately on the defensive. Eve's answer is partly correct. She quotes the Word of God rather freely and, maybe at one, point incorrectly, but at least she answers with God's Word. What God had said literally in ch. 2:16,17 was: "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die." There is in this text no mention of touching. But what seems to me the first sign of weakening of alertness in Eve, is the fact that she places the tree in the middle of the garden. In so doing she gives it a more prominent place than the Tree of Life. All of a sudden the Tree of Knowledge occupies the center of her attention.

Centuries later her Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ, would meet the same serpent. He shows us how to answer the devil. In Matthew's Gospel Jesus answers with: "It is written," quoting the Word of God literally. Of course Eve did not have a Bible and at this point in history there was no need for the art of writing. It is only because of death, which cuts the bridges between generations and because of man's failing memory, that writing has become a necessity. A Chinese proverb says: "The weakest ink is stronger than the strongest memory." Eve's incorrect quote is a foretaste of death. The presence of the Evil One has started to lure her away already from God, who is the source of life.

The next step in the temptation is the contradiction of the Word of God. With the first innocent-sounding question, Satan had left the door open for retreat, if that were necessary. But here the first lie on earth is born. That is why Jesus calls him, "the father of lies." He says of Satan: "He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies."⁶¹ The "murderer from the beginning" starts to strangle the woman with the first lie ever spoken on earth. "You will surely not die." Having contradicted the Word of Truth, he proceeds to slander God.

At this point Satan must have known something of what God wanted man to become. He may not have had a full understanding of God's plan to share His glory with man and to make mankind the bride of His Son, filled with His glory. But he understood enough that if man became what God wanted him to be, it would mean the end of the kingdom of darkness. The real target of this temptation was Adam. But Satan must have feared that Adam would be too formidable a prey to swallow alive. He guessed correctly that it would be easier to trip Eve and to leave it to her to pass death on to her husband.

After the outright lie "you shall not die," the devil mixes a little bit of truth into his words, to make the argument sound more logical. He sheds, first of all, doubt on God's motives; and secondly, he tells Eve that she will have some essential point in common with God: the knowledge of good and evil. He says three things: her eyes will be opened, she will be like God, and she will know the difference between good and evil.

To start with the latter: Eve knew of the existence of evil, because of God's command not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. What the devil says is, "you will know," but what he

⁶¹ John 8:44

means is, “you will experience.” He does not explain that there is no need to experience in order to know. If you ask me if it is good to kill somebody, I will not answer: “I do not know, because I have never done it.” I wish we would be able to stand back and let the horror of this moment in the history of our world fully penetrate to us. Satan is at the point of killing the most wonderful part of God’s creations, and Eve just lets him do it. God Himself did not have the experience of evil. In that respect the devil’s word was an outright lie. Eve did not become like God at this point. It would not be until centuries later that Satan’s word would become true and God would experience evil when Jesus would take upon Himself the sin of the world and die on the cross. This was not because man had become like God but because God had become man. From our perspective we can see how twisted the lie was. Probably the devil himself did not completely understand what he was saying. “You will be like God.” Nothing was farther from the truth. The image of God in man, which would have developed into a glorious likeness, would fade out almost completely with the act of sin. “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”⁶²

The irony was that God’s plan was for man to become like Him. The Apostle John says: “Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.”⁶³ And in Revelations we read: “One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, ‘Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.’ And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. It shone with the glory of God...”⁶⁴

Here again, we do not know how much the devil could guess of God’s plan for man. That fact that he insinuates that God would not want man to be like Himself but that Satan knew a way to get there anyhow, suggests that he had an inkling of God’s plan with man. But the short-cut leads man away from his glorious destination and some never get there.

Maybe the worst lie is “your eyes will be opened.” Sin makes man blind. What the devil does to Eve is best described by Paul when he says: “The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.”⁶⁵ The devil always throws a veil over the eyes of men, which makes them move from reality to unreality. It is not until we stand in the presence of God that we see things as they really are. When sin opened the eyes of Adam and Eve, they saw their shame and nothing else. They knew they had been deceived. Vs.6 shows that when Eve starts paying attention to the words of the devil, the optical illusion begins immediately: “When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.” We should never lose sight of the fact that Eve is as yet under no compulsion to follow the devil’s suggestions. Her will was still free. She could eat and she could refuse to eat. She bears full responsibility for her act. It is true that the temptation, carried out with so much cleverness, was hard to resist; but it was not impossible.

I believe that the main problem was that neither Adam nor Eve had ever consciously, by an act of the will, chosen God’s side by eating from the Tree of Life. Sartre was right in saying that man only becomes fully man when he makes choices. He was wrong in believing that it did not matter what kind of choices were made. It is still true that we reach maturity by making the right choice.

The writer to the Hebrews defines maturity as the ability to distinguish between good and evil. “But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.”⁶⁶ The longer we postpone making the choice for good, the easier we will be lured into evil. Adam and Eve may have been innocent, but they were not mature. The consummation of the act of sin is the eating of the fruit. As long as she only looked and even as she started ascribing qualities to the fruit that were not there, she was only on the road but she could have returned. The illusion was the work of the devil, but the act of taking and eating was hers.

The act was also irreversible. From that moment on only God could save her from total destruction. Sin had entered her heart to stay, and now she had to die. Because only physical death could

⁶² Rom.3:23

⁶³ I John 3:2

⁶⁴ Rev.21:9-11

⁶⁵ II Cor.4:4

⁶⁶ Heb. 5:14

save her from eternal spiritual perdition. From that moment on she was no longer a free person. As Jesus says in John's Gospel: "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin... So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."⁶⁷

The pattern of temptation has remained the same throughout the ages. John talks about "the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life."⁶⁸ The devil has never excelled in being original. And in James we read: "But each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death."⁶⁹

But this was not the condition Eve was in when she committed her first sin. She did not sin because she was prompted by a sinful nature. For both salvation and sinning the basis is hearing. What Paul says about the Gospel can be applied to temptation also. "So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God."⁷⁰ The objection is often stated that there is no tangible basis for faith in God's Word. But the same can be said about sin and temptation. It was and is the word of Satan over against the Word of God. What Eve thought she saw "that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom" was an illusion. She had the Word of God for the truth and the word of Satan for the lie. After she sinned, she knew immediately that she was deceived, but her offspring still believes that what they think they see is the real thing and that the things of God are unreal. It is only when we believe the Word of God that we see reality. As was said before, sin blinds our eyes.

Then the verse says: "She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it." It seems very unlikely that Adam would have been present from the beginning of Eve's encounter with the serpent, or even that he would have witnessed Eve's picking of the fruit. The RSV omits completely that Adam was with Eve. It says: "she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, and he ate." Some commentators read this to mean that Adam was "in the neighborhood," and others see in it an indication that they were living together, not necessarily that they were standing next to each other.

Adam's eating of the fruit calls up many more questions than Eve's. He is ultimately held responsible for what happened. The Bible gives no details, but it is obvious that Adam knew what he was doing, and was consequently guilty. The fact that Eve was tempted and lured into sin may be considered as extenuating circumstance. But Adam was not tempted directly by the devil. He appears to have acted of his own free will, only slightly influenced by his wife. The situation is far too serious to make flippant remarks about this. God had created man first in His image with the express purpose of ruling over His creation and protecting it against this kind of assault. But Adam gives up without a struggle. Eve must have told him what the fruit was. He also must have known that she had eaten first, and undoubtedly he must have seen a change for the worse in her. Yet he takes and eats. There has been much speculation about what would have happened if Eve had fallen and Adam had not. C. S. Lewis says in *The Chronicles of Narnia*: "We never know what would have happened."

The consequences are immediately apparent. We read in vs.7 "Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves." It has been speculated that before the fall, man was clothed in divine radiance. But ch. 2:25 states specifically: "The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame." There is no doubt in my mind that a drastic change occurred, but it was probably not as simple as the taking away of a covering of parts of their body. Objectively, there is no reason to be ashamed of any part of the human body. The fact that people feel ashamed to expose their sexual organs to one another is an phenomenon that is difficult to explain, except for the story of the fall. Also the only humans present were they. If a man and wife are ashamed to expose themselves before one another that means that there is a lack of love. For love is naked.

The first result of the act of sin was a change in their affection for and attraction toward one another. But even worse, they were ashamed before God. They had felt perfectly comfortable in God's presence in their naked condition before, but sin had changed that completely. First they hid from one another by sewing fig leaves to cover themselves, and then they hid from God, fig leaves and all. They must have realized that what covered them before one another did not cover them before God. Most of all their feeling of shame had little or nothing to do with their physical appearance; it was a spiritual

⁶⁷ John 8:34,36

⁶⁸ I John 2:16

⁶⁹ James 1:14,15

⁷⁰ Rom. 10:17 (KJV)

phenomenon. They felt naked, not because their body was uncovered, but because they had severed themselves from God by disobeying His Word.

It has been argued that their actual sin was not an act of eating of a fruit, but the act of sexual intercourse. This misconception is particularly persistent among the tribal people of Irian Jaya, Indonesia. But since God made man in His image and likeness as male and female, and ordered them to be fruitful and multiply, this could hardly be the case. Their sin was disobedience to the command of God, and there is no reason to believe that the story of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil should not be taken literally.

The devil was partly right in saying that their eyes would be opened; there was an immediate realization that they had sinned. They knew that God had been right and that they were dying. The warning in ch. 2:17 had been “when you eat of it you will surely die.” Or as the KJV and the RSV put it: “for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.” They did die that same day, although their body kept on existing for almost one thousand years. In ch. 5:5 we read: “Altogether, Adam lived 930 years, and then he died.” This physical death was the last phase of his dying that started on the day he sinned. The Hebrew in 2:17 says literally “dying you shall die.” Death started at the spiritual level and then penetrated the level of the soul and finally consumed the body.

On the basis of what Paul writes in I Thessalonians, we believe that man exists as a unity of spirit, soul and body.⁷¹ It needs no explanation as to what is meant by the body. The soul must be the seat of man’s intellect, emotions and will. And the spirit is the organ with which he is able to commune with God. The dying started immediately in the spirit. By disobeying man severed his communion with God. It is only through the regeneration by the Holy Spirit that this fellowship is restored. Jesus explains this to Nicodemus: “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again... I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.”⁷² Later in this same chapter we are told that this regeneration is the result of faith in the payment for our sins by Jesus when He died on the cross. “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, That everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”⁷³ The amazing part of the temptation is that the devil did not attack man’s spirit, but his soul. It was through thoughts and emotions and ultimately through an act of the will that first Eve and then Adam died spiritually. This is the more reason to believe that Adam and Eve never fully developed their spiritual relationship with God by eating of the Tree of Life. Their spirit was alive, but it had not grown into maturity yet.

Vs.7 makes clear, as we said above, that the first result of sin is the breaking up of the relationship between husband and wife. Obviously, this was preceded by an inner breakdown in each of the individuals. The sequence of events must have been as follows: first the relationship with God was severed, secondly the band of the spirit, which tied soul and body together had snapped and so there was no inner harmony. Then finally there was a breakdown in interhuman relationships. It is important to understand this sequence because the healing process follows the same order. It is when we are born again by the Holy Spirit that fellowship with God is restored. This starts the sorting-out process in our inner man, which is part of our sanctification or inner healing. It will depend on how fast this process develops as to how well we will do in our inter-human relationships. The Bible ties loving God and loving fellow humans together. The following quotations are just a condensed selection:

- “Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.”⁷⁴
- “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.”⁷⁵ And lest we think that this only pertains to one’s own family, Leviticus adds:
- “The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the LORD your God.”⁷⁶
- John settles it all by saying: “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen.” It is the

⁷¹ See I Thess. 5:23

⁷² John 3:3,5

⁷³ John 3:14,15

⁷⁴ Deut 6:5

⁷⁵ Lev 19:18

⁷⁶ Lev 19:34

experience to be loved by God that heals us inwardly and enables us to reflect love toward others. "We love because He first loved us."⁷⁷

What follows in vs. 7 and 8 is both pathetic and moving. First Adam and Eve hide from each other. They cannot stand the idea of being naked before one another. They feel like the other one can see straight through them, and since they hate what they see in themselves, they are sure that they will hate that in the other also. So they put on masks. Sin and masks go together. We put on masks for our own benefit and for the benefit of one another. People who say they do not wear masks are the greatest pretenders. This does not mean we are all always phonies, but we act like we are. In his book *Till We Have Faces*, C. S. Lewis describes the character of the queen who decides that she is too ugly to look at herself; so she starts wearing a veil. She gets in trouble when she has to talk to a god, because the gods only talk to people face to face. And she asks herself "how can the gods talk to us till we have faces?" A very profound question!

The most amazing thing, as we shall see later, is not that God takes away our masks and exposes us as naked before Him and one another, but that He provides us with another cover, not of our own making. The skin of the animal that died in the place of man (see vs.21) covers them sufficiently to be able to live and to maintain a relationship with God and man in a broken world. The covering with fig leaves was bad and pathetic enough, but then comes the dreaded moment where God comes for the time of His daily visit on the planet and the hour of fellowship with man. Moses puts this visit "in the cool of the day." It is doubtful that days would have been hot and tiring in paradise, but the description gives us a clear image of rest and beauty such as we know it at sunset. We get the impression that God's visit was a daily reoccurring event. How this corresponds to a realization of God's omnipresence, I do not know. It is possible that Adam and Eve needed moments of being consciously in God's presence since they had never eaten of the Tree of Life yet.

Undoubtedly, this hour in the cool of the day was the highlight of their daily life. But this day, sin turned it into a moment of terror. They had just covered their nakedness with fig leaves before one another, but when they heard God approaching, they knew immediately that this mask would not do before their Creator. So they hid behind the trees. If the leaves were not enough, maybe the trees would do! How foolish sin makes a man. Sin always shows itself in irrational behavior. It seems that God plays their game of hide and seek, the oldest game in the world. In vs.8 He pretends as if He does not know where they are, and calls: "Where are you?" If Adam and Eve had believed that the omnipresent God would not always be with them and that the omniscient God would not know where they are, God goes along with them for a while. The question is, of course, not an effort for God to gain information, but to make Adam and Eve understand that they are hiding and that hiding for God is useless. The question: "Where am I?" as a sinful being in a sinful world could be the first step toward God and salvation. Before sin entered, the question did not have to be asked. After eating from the Tree of Knowledge Adam lost the answers to most questions. How knowing can you get?!

We have to realize how much Gospel there is in vs. 9. "But the LORD God called to the man, 'Where are you?' " Both the RSV and NIV use the phrase "But the LORD God" Adam and Eve are running away from God, but God seeks them. He does this by forcing them to realize where they are. God knows where Adam is, but Adam does not. God seeks man because He loves him. The essence of the Gospel is "not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins."⁷⁸ And Paul writes in Romans: "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."⁷⁹ Sin may separate us from God, but it does not hide us from God.

Adam never considered the possibility of not answering. He must have known all the time that man cannot hide from God. The question from the omniscient God "Where are you?" makes him understand that he is not hiding from God but from himself. His answer is partly truthful: "I was afraid." This is a new word in his vocabulary. He had never been afraid in his life before, but in eating from the Tree of Knowledge, he acquired this new experience.

Fear comes from a feeling of inadequacy. We know that we are facing forces against which we are not equipped to defend ourselves. Thus far Adam had been on God's side, so a feeling of inadequacy was unknown to him. Now he has left the side of God, and he is afraid. The problem with sin is that it makes

⁷⁷ I John 4:19

⁷⁸ I John 4:10

⁷⁹ Rom. 5:8

us lose our sense of direction. Adam is afraid of God. He should have been afraid of Satan and his temptation.

In ch. 2:25 we read: “The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.” A sense of nakedness is actually a sense of shame. Sin and shame fall into the same category. Shame is a rather complicated phenomenon. It has a moral connotation. It means that we are aware of the fact that we are not what we should be. It is a feeling of the conscience. Adam knew what he had done, and he was afraid of the consequences. He must have been amazed at God’s reaction to his sin. First, that God seeks him and calls him. This is what John Newton called *Amazing Grace*.

God asks him two questions: “Who told you you were naked?” and “Have you eaten from the tree?” Again this is not an effort of God to gain information from Adam. God wants Adam to get a clear picture of what he has done and why he feels the way he does. It is because he has disobeyed God’s command that he is afraid and feels ashamed.

This seems all rather simple to us, but it is amazing to see how much trouble men often go through analyze the root of their problems. When my brother-in-law was in the process of divorcing his first wife, and I tried to tell him that he needed a personal relationship with Jesus, he could not see what that had to do with it. There seems to be the general “blank spot” in the life of most people. Most marriages break up because God is not in the center, and most of our difficulties are due to the fact that He does not occupy the first place in our lives.

One wonders what would have happened if Adam would have made a clear and unreserved confession, taking the blame of what he had done. But Adam passes the buck to Eve, and Eve to the serpent. There is some truth in the excuses, but there is also a redeeming factor in taking the blame for our sins. It is hard to have our debts paid for us if we do not own up to owing. Hiding from the facts and putting the blame elsewhere seems to be a built-in feature of sin. In sinning we submit ourselves to the Father of Lies.

As a matter of fact there is a hint of blaming God in Adam’s reply: “The woman you put here with me; she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.” (vs.12) What Eve says is true, but there is no mention of personal guilt and responsibility in her words either. It is all the fault of the serpent.

Judgment starts with the serpent. In the verses 14 and 15 we read: “So the LORD God said to the serpent, ‘Because you have done this, cursed are you above all the livestock and all the wild animals! You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life. And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.’” It seems that at first the words are addressed to the animal, but further on words are directed to the spiritual power that used the animal.

The fact that God actually punishes the snake implies that the animal bore responsibility; otherwise, judgment would be unfair. What this responsibility was, we are not told. It seems that Satan took possession of the serpent’s body, but that somehow the animal could have refused, or could have run to Adam for help, because, as we mentioned before, all animals stood under Adam’s protection. God takes away the legs of the snake. If I remember my biology correctly, there are rudimentary legs in each snake’s skeleton, which testify to the truth of this punishment. The eating of dust is evidently a figure of speech. The dust is not the snake’s nourishment, but his environment. The way the snake has learned to adept itself to it’s new condition is one of the miracles of nature. We could call it an object lesson on how to live with sin and its consequences.

It is interesting to note that the serpent is still around when God calls the court to order. It is said that after a poisonous snake has bitten his prey, he can always be found in the neighborhood, waiting for the opportunity to swallow what his venom killed. This habit acquires spiritual significance here. The snake would have done better to make himself scarce.

Although we might read some ambiguity in the line “And I will put enmity between you and the woman,” since it seems that women are particularly scared of snakes, (but they are so of mice also), the prophecy is clearly directed at Satan, the spiritual being and not at the reptile.

Genesis chapter 3 verse 15 is the first prophecy found in the Bible: “And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.” It is addressed at the devil, but it even extends beyond the person of Satan himself because it speaks regarding the offspring of both the serpent and the woman. We have no problem of determining who is meant by Eve’s offspring, even if the word has a plural connotation. Obviously, God has His Son Jesus Christ in mind. But who is the offspring of the serpent? As far as we know, angels do not have offspring. We conclude this from what Jesus says in Matthew: “At the resurrection people will neither marry

nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven.”⁸⁰ In the parable of the weeds and the wheat, Jesus calls human beings “the sons of the evil one.”⁸¹ And: “The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one.”⁸² It seems though, that vs. 15 does not just speak about men who have decided to follow Satan instead of Christ. Probably both spiritual powers and human beings are included. This would make sense, particularly in connection with the coming of the antichrist.

The first prophecy introduces the Cross in the Bible. We need the New Testament perspective to understand this, but it is obvious that it was in dying at the cross that Jesus Christ crushed the head of the serpent. The image is of a man stepping on a poisonous snake. The snake bites his heel; which causes the man’s death, but in dying the man crushes the head of the snake. The death of our Lord Jesus Christ means that Satan is dethroned and his authority is taken away. The fact that he behaves in our present age as if he still possess his full power, does not change this reality. Peter says: “Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.”⁸³ But there is no longer any legal ground for the lion to devour. All he can do is roar, which he does very well.

A good Old Testament illustration of Satan’s attitude is found in the person of King Saul, who was dethroned by God, but who kept on sitting on the throne of Israel for a total of forty years. Samuel had said to Saul “... You have rejected the word of the LORD, and the LORD has rejected you as king over Israel!”⁸⁴ In Tolkien’s book *Lord of the Rings* we find another fine illustration in the person of Saruman, who tries to keep up his reign of terror even after the center of power in the person of Sauron has been destroyed.

It is on the basis of this prophecy that later in the day the LORD God can provide Adam and Eve with covering for their nakedness, so they can continue to live in a world of sin, without being destroyed. The killing of the animal, who provided the skin expresses what Jesus would do in pouring out His blood in order to cover us with His righteousness.

We can hardly presume that it was an afterthought of God that the offspring of Eve would crush the serpent’s head. It is from this prophecy that we take it that God had created man with the specific purpose of defeating the Satan and bringing planet earth back under God’s control. Satan must have known that such was God’s plan in the creation of Adam and Eve, and this must have been the reason why he went to such length to tempt man into sin. The fact that God’s purpose for man was thwarted and ultimate victory over evil was postponed for centuries lends such depth to the tragedy of the fall.

How all this fits in with God’s eternal purpose, we cannot understand. It is obvious that God did not plan sin. That would have been immoral to the highest degree. The possibility of the fall of Lucifer and man’s wrong choice are implied in the moral freedom God granted to some of His creatures, such as angels and humans. But that is all we can say about this. It is also clear that the Incarnation is part of the “eternal covenant” about which the writer to the Hebrews speaks.⁸⁵ But although God knew about sin and made preparations in eternity to undo the damage, this does not make Him the author of sin. It was the calling of the first man to subdue the planet and see to it that God’s “will would be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

Maybe we can call the Incarnation God’s plan B. Such a thought seems to be implied in Ezekiel’s prophecy: “I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found none,” and Isaiah says: “I looked, but there was no one to help, I was appalled that no one gave support; so my own arm worked salvation for me, and my own wrath sustained me.”⁸⁶

The fact that man separated himself from God does not mean that he became friends with the enemy. It is part of man’s salvation that God put enmity between Satan and man. Man did not become the devil’s friend although he became God’s enemy.

⁸⁰ Matt.22:30

⁸¹ Matt.13:38

⁸² Matt. 13:38

⁸³ I Pet.5:8

⁸⁴ I Sam.15:26

⁸⁵ Heb. 13:20

⁸⁶ Isa. 63:5

There is a wide gap between the curse upon the serpent in vs.15 and the punishment for man in the following verses. Nowhere does God pronounce a curse upon Adam or Eve. They suffer the consequences of their act, but that is all. In Adam's case the ground is cursed because of him, but not he. God could not have cursed His own image.

God turns first to Eve, since she was the first one to commit the sin. The punishment for both Eve and Adam has to do with that which would have been their greatest glory: for Eve the transmission of life, for Adam his reign over God's creation. Eve is still "the mother of all the living" (vs.20), but childbearing will henceforth be a painful experience. In trespassing, she had entered the domain of death but this would not prevent her from giving birth. Having children and passing on life would be part of the process of dying from now on. Some women actually do die in childbirth, like my paternal grandmother. Yet the birth of a child remains one of the most exhilarating experiences; at least it was for me in the birth of my children. And Jesus says: "A women, giving birth to a child has pain, because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets her anguish, because of her joy that a child is born into the world."⁸⁷ The joy of birth merges with the sorrow of death. The punishment hits Eve there where she is uniquely woman.

The second evidence of the entrance of death in Eve's life is in her relationship with her husband. The mutual love and openness, the unity of spirit, soul and body, is reduced to sexual desire. We can only guess what this relationship must have been before they decided that they were ashamed of themselves before one another because they were naked. There is, however, a redeeming feature in this desire also. It would keep the first couple from drifting completely apart, and it would ensure the procreation of their offspring. But all this was a far cry from the condition of exuberance, which is described in ch. 2:23-25.

There is also a significant shift in hierarchy. Adam had pre-eminence over Eve before the fall because he was created first, and because she was taken out of him. But their relationship must have been such that Adam was first among equals. We should always bear in mind that the dominance of a man over a woman is not part of God's original plan of creation. It is the result of sin. It must also be obvious that the tendency of a man to hang on to his position of dominance is a result of sin. This is humorously illustrated in the first chapter of the book of Esther. In Esther it is made into the law of Medes and Persians that the man should rule the household.⁸⁸

The question arises of course that, if the present position of husband and wife is linked to the presence of sin in the world, what about couples who have their sins forgiven because of their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ? Where the Apostle Paul deals with this topic, it seems that the Gospel has not brought about any changes in the relationship of married couples. Paul states flatly, "The head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man..."⁸⁹ And elsewhere he says the same thing.⁹⁰ On the other hand Paul abolishes all the differences in race, social status and sex for those who are in Jesus Christ. To the Galatians he writes: "For all of you who were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you all are one in Christ Jesus."⁹¹ Our identification with Christ has ended male supremacy which entered human relations with the fall. Where the New Testament states that in a marriage the husband is the head of the woman, it is to demonstrate that marriage is an emotional and physical expression of the spiritual relationship between Christ and the church, as in Ephesians,⁹² or it is an admonition for Christians to maintain a testimony in a heathen world. A passage in First Corinthians, for instance, bears a stamps of the culture of its time.⁹³ As redeemed men and women, we live in a sinful world; and our position is highly ambiguous. If we insist on our rights, we could very well lose our testimony. A Christian marriage is to be a partnership of mutual respect and love and sacrifice. An mistreated wife is just as reprehensible as a hen-pecked husband. A woman should be able to lean on a man, and a man should be strong enough to be leaned on.

"To Adam He said" Adam bears the ultimate responsibility for what happened. Adam was not deceived by the serpent as Eve was. We are not told in full details what actually happened. We simply read in

⁸⁷ John 16:21

⁸⁸ See Esther 1:16-22

⁸⁹ I Cor. 11:3

⁹⁰ See Eph.5:22-32

⁹¹ Gal.3:27,28

⁹² Eph.5:22-32

⁹³ I Cor.11:2-16

vs. 6^b: “She gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.” As we said before, it was not likely that Adam would have witnessed the whole scene of temptation. If he had, it would surely have added considerable weight to his responsibility. Eve had the choice between Satan’s word and God’s; Adam between God’s Word and Eve’s. There was no supernatural element in this choice. Adam chose for Eve against God. No clever demonic argument influenced him. It was a matter of God’s Word against hers. He must have felt that she was right and God was wrong.

That is why God takes away his crown. He is no longer lord of the earth. From now on the whole of nature will be against him. Even the very ground that grows the food he and Eve eat will not be “user friendly” any more.

God does not mention the animal world here. Adam will have his livestock, but for the rest of the fauna disharmony will take over. One animal will prey on another and all will turn against man or keep their distance from him. The picture Isaiah paints of Christ’s millenium gives us an idea of what the animal world must have been like before the fall.⁹⁴

The Lord had given Adam the task to work in Eden and to take care of it, according to ch. 2:15. This was a joyous task. From ch. 2:19 we understand that this task covered the animal world as well as the flora. Not only the fauna, but the flora also, turns against man. From now on labor will mean “painful toil.” This punishment goes much farther than physical pain as the result of agricultural labor. A large percentage of mankind does not make a living by farming. The ulcers of the insurance and real estate agents and factory workers and office clerks are included in this: “By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food.” Sweat stands here for any kind of effort and for the fear of not succeeding. It is because of this curse that Jesus addresses His words of comfort to us in Matthew: “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.”⁹⁵ The sweat of the brow stands for the worry of life; what you will eat or drink, or what your body will wear.

Added to the fear that sin introduced in the life of man is the worry to stay alive. We should understand the origin of fear and worry. The Bible counsels against it at several places. In the Parable of the sower Jesus speaks of “the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth,” which choke the Word of God in our hearts.⁹⁶ Paul says: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.” And in Hebrews we read: “Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.’ ” We conclude from this that it is not God who puts fear and anxiety in a man’s heart. Man has brought this upon himself by listening to the devil and by cutting himself off from fellowship with God. God simply states the facts of Adam’s changed position to him: fear, anxiety and death. Or rather is it a triple fear: fear of intimacy with God and man, fear for the struggle of life,⁹⁷ and fear of death.

The antidote to all of this is to have your sins forgiven in Jesus Christ. The realization of this forgiveness will start the healing process immediately.

The ultimate fear is the fear of death; that is physical death. Fear itself is a part of death because it is caused by sin. People who fear are dead. They are in the category Jesus had in mind when He said: “Follow me and let the dead bury their own dead.”⁹⁸

⁹⁴ See Isa.11:6-9

⁹⁵ Matt. 6:25-34

⁹⁶ Matt. 13:22

⁹⁷ “der Kampf ums Dasein”

⁹⁸ Matt. 8:22

The devil manipulates this fear of death quite effectively in the lives of men. We read in Hebrews that Satan holds mankind in slavery by their fear of death.⁹⁹ In our short sightedness we believe that we can avoid death, or at least, postpone it by obeying the enemy. We do not realize that every sinful act we commit is born out of the death that is within us. Immoral acts do not postpone death, they only bring it closer. In a certain way though, people who fear death are more realistic than those who think it will go away when they ignore it? William Soroyan phoned a newspaper after he found out that he was terminally ill and he said: "I knew people died, but I always thought an exception would be made for me. What do I do now?"

In working the ground Adam knew he was looking at his grave. This truth was brought home even closer after the death of his son Abel. He saw what would happen to him. Unfortunately, we know much more now than Adam did.

"...Sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned."¹⁰⁰ Adam never saw the abundance of the harvest of the single seed he sowed: worse than thorns and thistles.

But the psalmist says, "Our God is a God who saves; From the Sovereign LORD comes escape from death."¹⁰¹ It is through His own death that our Lord Jesus Christ frees those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death."¹⁰²

God told Adam: "Dust you are and to dust you will return." In ch. 2:7 we read: "And the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being." The KJV says 'a living soul.' The word for breath and spirit are the same in Hebrew. So 'the spirit of life' is an acceptable translation. When God pronounces man to be dust, He indicates that the spirit is dead. Man is no longer the tri-unity of spirit, soul and body God made him. Sin has reduced him to dust.

Yet we know that even sinful man is an eternal being. That is both our hope and despair. The promise of resurrection, however vague, runs through the whole Old Testament. The turning point is when the prophecy of David: "Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure, because you will not abandon me to the grave (Sheol), nor will your Holy one see decay. You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence,"¹⁰³ was fulfilled in the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

It is interesting, to say the least, to see how Adam reacts to this verdict. He finished the task that he had started before in ch. 2:19, where he gives names to all living creatures. At that point the woman had not been created yet. When she is introduced to Adam, he calls her *ishshah*, she-man, woman. It is not until after the fall that we read: "Adam named his wife Eve, because she would become the mother of all the living." "Eve" means "life" in Hebrew. The LXX translates this verse: "And Adam called his wife's name life, because she was the mother of all the living."

At this point Adam did not speak from experience. He must have based his statement on the Word of God; the prophecy about the offspring of the woman. I believe that, from this statement of faith, we may conclude that Adam repented, and experienced salvation. He started his task of ruling God's creation by giving names to all the animals; after his crown is taken away he "rules" over Eve by naming her "life!" His kingdom has been greatly reduced, but his first decree is one of hope, and faith, and salvation. He, who was "a pattern of the one to come," as Paul calls him,¹⁰⁴ put his faith in the one to come. God has pronounced Adam dead, but Adam announces the first victory over death. God must have been pleased. Adam trusts the Word of God late, but not too late.

Verse 21 is one of the crucial verses in the Bible; one upon which most Gospel truth hinges. Whether God actually killed the animal and made the skin as a garment, or He showed Adam how to do it, is not the important point in this verse. Either way God takes the initiative.

A wide variety of truths springs from this verse. The first is that God takes man's feeling of shame seriously. Adam and Eve may have focused on the wrong aspect of their nakedness. Exposure of certain parts

⁹⁹ Heb. 2:14,15

¹⁰⁰ Rom.5:12

¹⁰¹ Ps.68:20

¹⁰² Heb. 2:14,15

¹⁰³ Ps. 16:9-11

¹⁰⁴ See Rom. 5:14

of the human anatomy does not make man naked; at the most, physical nakedness is an expression of a spiritual condition. Adam and Eve were naked inside. That is why they could not face each other or God. We may call this “conviction of sin.” Immediately after committing the sinful act, Adam and Eve proceeded to cover themselves with fig leaves (vs.7). This cover-up amounts to some sort of denial. The amazing thing is that God does not come to expose them. The answer to denial is not exposure, but atonement. It was my personal experience at my conversion that God was not out to embarrass me. I understood at that point that God really loved me.

God loved Adam and Eve. There are places in the Bible where God threatens to expose nakedness, as in Ezekiel.¹⁰⁵ But in such a case there was no feeling of shame to start with.

What God does for Adam and Eve does not amount to a denial. God covers them on a legal basis, the death of an animal as a substitute for their own death. This legal action implies guilt. Pardon always implies guilt. When Richard Nixon received a pardon from President Ford in the Watergate affair, it meant that he was guilty.

We are not told what actually happened. We understand from the fact that skins are mentioned that an animal was killed. How much Adam and Eve understood, we do not know. They must have realized that they could continue to live with this. To what extent Adam consciously identified himself with the slain animal or even saw a connection with the prophecy about the coming offspring that would crush the serpent’s head, can only be guessed. It is not very likely that he, or Eve, had much insight in God’s plan of redemption. On the other hand, it is possible that our first parents had a lot of knowledge that was lost in later generations.

At this point started, what Paul calls the time of God’s forbearance.¹⁰⁶ This was the extended period in which the sin of man was covered up by the blood of a sacrificed animal until the death of Christ on the cross.

This killing of the animal was the first death man witnessed. Never before had blood been poured out on earth. Millions upon millions of gallons would follow. Our planet has been soaked in blood, most of it as the result of useless spilling. We can hardly imagine the horror this must have produced in Adam (and in God!) to see a living creature die. I still remember my shock and anger as a little boy at seeing a chicken killed. Some of the deep darkness of physical death must have descended upon Adam. How easy it sounds: “...sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin...” Here stood that man, as he witnessed death. If ever he must have felt shame, it was here. When Paul continues to say in Romans: “...and in this way death came to all men, because all have sinned,”¹⁰⁷ he does not only tell us that we will all die but that we all share in Adam’s guilt and shame. If it is horrible to see death, how much deeper shame should we feel if we realize that his death takes the place of ours. If Adam felt shame in front of an animal that had died instead of himself, how should we feel about the death of Jesus on the cross?!

And yet, as the skin of the animal covered the shame of the first humans, so are we covered by the righteousness of Christ. The deeper the shame, the greater the glory. We will never outlive this miracle. God’s answer to our shame of sin is not punishment, but atonement.

The greatest miracle in all this is the reality that is expressed in this picture. It is one thing to understand that another living creature, in this case an animal, can take the place of guilty man; but it is beyond all description to discover that God Himself became like this animal to take the place of guilty man. We can only stand in awe, when we realize that “He who had always been God by nature, did not cling to His prerogatives as God, but stripped Himself of all privilege by consenting to become a slave by nature and being born as mortal man. And having become man, He humbled Himself by living a life of utter obedience, even to the extent of dying. And the death He died was the death of a common criminal.”¹⁰⁸ The real issue here is not that an animal died but that this animal portrays “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world”¹⁰⁹ That is why this moment of deepest shame becomes our highest joy. It is through the forgiving of our sins that we acquire knowledge of salvation.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁵ See Ezek. 16:37

¹⁰⁶ See Rom.3:25

¹⁰⁷ Rom. 5:12

¹⁰⁸ Phil.2:6-8 (J.B.Philips).

¹⁰⁹ John 1:29

¹¹⁰ Luke 1:77

The great difference between Adam and us is that his sins were covered and ours were taken away, washed in the blood of the Lamb.¹¹¹

Some commentators believe that the statement “The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil” (vs. 22) is an expression of divine sarcasm. I do not believe this. God had experienced evil when Lucifer decided to break with Him. It must have hurt Him more and deeper than any human will ever know. C. S. Lewis’s beautiful illustration in the Narnia book *The Magicians Nephew* speaks about this. When the boy, Digory, asks Aslan to do something for his mother, he sees tears that are bigger than his own in the Lion’s eyes and he hears Aslan say: “My son, my son, I know. Grief is great. Only you and I in this land know that yet. Let us be good to one another.” Adam had something in common with God now: the knowledge of good and evil. It was God’s goodness that decreed that from now on the fruit of the Tree of Life would be beyond his reach.

Up to this point the Tree of Life was only mentioned once, but we were never told what would have happened if Adam and Eve had eaten from its fruit. The tree evidently had been God’s pleasant surprise for man. God had forbidden Adam to eat of the Tree of Knowledge and warned him of the consequences, but there had been no invitation or explanation in connection with the Tree of Life. Obviously, Adam had known the name, as he knew the other. Now, as it is too late, Adam finds out what would have happened had he eaten. At this point, however, sin would have made immortality a disaster. For a man whose spirit is alive, immortality means eternal fellowship with God, loving God with all his heart, soul and strength for ever and ever. Eternal physical life for a man who is dead in sin, would be like a man who is dying with cancer, but who is never allowed to die. Death is not only the wages of sin, it is also man’s only way to be delivered from sin.

At the end of the Bible Jesus gives the promise to the church in Ephesus: “To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the Tree of Life, which is in the paradise of God.”¹¹² There the tree is a source of healing. Evidently, there, the tree has acquired a purely spiritual significance. That does not mean however, that in chapter 2 and 3 we are not looking at a tree as we know trees, with fruit that could be eaten. The fact that both the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge had spiritual significance and that the eating thereof had spiritual consequences, does not mean that they were not real trees but merely symbols of spiritual truths. If we let the trees evaporate into symbols only, there is no guarantee that the rest of paradise will hold. The whole of this biblical account would disintegrate to the point where we could not even be sure that the human race started with Adam and Eve and that sin and death entered the world through them. We know that sin and death are not only spiritual phenomena. We commit sin with our bodies, not only with our minds.

The question remains, what happened to the Tree of Life and the garden of Eden? The tree did not die since we find it alive and well at the end of time. Man died and the tree vanished from his view. The tree has stayed alive, even in the memory of man. The traditions of some tribes of Irian Jaya, Indonesia prove this. The Ekagi knew that eternal life had been taken away from them, but that one day “ajji”¹¹³ would return. And they were right! In the victory of our Lord Jesus Christ over sin and death, we all have the right to eat from the Tree of Life, As Jesus says in John’s Gospel: “I tell you the truth, (amen, amen), whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.”¹¹⁴

Adam learned that in trespassing and disobeying the word of God he had chosen a road of no return; a one-way street with a dead end. He could not undo what he had done. The process of dying had started, and there would be no letup till death would be complete, 930 years later. Painful toil produced enough food to keep him alive. Working the soil would give him all kind of thoughts regarding his origin and destiny.

So Adam was forcefully removed from the garden, and the presence of supernatural beings, cherubim, prevented him from returning. In primitive mythology, such as the Ekagi mentioned above, God removed Himself from the presence of man. The Bible says that it was the other way around; man was removed. Paradise was not taken away from man, man was driven out of the garden into a world that would become more and more hostile to him.

¹¹¹ Rev.1:5

¹¹² Rev.2:7

¹¹³ eternal life

¹¹⁴ John 5:24

The issue was the Tree of Life . It turns out that this tree had been the most important feature of the garden of Eden. It always was, but man had paid no attention to it. As we said before, eating from the Tree of Life would have meant a conscious choice, an act of surrender to God. Adam and Eve had enjoyed Paradise, but they had never responded to the love of God. They were sinless, but not ripe. After the fall this surrender is no longer an option. God could not accept fallen man as he is. This would have compromised God's absolute holiness. It would have made God less God, which would have had disastrous consequences for all of heaven and earth. The only solution for man is death. Death was his only hope.

CHAPTER FOUR

From the first verse "Adam lay with his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain. She said, 'With the help of the LORD I have brought forth a man,'" we get the impression that Adam and Eve did not have any form of sexual intercourse while still in Paradise; but this would be hard to accept. After all the LORD had already told them in ch. 1:28, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it." There would have been no reason to suppose that man would not have started doing this. Some commentators believe that Eve did not get pregnant until after the fall; but there is no ground for this supposition either. It is very unlikely that she bore children before they were expelled from the garden of Eden. Those children would have had to trespass individually in order to be expelled also, one would think. The most logical explanation is that Eve had children, probably even several, after the expulsion, but that their names are not mentioned. She could have been pregnant when the temptation took place. This would mean that their period of innocence had been a rather short one. Moses proceeds immediately with the account of the birth of Cain and Abel because it shows in such a dramatic way the impact of the fall and its consequences.

That there were other human beings when these events took place, we understand from vs.17, where Cain's wife is mentioned. There is no other answer to the famous question where Cain found his wife than that she was a daughter of Adam and Eve.

So we believe that the beginning of this chapter shows the same tendency as ch. 5:3 where the birth of Seth is announced and Cain and Abel are not even mentioned.

When Eve gave birth to Cain, we read: "She said, 'With the help of the LORD I have brought forth a man.'" The name Cain means "brought forth" in Hebrew. This would strike us strange, if she had given birth to other children before, unless the previous children had all been girls. That seems to give a likely explanation. Cain was probably the first boy born in the family. Eve recognizes the hand of the LORD in this, probably because of the prophecy in ch. 3:15. She may have thought that the Messiah had arrived, and that the head of the serpent would now be crushed. She lived in the expectation of the return of eternal life, like the tribal people of Irian Jaya, Indonesia, had done for centuries. This expectation would give the account of the murder an even more tragic twist. Instead of being the Messiah, Cain turned out to be the first murderer on earth.

The birth of the first martyr, Abel, takes place without any observation by Eve being recorded. *The Westminster Dictionary of the Bible* says about Abel: "[Heb. Hebel, breath; applied to Able from the shortness of his life; some derive it from Akkad, ablu, son]. A younger son of Adam, and by calling a shepherd. Abel was a righteous man (Matth.23:35; I John 3:12); one of the Old Testament worthies whose conduct was controlled by faith (Heb.11:4). etc."

Some commentators, like *Adam Clarke*, believe that Abel was Cain's twin brother. Whether this is true, or even can be construed from the Hebrew grammar, does not make any difference for the point of the story, which is the sacrifice both brothers brought to God and the results. We are told that Cain worked the soil and Abel kept the flock. It is only logical that these occupations would dominate the human race in the beginning. We shall see that industry and "culture" make their appearance at the end of this chapter, with the children of Lamech.

There is no reason to believe that Abel was a better man because he was a shepherd. I see no intrinsic value difference, between Cain's occupation and Abel's. On the surface it seems logical that when the moment to bring a sacrifice came, each brought that which was part of his life: Cain the fruit of the soil; and Abel, parts of an animal. But evidently there is more to it than meets the eye. In Hebrews we read: "By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was commended as a righteous man,

when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith he still speaks, even though he is dead.”¹¹⁵ Abel’s choice of a sacrifice was determined by faith. We may conclude from this that Cain’s was not.

The question we have to ask here is, what faith stands for. What kind of faith? What was the object? The problem of the text is that so much is left unsaid. We may supply the biblical truths found elsewhere to fill the gaps, but did Cain and Abel know about sacrifices of atonement and the value of blood in the forgiving of sin? The answer is that if they did not, the whole of this story does not make much sense. There can be no doubt as to whether the boys knew about sin. Paradise was only one generation removed from them, and Adam and Eve would have talked about nothing else. They must have worn animal skins to cover their own nakedness and they knew why. The killing of animals must have been a common practice at this point in human history.

So, when Cain brings “some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD,” he consciously presents the result of his own labor, presuming that this is acceptable. In doing so he bypasses the issue of his sin and the need for atonement. Abel’s faith must have consisted in the acknowledgement of his sin and his admission that someone had to die in his place. Unless we take this to be the basis of this story, we will have to accept that God deals with man according to biased favoritism and not on the basis of immutable holiness and righteousness.

The offering Cain brought was a *minchah*, which is the grain offering, described in Leviticus: “When someone brings a grain offering to the LORD, his offering is to be of fine flour. He is to pour oil on it, put incense on it.”¹¹⁶ Incidentally, this indicates that the ordinances regarding the sacrifices, as we find them in Leviticus, were mostly a confirmation of the existing practice and not new factors that were introduced with the building of the tabernacle.

In the human experience this grain offering was the third, which could only be brought after there had been a ‘Guilt offering’ and a ‘Sin offering.’ So, by bringing this *minchah* Cain specifically ignored his sin and his need for atonement.

Vs. 4 says: “The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering.” KJV: “And the LORD had respect unto Abel and to his offering.” *The Jamieson, Fausset & Brown Commentary* says here: “ ‘had respect to,’ signify in Hebrew - ‘to look at anything with a keen earnest glance,’ which has been translated, ‘kindle into a fire,’ so that the divine approval of Abel’s offering was shown in its being consumed by fire.” Evidently, when Cain brought his grain offering nothing happened. He had to light his own fire.

If this interpretation is correct, we have a wealth of spiritual teaching here. God lets His fire descend upon people who come before Him as sinners in humble contrition, people who accept the covering of their sins by the righteousness of Jesus Christ. The Apostle Peter says: “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.”¹¹⁷ People who believe that they are acceptable to God on their own merit, have to light their own fire.

Verse 7 reads: “If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it.”

Cain must have drawn the conclusion from this that it put him in the second place as son of Adam, that is, that he lost his right as first born son. We turn again to *The Jamieson, Fausset and Brown Commentary* and quote: “ ‘If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted?’ - A better rendering is, ‘Shalt thou not have the excellency?’ which is the true sense of the words referring to the high privileges and authority belonging to the first-born in patriarchal times. Sin lieth at the door- sin, i.e. a sin offering - a common meaning of the word in Scripture (as in Hos.4:8; II Cor.5:21; Heb.9:28). The purport of the divine rebuke to Cain was this, ‘Why art thou angry, as if unjustly treated? If thou doest well (i.e. wert innocent and sinless) a thank offering would have been accepted as a token of thy dependence as a creature. But as thou doest not well (i.e., art a sinner), a sin offering is necessary, by bringing which thou wouldest have met with acceptance and retained the honors of thy birthright.’ This language implies that previous instructions had been given as to the mode of worship; Abel offered through faith (Heb.11:4) unto thee shall be his desire - The high distinction conferred by priority of birth is described (ch.27:29); and it was Cain’s conviction, that this honor had been withdrawn from him, by the rejection of his sacrifice, and conferred on his younger brother - hence the secret flame of jealousy, which kindled into a settled hatred and fell revenge.”

¹¹⁵ Heb.11:4

¹¹⁶ Lev. 2:1

¹¹⁷ Acts 4:12

The above quote gives a meaning to the text which is quite different from what we would understand if we look at the NIV, or even the KJV rendering of vs. 7: "If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it." Or the KJV: "If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? And if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door. And unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him."

Most commentators agree however, that the text is corrupted and difficult to understand. Every translation I have come across translates *chattah* with "sin" instead of "sin offering." Evidently, both translations are acceptable, since the word stands for both. The *Jamieson* interpretation seems highly theological; that is it tries to fit the verse in the context of Bible truths found elsewhere. But that does not conflict with principles of Bible interpretation, and the rendering seems more satisfactory than any other. If we follow the suggestion of the translation "sin" instead of "sin offering," it would imply that Cain has to try to overcome sin by his own means. This would amount to divine approval of his attitude, which is contrary to what the whole text implies.

Cain is angry. Obviously, the real object of his anger is self. But, like most people, when a man is angry with himself, he does not admit it; rather he projects his anger upon something or somebody else. So the focus of Cain's anger was put on God, and since anger directed to God has a tendency to bounce back, it hit on Abel. Abel had just received forgiveness for his sin from God, and that becomes the unpardonable sin in the eyes of Cain. Hatred for his brother takes over in his heart. After Adam and Eve sinned, they were ashamed before one another. As we have seen, this meant that they no longer loved each other. Here sin goes one step further; shame turns into hatred and hatred to murder. It seems that Satan has gained a complete victory.

There are four references to this first murder in the New Testament that need our attention. In Matthew: "And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar."¹¹⁸ In Hebrews: "To Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel."¹¹⁹ John writes in his epistle: "Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother's were righteous."¹²⁰ And Jude writes: "Woe to them! They have taken the way of Cain; they have rushed for profit into Balaam's error; they have been destroyed in Korah's rebellion."¹²¹

In Matthew, Jesus says that all of humanity bears responsibility for the murder of Abel. Almost in the same way as Adam's sin is imputed on the whole human race, so it seems that all of mankind is guilty of the sin of spilling the first innocent blood. There is a difference in that through Adam's sin we all inherited the tendency to sin, that is our sinful nature; we do not inherit anything in that sense from Cain. John explains that it is a matter in whose camp we belong. Cain belonged to Satan because he had not sought forgiveness from his sins in the way that God had indicated. In the preceding verse John says: "This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another." It is the lack of love for one another that makes us to murderers. There is a direct link between the fig leave that Adam and Eve put on because they no longer loved each other, and the murder of a brother. If we are not filled with the love of Christ, there is no guarantee that we will not murder, even our own brother. It would come as a terrible shock to most people to discover, when their file is opened before the throne of God that they are accused of being guilty of this murder and all the following ones that are committed on earth. It will be of no help to protest that we never even killed a fly.

But the writer of the Hebrew epistle proclaims that the cry of the blood of Abel is drowned out by the cry of the blood of Christ. The NIV says that the blood of Christ speaks "a better word," KJV "speaketh better things." The Greek word is *kreitona*, which comes from *kratos*, meaning power. The message of the blood of Christ is not just nobler in that it does not cry for revenge, like Abel's blood did, but it shouts louder, so that the cry of Abel's blood is not heard any longer. Abel also was revenged in the death of Christ.

¹¹⁸ Matt. 23:35

¹¹⁹ Heb. 12:24

¹²⁰ I John 3:12

¹²¹ Jude vs. 11

Jude's pronouncement about the false prophets speaks for itself. There is no confession of sin, only a covering up and a trying to maintain the priority in the face of God's condemnation.

In vs. 8 we read: "Now Cain said to his brother Abel, 'Let's go out to the field.' And while they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him." It seems from the first part of the sentence that Abel's murder was premeditated. However, in some manuscripts as well as in the Septuagint this part of the verse is missing. It does not really make that much difference. Cain had passed the point of no return when he refused the sin offering. If we cling to our sins like the man in Herman Marsman's poem, who said: "Do not take my last possession from me; my sins will go with me in my grave,"¹²² the devil can make us do whatever he wants. And since he is the murderer from the beginning, he wants his children to be murderers too.

The above does not mean that there is really a point beyond which we cannot turn back to God. The repentance of the murderer, who was crucified with Jesus, proves that there is no point in this life where it is too late.¹²³ The devil wants man to believe that there is no way to get up when he has fallen into sin, but this is a lie. There was even hope for Judas. Satan wraps us in despair when he entices us to sin.

There is no need to go into detail as far as this murder is concerned. We do not read how Cain killed Abel. Probably the only way he knew was to kill him like a sacrificial animal was killed by cutting his throat. It must have relieved his feeling of hatred for a moment, but not for long. Blood is not silent. As Don Richardson says in his book *Lords of the Earth* a dead man is more dangerous than a live one. "The LORD said, 'What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground.'" Cain must have heard the cry of his brother's blood for the rest of his life, and the picture of his dying face would never be wiped from his memory. We read in Revelation that the blood of people who were martyred cried to God. "When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They called out in a loud voice, 'How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?'"¹²⁴

We should step back a moment to where Eve looked at the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, which looked "good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom," and then look at the pool of blood beside Abel's body. How "pleasing to the eye, and also desirable...!" In the next chapter we will be able to step back again and look at the events described from the same vantage point. We can do this through the whole of world history and get the right perspective on the wages of sin and disobedience.

When God confronted Adam with his sin, He called to Adam, "Where are you?" Here God says to Cain: "Where is your brother?" The answer is the first insolence and blasphemy in the Bible. The "I do not know" is partially true. Cain could have no idea what happened to the soul of his brother. But the intent is obviously to deny any knowledge of what happened. Sin and denial go together. Murder and lying are twin brothers. In committing this sin Cain has lost all sense of proportion. At least Adam and Eve realized that God would see through their fig leaf covering. Cain thinks that he can deny responsibility for Abel's death, and get away with it before God. He may have thought that he could kill God like he killed his brother. He certainly would have done so if he could. His hatred for God must have been even greater than for his brother. It was God he had hated in the first place.

Even here God does not curse Cain. The only one cursed in the Bible was the serpent in ch. 3:15. The NIV may be less clear at this point. In vs.11 we read: "Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand." Other translations are probably closer to the truth: "And now art thou cursed from the earth, which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother's blood from thy hand" (KJV); "And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand." (RSV). It is the earth that curses man now, after having been cursed herself because of man. The earth is spoken of as if it has personality and is able to curse humans. We find a suggestion of this in the book of Numbers: "...for blood pollutes the land, and no expiation can be made for the land, for the blood that is shed in it, except by the blood of him who shed it."¹²⁵

¹²² "Neem mij mijn laatste bezit niet af, mijn zonden gaan mee in mijn graf."

¹²³ See Luke 23:42,43

¹²⁴ Rev. 6:9,10

¹²⁵ Num. 35:33 (RSV)

Verse 12 indicates that because of what Cain did to the land, he will be even less successful as a farmer than his father. “When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth.” So the murder made him the first nomad on earth.

After hearing his sentence, he still shows no sign of remorse. Cain only complains about the severity of his punishment. He does not realize that most of the punishment is in his own conscience. Every time he looks at the ground he will see the blood of his brother which accuses him. He will be under the illusion that if he goes somewhere else and looks at another piece of ground, things will be different; but they are not. I do not know if he ever came to the point where he recognized that the blood-stained ground was in his own soul. The knowledge was as a worm that gnawed at his soul. Jesus describes hell as the place “Where ‘their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.’”¹²⁶ Cain got a foretaste of hell.

It all started when Cain refused to confess his sin, ask for forgiveness, and bring the sacrifice that would have brought forgiveness. The longer sin lodges in a person’s heart, the harder it becomes to confess it. Our heart has the ability to accumulate calluses. And the Bible indicates the danger of hardening one’s heart, as Pharaoh did. When Pharaoh hardened his heart, God hardened it so there was no way back. In Exodus, we read several times that Pharaoh hardened his heart until finally God made it irrevocable.¹²⁷ Basically, Cain blames God for the whole affair. His punishment is more than he can bear, he says in vs. 13. This does imply that he accepts responsibility for his act, but there is no sign of remorse. He is afraid that others will do to him what he did himself to Abel. It seems strange that he complains about being banished from the presence of the LORD, as if the LORD’s presence would be something desirable for him. Probably the presence of the LORD is a reference to the vicinity of Paradise. It could be that the cherubim with the flaming sword were visible during the centuries that the first generation of mankind was born and grew up. Some commentators suggest that.

Cain sees the consequences of removal from the presence of the LORD. He knows that the LORD’s presence gives peace and stability, but that since he could not bear this presence, he will be condemned to wander over the earth restlessly. He has analyzed his condition correctly. He must have known that repentance and confession, accompanied by the required sacrifice, would have restored the presence of the LORD to him sufficiently that he could live with it. But this seems out of the question for him. He never considers confession as a real possibility. Since he has surrendered himself to Satan, he does not see any way back. Yet for him, too, there would have been, what the writer to the Hebrews calls “the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.”¹²⁸

One wonders of course, who on earth would find Cain and kill him. After all, you could probably count the world population on your hands in those days. If we read Scripture correctly, Adam and Cain were the only males left at that time. It could be that Cain speaks of demons instead of humans and that the mark God put on Cain was a restriction for demonic powers, so that they could not touch the lives of human beings. It is still true that the devil has no power to kill any one. He can entice men to kill men or people to commit suicide, but he cannot do the killing himself. Probably Cain was very much aware of the fact that he was in the power of the devil. The absence of the presence of the LORD may have been a reference to that condition, more than to a locality.

We are not told what the mark was that God put on Cain. If it was meant to keep demons away, it may not have been visible to the human eye. In some way God still kept Cain under his protection.

So Cain moves away. Most likely he could not bear to be in the vicinity of his parents any longer. His residence is East of Eden. John Steinbeck wrote a novel under the title *East of Eden*, which describes human depravity. The main character is a girl, who gives no indication that she has any trace of conscience. She kills her parents by burning down their house and gives herself to prostitution without restraint. John Steinbeck evidently understood Cain’s character quite well. Whatever voice of conscience he may have had was kept suppressed since it was too much mingled with the voice of Abel’s blood.

In vs. 17 we read briefly what happened to him after this. “Cain lay with his wife, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Enoch. Cain was then building a city, and he named it after his son Enoch.” And then he moves out of the picture completely. When Cain moved he must have taken his wife, who was his sister, with him. Enoch is born, and Cain builds a city. The word ‘city’ seems a little out of place at this point. When we think of cities, we do not think of a population of three persons. The main characteristic of

¹²⁶ Mark 9:48

¹²⁷ Ex. 7-10

¹²⁸ Heb.12:24

a city used to be that it was surrounded by a wall. It was a place of protection. Probably what is meant is that Cain built a house and put a large fence around it, to keep the enemy out. What enemy? Like in our modern cities, the enemy lives inside. The mention of the city shows the paranoia to which Cain must have fallen prey at this point. His city was a substitute to the protection of the LORD. People still build protections as substitutes for the protection of the LORD. We want security, but not the security that emanates from fellowship with God. A common form of security, or the substitute of it, is money. Hebrews speak of this. "Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.' So we say with confidence, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?'"¹²⁹ This is basically what Cain tries to bring about here. Security without the presence of the LORD. In the Parable of the Sower, Jesus calls this the "deceitfulness of wealth." People are lulled into a sense of security that does in no way give protection to the real dangers that threaten us. Only when we realize that the Lord is our helper, will we not be afraid, knowing there is nothing that man or devil can do to us.

Vs. 18 rushes us through four generation to the birth of Lamech, who explored the possibility of polygamy. Degeneration takes one step further with Lamech. Unfortunately, development of human culture stems from this period in history also. I say "unfortunately," because the blessings of human culture are numerous, but the circumstances under which culture was born make it a mixed blessing, or a mixed curse. It is to this period that the beginning of agriculture in the more refined sense - music and industry - can be traced; all of which are factors that influence our modern life.

By his act of polygamy Lamech degraded the dignity of the woman even further. The original fall had demoted Eve from Adam's equal to the one over whom he ruled, and from a relation of intimacy in love they had gone to one of sexual desire only. Lamech pushes this one step further because polygamy removes all dignity from a marriage relationship. It shows how fast the role of the woman in society had deteriorated in the first millennium. The only distinction given to women here is that the names of Lamech's wives are mentioned, whereas we do not read the names of any of the other wives. We do not know what Mrs. Cain was called, for instance.

Adah becomes the mother of Jabal and Jubal and Zillah gives birth the Tubal-Cain. There is a Persian word *tupal*, which means iron dross. Some commentators believe that the latter name may be related to this. But of course, others do not. It would be suspicious if commentators would agree one hundred percent on any point!

The three boys are highly talented, and distinguish themselves in different areas. *The Pulpit Commentary* says about Jabal: "And Adah bare Jabal. Either the Traveler or the Producer, from yabhal, to flow; poetically, to go to walk; hiphil, to produce; descriptive, in the one case, of his nomadic life, in the other of his occupation or his wealth. He was the father - av, father; used of the founder of a family or nation, of the author or maker of anything, especially of the Creator, of the master or teacher of any art or science - of such as dwell in tents, and of such as have cattle. Mikneh, literally, possession, from kanah, to acquire, as in vs.1; hence cattle, as that was the primitive form of wealth; by which may be meant that Jabal was the first nomad who introduced the custom of living in tents, and pasturing and breeding not sheep merely, but larger quadrupeds as well, for the sake of wealth." So Jabal may have been the first capitalist on this planet.

Jubal was the first player on an instrument. His name lives on in several languages, like in the English word jubilee. The NIV says about him "he was the father of all who play the harp and flute." The KJV says "the harp and the organ" and the RSV gives the instruments as "the lyre and the pipe." Evidently both strings and wind instruments are meant. This probably implies composition of songs and lyrics. I suppose that abstract music is a phenomenon of later times, that is the last four centuries. Tubal-Cain was the original 'Mr. Smith' on earth. The biblical account proves that the theory that man slowly developed from a primitive creature into a more sophisticated being, as we know him now, is a myth. Both the NIV and the RSV speak about tools made out of bronze and iron. The KJV calls it brass. The ability to extract ore and make fire that is hot enough was exercised early in the history of humanity.

So the three sons of Lamech laid the foundation of our modern society. I have an inkling that this 'primitive' society may have been much more advanced than we give it credit for. We will get back to this suspicion of mine in the following chapters. Lamech's three sons were brilliant men. They may have been sons of a brilliant father. Lamech may have been wicked, but he was not dumb.

¹²⁹ Heb. 13:5,6

We do not learn anything about Naamah, except that she was Tubal-Cain's sister. The very fact that her name is mentioned is interesting. She is the first girl whose name is mentioned in the Bible besides the name of her mother and stepmother. It could be that this throws some light on Lamech's character. He may have been a sinful man, the inventor of polygamy; but he must have been proud of his family. He made sure that the names of his wives and daughter were recorded in history.

He also was a poet. Lamech's words in vs. 23 and 24 are the first poetry in the Bible. The poem is dedicated to his wives. We read: "Lamech said to his wives,

‘Adah and Zillah, listen to me; wives of Lamech, hear my words.

I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for injuring me.

If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times.’ ”

Poetry describes best the spirit of an age. The time of Lamech was a time of self-centeredness. There is no expression of beauty in these words. There is no recognition of God, or even of any authority outside of Lamech. Lamech has set himself up as the center of the universe. If God had promised to revenge Cain, Lamech will defend himself. Centuries later the Apostle Paul will condemn Lamech when he writes: "Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord."¹³⁰ The RSV says: "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." Although Lamech cannot have known the Apostle Paul, he must have known this truth.

Lamech's words are the first sample of modern poetry. It is sad that things which give so much beauty to human life, like music and poetry, that obviously have their roots in heaven, were born on earth under such perverse circumstances. One of the first songs that was heard on earth under the accompaniment of Jabal's lyre and flute was a song of revenge, of repaying evil with evil. There is no reference to good or to the standard by which deeds can be measured. The measure of good and evil is Lamech himself. By setting himself up as the ultimate measure he has made himself equal to God.

Fortunately, this is not the only poetry the world has produced. We only have to open the book of Psalms to come upon some of the most exquisite uses of language in human speech written for the glory of God. And above some of the most perfect music the world has ever heard, Johan Sebastian Bach wrote the words "Soli Deo Gloria."¹³¹

It seems that the devil had won another major victory here. But Satan, even if he writes poetry, did not create poetry. God is the Creator of speech and beauty. When the enemy writes a verse, he has to borrow God's pen.

But the fourth chapter does not end in this minor note. We read about the birth of Seth in vs. 25. The KJV is probably closer to the original meaning of the Hebrew. Both the NIV and RSV say "God has granted (or appointed) to me another child." The KJV says: "And Adam knew his wife again; and she bare a son, and called his name Seth: For God, said she, hath appointed me another seed instead of Abel, whom Cain slew." The use of the word "seed" is important as a reference to God's promise in ch. 3:15. After the murder of Abel and the departure of Cain, Eve recognized that there was no male to fulfill this promise. The reminder of the promise must have played an important part in the life of Seth, and the calling upon the Name of the LORD must have had a lot to do with that. Eve must have held before Seth's eyes that God had appointed him to fulfill that promise. That was his name; for that reason he was born. Seth means appointed.

We may see a shadow here of the coming of Christ. First of all, Christ was from the line of Seth. But also, there was in the life of Jesus the consciousness, which is expressed in the psalms: "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but my ears you have pierced; burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require. Then I said, 'Here I am, I have come; it is written about me in the scroll. I desire to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.'"¹³²

The chapter concludes with the words: "Seth also had a son, and he named him Enosh. At that time men began to call on the name of the LORD." According to *The Pulpit Commentary* Enosh means "man" in the sense of "mortal, decaying man." If this interpretation is correct, it shows a sense of reality. This would fit with the conclusion of the verse.

There are, however, various interpretations to the words, "At that time men began to call on the name of the LORD." The main one's mentioned in *The Pulpit Commentary* are: "(1) to invoke by prayer

¹³⁰ Romans 12:19

¹³¹"To God alone the glory."

¹³² Ps. 40:6-8

the name of Jehovah...(2) to call themselves by the name of Jehovah.” *Adam Clarke* says about this last version that this distinguishes the line of Seth from others by the appellation of “sons of God” as opposed to the “children of men.” This would explain the use of these terms in ch. 6.

It seems to fit more in the context, if my understanding of it is correct, to cling to the thought that this was the time when people started to turn to the LORD to pray for deliverance, and to bring consistently the sacrifices they knew were required. The chapter starts out with the right sacrifice and the wrong one. It shows the development of the neglect; what happens when people do not take sin and forgiveness seriously. Then it ends with Eve’s rekindled hope when a new male is born, which could be the ‘seed’ God promised which would crush the serpent’s head. All this works together for a group of people to start taking religion seriously. Let’s hope this is what it means!

CHAPTER FIVE

Chapter five is more than “the written account of Adam’s line” as the NIV calls it or the KJV’s and the RSV’s: “the book of generations of Adam.” It is a genealogy with a message.

It does give the family tree of Adam, Seth, Enosh, Kenan, Mahalabel, Jared, Enoch, Methuselah, Lamech and Noah and Noah’s three sons. A total of eleven generations. *The Pulpit Commentary* adds up the ages of the fathers at the birth of their sons and comes up with a total of 1656 years in the Hebrew text. The Septuagint, however, adds up to a different total of 2262. The question is if we are looking at an exact genealogy or a sketch of the development of mankind. The tendency in other genealogical lists in the Bible seems to be to omit names of people, who have made no impact on the history of salvation. This list is highly selective, as we can see from the fact that only one son in each family is mentioned; so we do well not to take this chapter as a basis for calculating the age of man on earth.

This genealogy has its highlights in different places: Adam, Enoch and Noah are the main points of focus, Adam as the original man made in God’s image, Enoch because of his intimate fellowship with God, and Noah because of his role in the preservation of the human race during the flood.

The first two verses go back to Paradise. We read: “When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God. He created them male and female and blessed them. And when they were created, he called them ‘man.’”

Seen in the context of the preceding and following chapter, this chapter sheds light on the reason of what happens next. Chapter six is one of almost total despair, we would almost say, even for God. This chapter brings us to the reality of things. In the middle of it shines a light that has eclipsed the degeneration of mankind for centuries: Enoch’s walking with God and his “translation” into glory. The reminder of God’s likeness in man in the beginning and the promise of salvation at the birth of Noah, are the important points to ponder in these verses.

I remember a teacher in elementary school explaining the importance of the phrase “then he died,” which occurs eight times. It starts with the death of Adam and ends with Lamech’s. He thought the emphasis on death to be the main message of this chapter. But in between we see the victory over death in Enoch, which my teacher overlooked. After thus flying over the chapter and getting the bird’s eye view, we should approach it more systematically.

The first verse pictures man as a creation in the likeness of God, as male and female. It mentions the blessing of procreation and that God gave the name “man” (Adam), Eve being included in the word. But when we get to verse three we have jumped an enormous chasm, almost as big as the one between ch.1:1 and 2. The image of God in man is damaged, almost beyond recognition.

The woman has disappeared from this chapter. Of course she is there in the birth of every child, but she is never mentioned, and the blessing of producing life turns into the bringing into the world of a being that is doomed to die. The chapter starts in Paradise with the creation of man in the likeness of God. Without overly spiritualizing the chapter we can see a picture of Jesus Christ in these words. As we said before, God must have had the body of Jesus in mind when He created Adam.

Nobody bore so strongly the likeness of the Father as the Son, even to the point that He could say to Philip: “Do not you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father?’”¹³³ And the writer to the

¹³³ John 14:9

Hebrews says: “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being.”¹³⁴ At the end of the chapter we see the picture of the Holy Spirit in the type of Noah, in connection with whom it is said: “He will comfort us in the labor and painful toil of our hands caused by the ground the LORD has cursed.”

At the beginning of creation the Spirit of God brooded over the water. During the flood the Holy Spirit of Christ was in Noah in the ark on the water.¹³⁵ But in vs. 3 we read: “When Adam had lived 130 years, he had a son in his own likeness, in his own image; and he named him Seth.”

The difference between the likeness of God in Adam and the image of Adam in Seth is the difference of the fall. Seth was born with the experience of evil in him. He was a sinful human being, far removed from the original purity of his parents when they were created. And as soon as he was old enough to act on his own he proved that he was a son of his father, who chose for his own will instead of for the will of God.

When he was born and grown up “men began to call on the name of the LORD.” But this was not the fellowship Adam and Eve had known with God in the cool of the day; it was a “Kyrie eleison!” (Lord have mercy!)

As we said before, this chapter does not describe the history of mankind, but the history of salvation. When Noah was born the world population had grown impressively. It is hard to guess how many there would have been, but we are probably talking about one or more million. Yet, only one family tree is traced, which eventually leads to the Messiah. Vs. 4 says: “After Seth was born, Adam lived 800 years and had other sons and daughters.” We know that before Seth was born Adam had other sons and daughters also. Otherwise the mention of Cain’s wife would really be a mystery. Of all these patriarchs nothing is said except that they had a son, that they lived a certain number of years and that they died. Scripture seems to rush over these centuries to come to one man: Enoch. The span of Enoch’s life on earth was a paltry 365 years, nothing in comparison with the others, particularly with his son Methuselah. But the quality of his life outshines all the others. We read in the verses 22-24: “And after he became the father of Methuselah, Enoch walked with God 300 years and had other sons and daughters. Altogether, Enoch lived 365 years. Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him away.” We could wish for more details on this first man who never died.

Scripture sheds a little more light on him in Hebrew epistle, where we read: “By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death; he could not be found, because God had taken him away. For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God.”¹³⁶ Yet, Enoch must have been a sinful man. He was a son of Adam and he had inherited Adam’s nature. But he must have taken his sin seriously and he must have applied the atoning blood of the sacrifices he brought daily and consistently. I have an inkling that he must have interceded for his generation to the point of offering his life to God in death in order to save others. Something in Enoch must have reminded God of His Son, Jesus Christ. Enoch must have taken the attitude of Moses, when he interceded for the people of Israel. We read that Moses said to God: “But now, please forgive their sin; but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written.”¹³⁷ People who are willing to die for the salvation of others never die even if their body expires. But even Enoch’s body did not expire.

The Bible does not tell us any of these things about Enoch, but our conjecture cannot be too far off. After all, God could not compromise His righteousness. He did not just like Enoch. Enoch could only become the object of His eternal love, when the conditions of God’s righteousness were met, and evidently somehow they were. The result is that “Enoch walked with God!” The Bible uses the same expression about Noah in ch. 6:9. We will get to that later. *The Pulpit Commentary* says about the expression “to walk with God”: “The phrase, used also of Noah, and by Micah (ch.vi, 8...) portrays a life of singularly elevated piety; not merely a constant realization of the Divine presence, or even a perpetual effort at holy obedience, but also ‘a maintenance of the most confidential intercourse with the personal God.’ It implies a situation of nearness to God, if not in place at least in spirit; a character of likeness to God (Amos iii.3), and a life of conversing with God.”

¹³⁴ Heb. 1:3

¹³⁵ See I Pet.3:18-20

¹³⁶ Heb.11:5

¹³⁷ Ex. 32:32

The life of Enoch proves two things: first that it is possible to love God even in the presence of sin. Enoch not only lived in a world that was so sinful that God abhorred it, and came to the terrible conclusion that He was sorry He had made man (ch. 6:6), but sin was in Enoch's own heart. He needed atonement just as much as the most corrupted of his race. But in a world full of sin and with a heart that tried to deceive him daily, he walked with God.

Secondly, death was conquered in Enoch for the first time in human history. God did with Enoch that which could not be done. Not only did Enoch get an advance payment on the atoning death of Jesus on the cross in the forgiving of his sins, but he also got an advance payment on the resurrection of Christ in the translation of his body and extraction of his sinful nature. God gave him a taste of the fruit of the Tree of Life. Theologically this is impossible. But what is impossible for theologians is not impossible with God. With God all things are possible!

He even got a preliminary hearing of the sound of the last trumpet. Because to Enoch happened, what the Apostle Paul prophesies will happen to believers on the last day. In his First Corinthian epistle he says: "In a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed."

How Satan must have cringed when Enoch walked straight into heaven, without even getting close to death. He must have realized how fragile his grip on mankind was. He rules over this earth through fear of death, but who can be afraid of death when he remembers Enoch? Who can be afraid of death when he remembers Jesus Christ?!

The Bible mentions one more thing about Enoch; that he was a prophet. In Jude we read: "Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied about these men: 'See, the Lord is coming with thousands upon thousands of his holy ones. To judge everyone, and to convict all the ungodly of all the ungodly acts they have done in the ungodly way, and of all the harsh words ungodly sinners have spoken against him.'"¹³⁸ Jude quotes from the apocryphical book of Enoch, chapter 1:9.

The Pulpit Commentary calls it an apocalyptic book and considers it a product of the second century BC, but admits that there are traces of ancient parts in it. The commentary believes that the book was ascribed to Enoch. There is no point in entering into such a controversy of Bible criticism here. If the Holy Spirit inspired the book of Jude, it means that Enoch was a prophet, who uttered a clear condemnation of his generation. There is in *The Pulpit Commentary* an interesting paragraph about manuscripts of the book of Enoch, found in the nineteenth century.¹³⁹

Enoch walked with God. The expression stands for an intimate relationship. Such intimacy with God is rare among men, but we find some examples if it in the Bible. When God says about Abraham: "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?"¹⁴⁰ that surely shows an intimate relationship. James comments on the fellowship Abraham had with God by saying: "And the scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,' and he was called God's friend."¹⁴¹ This was after Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. David is called by God "a man after his own heart."¹⁴² And of Daniel we read that he is addressed by Gabriel: "O Daniel, man greatly beloved."¹⁴³ Davis says in the psalms: "The friendship of the LORD is for those who fear him, and he makes known to them his covenant."¹⁴⁴ I like the KJV of this verse even better: "The secret of the LORD is with them that fear him."

Again we have to ask ourselves the question why there are so few people who enter into this intimacy with God? It can hardly be that God has favorites among His creatures in the sense that He loves some and others He does not like. God's eternal love goes out to all men. But some people respond and experience this love in a deeper way, like John, the apostle, who calls himself in his Gospel "the disciple whom Jesus loved,"¹⁴⁵ as if he was the only one in the crowd. By the grace of God I want to be such a man.

¹³⁸ Jude vs. 14,15

¹³⁹ Vol.22. Commentary on Jude, pg 12

¹⁴⁰ Gen. 18:17

¹⁴¹ James 2:23

¹⁴² I Sam.13:14

¹⁴³ Dan.10:11

¹⁴⁴ Ps. 25:14 (RSV)

¹⁴⁵ See John 13:13; 21:7,20

Enoch's son Methuselah sets the record for living the longest on earth; thirty one years short of a millennium. We get the impression that there was in the pre-flood condition of the world something, that is lacking in our present time, that stimulated longevity. Several years ago I read in TIME magazine that scientists had analyzed an air bubble inside a piece of amber which supposedly dated from the pre-flood period. It was discovered that the oxygen content of the air trapped inside was much higher than in the air in our present atmosphere. This could account for better health and a slower aging process. But this is speculation.

If it is true that before the flood our planet was wrapped in a much thicker layer of atmosphere than it is now, that sunlight was much more defused and ultra violet sun rays were blocked almost one hundred percent, which would have created living conditions quite different from ours. But we do not know. It is almost impossible for us, who are worn out at the age of seventy or eighty, to imagine what it would be like to live almost one thousand years. Obviously, the flood did make difference, since people's life span started to be greatly reduced from that time on.

One of the implications of the extreme aging of mankind (from our perspective at least), is that at the time of the flood, which would have been only 1500 years after Adam, if we follow the Hebrew age diagram in *The Pulpit Commentary*, Adam's grandson, or great grandson was still alive when it occurred. If we follow the Septuagint, which adds another 606 years, we are only one generation further down. Cainan, or Mahalaleel would have perished in the flood. This is hard for us to imagine.

The chapter rushes to the birth of Noah, who is Methuselah's grandson. Lamech calls the son that is born to him Noah. We read in vs.29 "He named him Noah and said, 'He will comfort us in the labor and painful toil of our hands caused by the ground the LORD has cursed.'" The root of the name Noah is *nch* in Hebrew which means 'to sigh, breathe, rest, lie down,' according to Murphy, quoted in *The Pulpit Commentary*. So the idea of comfort in the name is that of rest.

I recently read in *The Quotable C. S. Lewis* remarks about the purpose of labor, which according to Lewis, quoting Aristotle, is relaxation. We labor to be able to rest. If the goal of our work is not to enable us to stop working, we are indeed slaves. Evidently, the curse of the pre-flood population was the same as of our generation that we live to work, instead of working to live. The Ecclesiastes was right: it is only when a man is blessed by God that he is able to enjoy what he is doing, that he finds satisfaction in life. "What does a man get for all the toil and anxious striving with which he labors under the sun? All his days his work is pain and grief; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is meaningless. A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, For without him, who can eat or find enjoyment? To the man who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness, but to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind."¹⁴⁶

Lamech's naming of his son turned out to be rather ironical. Noah was the instrument of drastic changes in the world. But I am sure what happened during the flood was not the kind of comfort or rest from heavy labor that Lamech had in mind. Lamech died just a few years before the flood. Vs. 28 tells us that he was 182 years old when Noah was born. The flood started when Noah turn 600, according to ch. 7:6. Lamech would be been 782 at that time, but he died at the age of 777, we are told in ch. 5:31. Now we have come where this chapter wanted us to arrive. Noah is the last one of the pre-flood generation and the first one of the post-flood world population.

Chapter six is now going to introduce us into the conditions of the pre-flood time and the actual reason why God felt He had to destroy mankind and start anew.

CHAPTER SIX

We finish our study of "The Fall and Its Consequences" with this section. Starting with vs. 9 we hope to begin a study on the life of Noah. These first eight verses of our chapter belong to the most controversial sections of the Bible. A point to consider is the meaning of several words, such as "the sons of God," *Nephilim* and "the LORD was grieved," as we read in vs. 6 "The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain," or "And it repented the LORD that he had

¹⁴⁶ Ecc.2:22-26

made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart” (KJV), or “And the LORD was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart” (RSV).

There are three main theories of interpretation of the term “the sons of God,” who came to the daughters of men and had children with them as a result of sexual intercourse.

- The first one is that “the sons of God” were men of the generation of Seth, that is the people who started to call upon the name of the LORD as we read in ch. 4:26. The daughters of men would then be the girls from the lineage of Cain, who had rejected the worship of YHWY. The implication would be that people who followed the LORD would marry people of an unreligious group and that this would endanger and finally wipe out religion all together.

- The second theory is that ‘the sons of God’ were fallen angels, demonic spirits, who mixed with the human race by sexual intercourse, and produce beings that were half human and half demon. This corrupted the human race to the point where it became impossible for the “seed of the woman” which was promised in ch. 3:15 to be born, and would thus make the coming of the Messiah and the final defeat of Satan impossible.

- We will look at a third theory, which so far I have not found in any commentary, after a look at the first two.

The term “the sons of God” is only used in this chapter and in the book of Job in the Old Testament, in the KJV and the RSV. In the latter case it refers clearly to angels. The NIV translates it as angels in Job.¹⁴⁷ The Hebrew word is *beney haelohim*. Adam Clarke is quite adamant that in ch. 6:1 it refers to the children of Seth, but in Job 1:6 he argues with equal force that the term there refers to angels.

One of the problems is that this interpretation paints the pictures in black and white; as if all the offspring of Seth were holy people and all the children of Cain were sinful without one trace of redemptive value in them. This seems to me a gross oversimplification, which we find nowhere else in the human race. It does not apply in our time, and I doubt very much it did in the pre-flood millennia. Also there would be no logical connection between this intermarriage and the appearance of the *nephilim* on earth.

The second theory would imply that angelic beings would be capable of having sexual intercourse with humans, and that they would be able to produce human offspring this way. This is even harder to accept. We conclude from Jesus’ words: “At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven,”¹⁴⁸ that angels are not sexual beings, and we take it that this would apply to fallen angels as well. There is no indication in the Bible that Satan is able to create life. And this would be the case if ch. 6:1 would refer to a marriage between humans and spirits.

I have no proof for the third hypothesis. The thought came to me after the reading of the book *In his Image (The cloning of a man)* by David Rorvik. This novel is written in the form of a scientific report. It tells the story of a millionaire who wants a son to inherit his fortune and so he pays for a scientific experiment to have himself cloned. Some DNA from his body is implanted in a specially treated female egg. The experiment finally succeeds. The reading of the book was a frightening experience. Then it dawned on me that science could advance to the point where such a story became reality. Thus far man has been unable to do such a thing, but he could learn.

How can we prove though, that in pre-flood times man was not far more intelligent and had much more knowledge than we possess at present? Darwin’s theory has blurred our perception of the world picture to the point that we take it for granted that man started out as primitive and animal like and developed to the stage of sophistication in which we find ourselves at present. But since we reject Darwin’s thoughts on evolution, why would we keep on being influenced in our thinking by the whole framework of his approach?

What I am saying is: we are afraid of the possibilities of genetic engineering. We think the situation can easily get out of hand in that man will start to produce some creature that he does not want, but once it exists there is nothing that can be done about it. Who can prove that this was not the case in the pre-flood times? If people had advanced genetic engineering to the point that they were able to manipulate genes and produce giants, superhuman beings, would this not explain our text? If people were knowledgeable to this point, the door to demonic influence would be wide open. It may be true that Satan cannot produce life, but humans can, and the enemy would be delighted to show them what they could do to corrupt life by “improving their genes!”

¹⁴⁷ See Job 1:6 and 2:1

¹⁴⁸ Matt. 22:30

None of these phenomena would be understood by a post-flood person such as Moses, to whom we ascribe the record. So how else would he describe what happened than in the terms of vs. 1- "When men began to increase in number on the earth and daughters were born to them..." I am not presenting this as Gospel truth, but as a possible explanation to a mysterious text. If Satan really was successful in persuading men to improve their race by manipulating genes so that the image of God would be practically blotted out in the *Nephilim*, it is no wonder that God decides that He could not let this go on, and that the decision was taken that all life on earth had to be destroyed by a flood.

It also puts the verses 5 and 6 in a different light: "The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain."

Now we have to look into the meaning of the word *Nephilim*. This word is left untranslated in the NIV and RSV. The KJV translates it with "giants." *Adam Clarke's Commentary* says that *Nephilim* comes from a root word *naphal*, which means "he fell." The Septuagint translates it with "gigantes," from which we derive our word giant. The Greek word *gigantes* literally means "earth-born." *Clarke* sees herein a confirmation of his interpretation that "the sons of men" stands for the children of Cain. It seems to me, however, that the meaning of the word neither proves one thing or another.

We can deduct more from the additional comment in vs. 4: "They were the heroes of old, men of renown." The KJV and RSV say: "the same became mighty men which were of old, men of renown," or "These were the mighty men that were of old, the men of renown." Whether these men were physically superior to their ancestors, we have no way of knowing. But that they were superior in many respects, is beyond doubt. Their renown survived the flood. The hypothesis that this "superior race" would be the result of genetic engineering, carried out under the inspiration of demons, but by human hands, seems to explain most of the difficulties of this text. It also would give reasonable grounds for God's drastic intervention in the situation. History does not give us any reason to believe that man has developed from a primitive being into the intellectual creature of our modern times. It is more logical to presume that those who were closer to Paradise possessed superior knowledge than men at later stages of deterioration. Some of this knowledge, which is slowly being recovered now, may also be evident in the story of the tower of Babel in chapter 11. We will return to the subject there.

The third point to be considered is the question of the LORD's "repentance," as the KJV calls it. Vs. 4 gives is the interpretation of how the population of the earth viewed themselves. The *Nephilim* were famous. Men were proud of their achievements. They thought they had created a good world for themselves. But God's perspective shows a picture that is completely different. These "mighty men," "the men of renown" were, evidently, the most corrupted creatures our planet has ever seen.

God's verdict is given in vs. 5: "The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time."

This difference of opinion between God and man about the world situation still exists. In the days of Nebuchadnezzar the Bible gives us the picture from two different angles. The king himself saw the kingdom of Babylon as the golden head of a statue. But in the revelation that is given to Daniel, God showed it to him as a lion with wings, one of four awful creatures.¹⁴⁹ God is the only one who can judge objectively about anything; all human judgment is subjective.

I am sure that the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah were proud of their cities. They must have believed in their hearts that God was impressed by the way they handled their affairs. Recently, I spoke with an agnostic from Amsterdam, who told me that the conditions of the city were not as bad as some people made them out to be! This in spite of the fact that Amsterdam is the "drug center of Europe."

God's opinion of the *Nephilim* is that they were totally corrupt: "every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time."

Listen to what Jesus says in Matthew's Gospel: "And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths. If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you."¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁹ Comp. Dan.2:32 with 7:4

¹⁵⁰ Matt. 11:23,24

From one generation to another man has been unable to see himself as he really is, as God sees him. And, ultimately, it is only God's judgment about man that counts. After all He is the judge. The farther away from God man is, the less he knows himself.

The image of God had been almost completely wiped out in the *Nephilim*. This development shows how extremely clever God's adversary is, and how close he came to achieving his purpose.

Man is more than a pawn in this game; he plays a pivotal role, as the story of Job's life shows. It is through confession of sin and through atonement that man becomes the instrument in God's hand through which the enemy is defeated. The Apostle Paul says: "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet."¹⁵¹

How can God's "repentance" be reconciled with His immutability and His omniscience? It is obvious that God does not repent from sin, as man has to do. The NIV and RSV are probably much closer to the original meaning when they say "The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain," or "And the LORD was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart" (RSV). The fact that human emotions are ascribed to God, even emotions that are considered as a sign of instability in men, does not mean that God would not be immutable in character, or that the developments took Him by surprise.

First of all, we have to realize that our emotions are part of the divine image in us. If we agonize, it is because God is capable of agony. The grief and sorrow, mentioned in vs. 6 are an expression of divine agony. In reacting toward the corruption of the human race in the period before the flood, God acted consistent with His character. Anger and wrath are as much part of God's eternal character as love and patience. As Paul states in Romans: "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness."¹⁵² "The wrath of God is being revealed" is in the present in Greek, which means that it is a constant, lasting condition. It is always that way. The difference between our emotions and God's is that God's are consistent and ours are not.

Secondly, there is no inconsistency between God's evaluation of man at the time of creation and at the period described in our text. Chapter 1:31 says: "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning; the sixth day." Now it does not say, that God regretted that He had created man in His image. Vs. 6 speaks about God's pain in seeing the results of men's choice. Some of our children may go wrong when they grow up. In many cases this may not be our fault. (Sometimes it is.) Parents who have seen their children go wrong through use of drugs, or by becoming criminals, or who have lost children through suicide, should understand something of the feelings that God expresses here. Just as much as we may be proud of our child, we can also be ashamed that this particular one is ours. Our children have their own life, their own personality, their own choices. We cannot control them completely, even if we would try. This means that they can go wrong.

Before creation God knew that He wanted to create men in His image who would be free to choose. He knew how they would choose and what the results would be. Before the foundation of the world, He made the provision of redemption through the blood of Jesus Christ. We can say that God had calculated the price of creating man in His image, and He considered it worthwhile.

But this does not mean that when man fell into sin, God's heart was not pierced. God had feelings of agony in Paradise, in the pre-flood world, and at Calvary. The fact that He is omniscient does in no way diminish any of these feelings.

Finally, we have to admit that, because of a similarity of feelings, we can in a very limited measure, understand what God means when He says that He grieves; but in reality we are an eternity away from the depth of God's feelings. Our agony is only a vague, misty reflection of real grief and sorrow. To a certain extent this should mean a comfort to us because it puts our sorrow in perspective. We know that God goes through things that are structurally the same as our experiences, and He is on our side. His eternal love offsets the pain, and keeps us from despair.

Vs. 7 and 8 bring us to the end of our study about the fall and its consequences. Vs. 8 forms the link to our next subject, the life of Noah and the flood. We read: "So the LORD said, 'I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth; men and animals, and creatures that move along the

¹⁵¹ Rom. 16:20

¹⁵² Rom 1:18

ground, and birds of the air; for I am grieved that I have made them.' But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD."

It is hard for us to understand how to interpret God's decision to wipe out life from the face of the earth in the light of God's love. We have to remember that God's righteousness is just as much a part of His eternal character as is His love. If God would eternally tolerate sin, He would compromise His righteousness to the point where His perfection would be affected, and if God would become imperfect, He would cease to be God. This would mean the end of God, and the end of all life, the life of the devil included. It could be that the devil would have accepted annihilation of himself if it would have meant the end of God, we do not know. We are talking about things that are far beyond us. It seems that in choosing to wipe mankind from the face of the earth, God chose the lesser of two evils. If the flood had not taken place, the corruption of life would have taken care of its own annihilation.

It is easy for us to miss the point in reading in vs. 5: "The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time." The world had become one great concentration camp, where people were tortured and killed. And the people who did this enjoyed what they did. If we felt that Nazi Germany had to be brought down, and their war criminals had to be executed, we can hardly object to God's decision to bring the flood over the ancient world. It would not have been an expression of love to let the situation continue. How much this cost God, we understand from God's promise to Noah after the flood. In ch. 9:11 God says emphatically: "never again!" "Never again will all life be cut off by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth." Peter prophesied that on the last day the world will go up in flames. Talking about the flood, the Apostle says: "By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men." I believe, however, that man will light this fire himself, either by a nuclear explosion or by some similar device.

In all this corruption God found one man, Noah, who had kept the faith. God used him as a seed to start his new creation after the flood. Noah went through this death and he rose from it. Just when the victory of the devil seemed to be complete, this seed started sprouting out and soon afterward the earth was covered with life again.

NOAH AND THE FLOOD

Chapter 6:8 – 9:29

The story of Noah and the flood is a record of one of the most catastrophic events in the history of our planet. There are numerous accounts of this outside the Bible. Not only do we have the Babylonian myths about the flood, but we found that several of the tribes in the mountains of Irian Jaya, Indonesia, had oral traditions about a flood that covered the earth and about a man, called Nuh.

The name of Noah is found in some of the genealogies in the Bible.¹⁵³ Isaiah mentions his name in a prophecy.¹⁵⁴ Ezekiel put Noah next to Job and Daniel as an example of a righteous man.¹⁵⁵ In the New Testament Jesus compares Noah's time with the time of His return.¹⁵⁶ We find him in the list of heroes of faith in Hebrews.¹⁵⁷ And finally, Peter mentions him in two rather difficult passages.¹⁵⁸

Bible critics have tried to discredit the reliability of the account of the flood, but Emanuel Veliskovsky, who cannot be accused of Christian sympathies, maintains that there is overwhelming archeological and geological evidence that a major catastrophe hit the earth, and that a universal flood swept bones of humans and animals from one side of the globe to the other. This is the topic of his book *Earth in Upheaval*.

¹⁵³ See I Chr.1:3,4 and Luke 3:36

¹⁵⁴ Isa. 54:9

¹⁵⁵ Ezek. 14:14, 20

¹⁵⁶ See Matt. 24:37,38 and Luke 17:26,27

¹⁵⁷ Heb. 11:7

¹⁵⁸ I Pet.3:20; II Pet.2:5

The Bible starts the account of Noah's life by saying that he found favor in the eyes of the LORD, that he was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time and that he walked with God. (vs. 8,9). We have to emphasize again that this does not mean that Noah did not sin. His drunkenness in chapter 9 proves the opposite. But he availed himself of the provisions for atonement that God had made. This made him the object of God's favor and brought him into an intimate relationship with God, comparable to that of Enoch. It also gives him the reputation of being blameless among the people of his time, of whom it is said that they were totally corrupt. The importance of this lesson cannot escape us.

The word "favor" in vs.8 is *Hen*, which has the same letters as the name Noah, but in reversed order. *The Pulpit Commentary* says that: "the present is the first occurrence of the word in Scripture. 'Now for the first time grace finds a tongue to express its name' (Murphy); and it clearly signifies the same thing as in Rom. 5; 6; Eph. 2; Gal. 2, the gratuitous favour of God to sinful man."

The above comment confirms what we said about Noah's righteousness not being an absence of sin, but that it implies confession and forgiveness. Noah's confession of his sinful character, and failures, and God's provision of atonement brought about in Noah such a change that he could experience an intimate relationship with God and this made him gain a reputation of righteousness among the people of his time.

If we follow the Hebrew indications of age of the ancestors, as given in *The Pulpit Commentary*, Noah was 41 years old when Enoch was taken to Heaven. That means he was old enough to have known his great grandfather. And since the Scripture uses the same words to describe their relationship with God, we may presume that Noah modeled his spiritual life after that of Enoch.

In a certain way nobody ever played a more pivotal part in the history of the human race than Noah. If he had not walked with God and obeyed Him, doubtless in the face of a torrent of mockery and abuse of his peers, there would be no human race or animal life left on our planet. Noah is, therefore, the key to our modern world.

If we may conclude from vs. 3 that God planned to destroy the earth in 120 years, then Noah was about 480 when God started talking to Him about His plan. In ch. 7:6 we read that Noah was 600 years old when the flood came. We read nothing about Noah's reaction to this revelation. He obeyed God's orders and prepared the ark. In Hebrews we read: "By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that comes by faith."¹⁵⁹ His building of the ark was a sermon in itself. But he also must have proclaimed in words what he was doing, because the Apostle Peter called him "a preacher of righteousness."

There is a theory that up to the time of the flood it had never rained on earth. There is no way to prove whether this is true or not. It is obvious, though, that Noah built a ship on dry land, probably far from any main body of water that would make it a logical place for ship building. It is not hard to imagine what the general public must have thought about that. If the society of Noah's days was as sophisticated as we think it was, then the actions of a man, who built a ship on dry land in the Name of a God, whose existence they either denied or ignored, must have been the joke of the century. It went against all logic and reason, unless one was sincerely concerned about the morals of the age; and evidently nobody was.

The instructions about the building of the ark seem quite rudimentary to us, but it is possible that God gave a much more detailed blueprint to Noah than the one we have. A ship of 150 x 25 x 15 meter with three decks is still an impressive ship in our time. Modern translations use the word cypress wood for the building material. Evidently pitch was a common sealer at that time. We find tar mentioned in ch. 11:3, and also in ch. 14:10.

The ark was not a ship in the real sense of the word. It was more an elaborate raft or floating device. There was no rudder built into it, and it was not up to Noah to navigate it. God would be in charge of the navigation. The dimensions make sense, and the window, which evidently went all around the ark must have taken care of the ventilation.

Noah and his three sons must have been the main builders. We should not exclude the possibility of some outside help too. Probably men, who did not believe in it, lent a helping hand to build the ark; but they never entered it, and consequently they drowned in the flood.

It has been objected that there is so much repetition in the account. This is seen by the "Higher Critics" as an indication that we have here a combination of two or more sources, similar to the first two chapters of Genesis. We do not deny the possibility that Moses may have used existing sources, but that

¹⁵⁹ Heb.11:7

does not make the account harder to believe or less inspired. Much of the repetition can be explained, however, if we see that first God talks to Himself about what He is going to do, and then to Noah.

In vs. 7 God verbalized His plan: “So the LORD said, ‘I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth; men and animals, and creatures that move along the ground, and birds of the air; for I am grieved that I have made them.’”

In vs. 13 God speaks to Noah, and tells him what is going to happen and why: “So God said to Noah, ‘I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. I am surely going to destroy both them and the earth.’”

And in vs. 17 God tells Noah how He is going to do it: “I am going to bring floodwaters on the earth to destroy all life under the heavens, every creature that has the breath of life in it. Everything on earth will perish.” What God announced to Noah was something completely new. It may have rained before, we do not know, but never before had the huge water reservoirs from under the earth burst open and flooded the earth. God told Noah what to expect. This explanation must have made it easier for him to believe and he needed this kind of faith to stand against the mockery of his contemporaries.

The repetition about the animals is not too hard to explain either. In chapter 6:20; 7:8,14,23 we find the expression “every kind of animal and of every kind of creature that moves along the ground.” First of all it indicates the undeniable link between man and beast. God still sees man as the king of His creation. When the king dies, his kingdom perishes with him.

Secondly, there is a strong suggestion of deep emotion in the repetition. God does not destroy everything He made with a callous heart. The repetition shows His deep hurt.

And finally it shows the magnitude of the disaster. With the exception of two of every species, and fourteen of some, every one of God’s creatures perished.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Throughout the ages the ark has been a symbol of salvation. It was the vessel God used to carry His chosen creatures through death. It may not be a perfect picture of the work of Jesus Christ, but it is a picture that is clear enough. As Noah and his family were saved in the ark, and brought back through death to life, so we are saved in Jesus Christ. He is our ark of salvation.

In Ephesians we read that God has blessed, and chosen us in Jesus Christ “before the creation of the world.” Paul writes: “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.”¹⁶⁰ If we interpret this to mean that God chose us individually to be blessed and saved, ages before we were born, we get entangled in all the snares of the Calvinistic doctrine of predestination. But if we take the phrase “in Christ” to mean that God chose Christ, and that everyone who is in Christ shares in this choice, we have a reality of which the ark is a picture.

God chose the ark as the vessel or means by which men might be saved. The fact that Noah built the ark in plain view and that he preached righteousness to the people who saw him build it, implies that others could have been saved also. The fact that, evidently, nobody went into the ark besides Noah’s immediate family does not preclude the salvation of others. If others were not saved, it was because they did not want to be. In the same way people are lost without Christ.

Jesus says so much in John’s Gospel: “All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. For my Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.”¹⁶¹

According to ch. 6:18 the entering into the ark was part of a covenant, or a promise God made to Noah. It reads: “But I will establish my covenant with you, and you will enter the ark; you and your sons and your wife and your sons’ wives with you.” Noah needed this kind of assurance, because the outward circumstances gave no stimulus for hope. All Noah could see was destruction and death. Without God’s promise there would have been no basis for faith.

The boarding of the ark took seven days. It was like the boarding of a modern airplane. The bigger the plane the earlier the boarding starts. The ark was a gigantic vessel. The number of passengers must have

¹⁶⁰ Eph. 1:3,4

¹⁶¹ John 6:37,39,40

run into the thousands. Then there were the provisions to be loaded, and probably there were operational exercises until things settled into a daily routine. To take seven days for boarding and rehearsals seems no unnecessary precaution. The preparation and departure was an organizational feat of no mean proportions.

It is amazing how detailed the account of this event is. The mention of seven days, and the age of Noah when it all happened, the way the animals arrived gives indication that the Holy Spirit showed Moses clearly what had taken place. If Moses used existing documents, it shows how minutely the accounts had been kept.

Some commentators see quite a contradiction between ch. 6:19 and ch. 7:2,3. In the former Noah is to bring the animals and in the latter the animals arrive by themselves, evidently, at God's bidding. Probably both things happened. Noah did not have to go and round up the animals. They came and he took them in.

I see more of a problem in the fact that in ch. 6:20 there is only question of "two of every kind of bird," whilst in ch. 7:3 there are to be seven pairs. Evidently the distinction between clean and unclean is to be inserted here. The Septuagint does add the word "clean" at this point. *The Pulpit Commentary* reminds us that the instructions in ch. 6 were given 120 years earlier. One week before the flood they are repeated in greater detail.

This is the first time in the Bible that the distinction is made between clean and unclean animals. Obviously the Mosaic law in Leviticus is no new revelation but the confirmation of an existing situation.¹⁶² The distinction does not mean that God is not the Creator of all the animals. But some are destined for sacrifice and others are not. As in Leviticus, so here, we understand that the separation between animals expresses a distinction between humans; there are those who are clean before God, and those who are not. The effects of human sin are thus seen in the animal world.

One of the reasons for bringing in seven pairs of clean animals will have been that, after the flood, Noah and his family needed food. The post flood earth needed to be tilled and worked before Noah would be able to harvest. Even with seven pair of animals plus the offspring they had produced during their year in the ark, meat would have to be rationed for a while, so that the human family could stay alive. We understand that it was not until after the flood that Noah received permission to eat meat.

It is not until we get to Leviticus that we read which animals are to be considered clean, and which unclean. "You may eat any animal that has a split hoof completely divided and that chews the cud."¹⁶³ Noah must have had some idea as to how to make the distinction himself or maybe Leviticus simply repeated what was already an established guideline.

Chapter 7 opens with God's command to Noah to go into the ark. Noah has met the condition that allows him to enter and to be saved, that is, he is found righteous. Again, we have to emphasize that righteous here does not mean an absence of sin, or of the tendency to sin, but a condition that is the result of atonement. Noah's sin had been covered by the blood of an animal.

The fact that his family is saved also indicates that they had individually followed his example of confession of sin and the sacrifice of an animal. Neither at that time, nor at present, are other individuals included in the atonement of someone else's sin. Children at the age of non-accountability may be included in the parent's confession, but Shem, Ham and Japheth were married men. And none of the three young families seem to have had children yet.

The order to board the ark was given seven days before the beginning of the flood. Whether it took seven days to complete the boarding, or whether the inhabitants of the ark just waited for things to happen after they boarded, we do not know. If we understand Jesus' words in Matthew correctly, there were no outward indication to the people outside the ark that disaster was about to strike. Jesus said: "As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; And they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man."¹⁶⁴

People only had the Word of God to go by, both inside and outside the ark. Two months and seventeen days after Noah's six hundredth birthday the flood started. Three times in this chapter we hear about the animals that entered the ark. It is as if the writer cannot get over the fact that this happened.

¹⁶² See Lev. 11

¹⁶³ Lev. 11:3

¹⁶⁴ Matt. 24:37-39

In vs. 16 we read that God closed the door of the ark. There was no way in or out. In the Negro Spiritual "Didn't it Rain Children" the people outside the ark are said to be crying to Noah to be let in when the rain starts, and the floods come up. And Noah answers them: "Your life is full of sin; God has the key, you can't get in." Whether this is the way it happened or not, we do not know; but people must have realized that the Word of God that Noah had preached was true. They believed it when it was too late. The rich man in Jesus' story in Luke, who had "Moses and the prophets", came to the same conclusion when it was too late.¹⁶⁵ The time for salvation is when we hear the Word of God. As Paul says: "For he [God] says, 'In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you.' I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation."¹⁶⁶ And Jesus says: "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it."¹⁶⁷

Vs. 11, "In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, on the seventeenth day of the second month; on that day all the springs of the great deep burst forth, and the floodgates of the heavens were opened." The arrival and duration of the flood is recorded in quite some detail. The seventeenth of the second month in the six hundredth year of Noah's life. It rained forty days, (vs.12) and the ark was in use for one full year. Noah kept a precise calendar, like people usually do when they are shut in. Vs. 24, "The waters flooded the earth for a hundred and fifty days." Ch. 8:3-6, "The water receded steadily from the earth. At the end of the hundred and fifty days the water had gone down, And on the seventeenth day of the seventh month the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat. The waters continued to recede until the tenth month, and on the first day of the tenth month the tops of the mountains became visible. After forty days Noah opened the window he had made in the ark."

Ch. 8:13,14, "By the first day of the first month of Noah's six hundred and first year, the water had dried up from the earth. Noah then removed the covering from the ark and saw that the surface of the ground was dry. By the twenty-seventh day of the second month the earth was completely dry." It is hard to argue that this is not written as a historical record.

There is an amazing similarity between the way the flood came over the earth and the way Jesus pictures the storms of life at the end of the Sermon on the Mount. "The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock."¹⁶⁸ Of course Jesus used those words on purpose to evoke the image of the flood. The interesting inference is that one's life can, at the same time, be built on the rock and float on the water!

From the account of the flood we understand that disaster came from two directions: from above, from and below. We have no record of the earth's condition before the flood. It is logical to presume that God created the planet as much more livable than it is now. Huge sections of our globe are sparsely populated, because of harsh living conditions. The Sahara or the South Pole do not attract large numbers of people. The climatological differences of our planet may have been much less than they are now. If it is true that the earth was blanketed in a thick layer of humid air, like some presume, the temperature between one part of the world and another and between day and night, may not have differed too much. Also, if there were large reservoirs of water underneath the surface, which were kept warm by the magma underneath, the temperature of the soil would have been rather stable and uniform.

This balance seems to have been disturbed suddenly at the onset of the flood. What the physical cause of this disturbance was is impossible to guess. It must have been linked with some cosmic event, like the leaving of a star or planet from its orbit. The opening up of the great deep must have pushed up mountains.

The verses 19 and 20 tell us: "They [the waters] rose greatly on the earth, and all the high mountains under the entire heavens were covered. The waters rose and covered the mountains to a depth of more than twenty feet." We cannot imagine that there would have been twenty feet of water above the summit of our present Mount Everest. Under our present conditions there would not have been enough oxygen to keep the population of the ark alive at this altitude. Probably even mount Ararat may have been lower than it is now.

So the flood was not just a heavy rain, which caused rivers to leave their banks. It was earth's major upheaval, which disturbed the balance of the planet and changed its surface and condition irrevocably.

¹⁶⁵ Luke 16:19-31

¹⁶⁶ II Cor. 6:2

¹⁶⁷ Luke 11:28

¹⁶⁸ Matt. 7:25

The way Moses describes the rising of the water and the death of every living creature is extremely impressive. The rendering of the event is done in a moving way. It makes excellent poetry. But it was terrible nonetheless. With the water coming down from the sky and up from the ground, I imagine that it did not take long for life to be wiped off the face of the earth. God did not submit His creation to a slow dying process. There will have been very little floating around of people, trying to hang on to driftwood for days. You die fast in a flood with strong currents.

Three times we are told that the waters increased greatly, and three times we read that everything that breathed died. Compare these words again with the account of Genesis ch. 3. Satan told Eve the great lie: "You will surely not die."¹⁶⁹ I do not know if Eve could have looked from above to see the water cover the planet and the dead and decaying bodies floating on the surface. Sin had completed its work.

But the ark floated high above it all. There must have been anxiety inside the ark too, though. The flood must have caused strong currents and maelstroms, and the boat must have been swept away swiftly by the force of the water. I suppose that between the top layer of water and the bottom there was little or no wind. There were no hurricanes yet, as we know them now. They are the results of air currents that did not exist under the canopy of moisture that covered the pre-flood world.

It took six weeks of rain and five months of flood to finish the work. Then everything became quiet.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Then starts what may have been the hardest part of the ordeal: waiting. It took only six weeks of excitement, but 47 weeks of patience and boredom. The idea must have grown inside the ark: "God has forgotten us." That is probably why chapter eight starts out with the words: "But God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and the livestock that were with him in the ark, and he sent a wind over the earth, and the waters receded." Probably for the first time the wind blows over the earth. The word for 'wind' and 'spirit' are identical in Hebrew. We do not know what the pre-flood language was though and Noah may not have associated the wind with the Spirit of God, like Moses did, who wrote this down.

Somehow it becomes clear to Noah and the seven other humans in the ark that God has not forgotten them. Waiting may be the hardest part in our life with the Lord; it seems to be the most important part too. The Spirit of the Lord can work with amazing speed, but very often such outbursts are preceded by periods of waiting. Spiritual life is called "waiting on the Lord!"

We find the expression particularly in the book of Psalms in: "Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD."¹⁷⁰

"Wait for the LORD and keep his way. He will exalt you to inherit the land; when the wicked are cut off, you will see it."¹⁷¹

"I wait for you, O LORD; you will answer, O Lord my God."¹⁷²

"I wait for your salvation, O LORD, and I follow your commands."¹⁷³

"I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I put my hope. My soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning."¹⁷⁴

This time after the rain ceased must have been more of an exercise of faith for Noah than any other period in his life. Yet without 'waiting for the LORD' there is usually very little spiritual life at all, and never any fruit.

Another significant clause in this chapter is "But God..." The combination of these two words is the best antidote against despair in a world that has fallen apart because of sin. This earth may be under the dominion of evil powers, "but God..." sits on the throne of the universe and He has the last word in every situation. I remember vividly how these words were impressed upon my mind when we had to evacuate Kebo in Irian Jaya, Indonesia, for the second time during a native uprising at the time of the plebiscite. At the Mission's conference in Pyramid, during a prayer meeting, when I felt that maybe we would never be able

¹⁶⁹ Gen. 3:4

¹⁷⁰ Ps. 27:14

¹⁷¹ Ps. 37:34

¹⁷² Ps. 38:15

¹⁷³ Ps. 119:166

¹⁷⁴ Ps. 130:5,6

to return to our station, the Holy Spirit whispered to me: “But God...” and that made all the difference. We were able to go back and the rebels laid down their arms.

Floating on a wild ocean that covers a world of death and decay God remembers Noah and Noah remembers God. Because the words “But God...” are there as a reminder for us.

It took five full months for the waters to recede sufficiently for the ark to hit solid ground. We read in vs. 4: “And on the seventeenth day of the seventh month the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat.” Those three and a half-month of floating on the ocean without any land in sight must have been the hardest.

About the seventeenth day of the seventh month, *The Pulpit Commentary* quotes *The Speaker's Commentary*, saying: “Supposing the Flood to have begun in March, the second month of the civil year (about the beginning of November), ‘We have then the remarkable coincidences that on the 17th day of Abib (about the beginning of April) the ark rested on Mount Ararat, the Israelites passed over the Red Sea, and our Lord rose again from the dead.’ ”

From book entitled *In Search of Noah's Ark* I copy the following chapter, which is taken from another the book *The Flood* by Alfred M. Rehwinkel.¹⁷⁵

“During the year 1942, readers of church papers, magazine, and the public press were aroused by a detailed report of an alleged discovery of the remains of Noah's ark on Mount Ararat. This most remarkable discovery was said to have been made by Mr. Vladirmar Roskivitsky, a converted Russian aviator, who since then severed his connection with the godless Bolsheviks, came to America, and was selling Bibles when these articles first appeared. Because of the great interest these articles aroused and the wide discussion they caused, it is thought well to include here in this discussion of Noah's ark an account of this supposed discovery. The following is a verbatim account of this event as told by Mr. Roskivitsky and as reprinted in the Banner of the Reformed Church, dated November 27, 1942:

‘It was in the days just before the Russian revolution that this story really begins. A group of us Russian aviators were stationed at a lonely temporary outpost about twenty-five miles northwest of Mount Ararat. The day was dry and terribly hot, as August days so often are in this semi-desert land.

Even the lizards were flattened out under the shady sides of rocks or twigs, their mouths open and tongues lashing out as if each panting breath would be their last. Only occasionally would a tiny wisp of air rattle the parched vegetation and stir up a choking cloudlet of dust.

Far up on the side of the mountain we could see a thundershower, while still father up we could see the white snowcap of Mount Ararat, which has snow all the year around because of its great height. How we longed for some of that snow!

Then the miracle happened. The captain walked in and announced that plane number seven had its new super-charger installed and was ready for high altitude tests, and ordered my buddy and me to make the test. At last we could escape the heat!

Needless to say, we wasted no time getting on our parachutes, strapping on our oxygen cans, and doing all the half dozen other things that have to be done before ‘going up.’

Then a climb into the cockpits, safety belts fastened, a machinist gives the prop a flip and yells, ‘Contact,’ and in less time that it takes to tell it we were in the air. No use wasting time warming up the engine when the sun already had it nearly red hot.

We circled the field several times until we hit the fourteen-thousand-foot mark and then stopped climbing for a few minutes to get used to the altitude.

I looked over to the right at the beautiful snow-capped peak, now just a little above us, and, for some reason I can't explain, turned and headed the plane straight toward it.

My buddy turned around and looked at me with question marks in his eyes, but there was too much noise for him to ask questions. After all, twenty-five miles does not mean much at a hundred miles an hour.

As I looked down at the great stone battlements surrounding to lower part of the mountain, I remembered having heard it had never been climbed since the year seven hundred before Christ, when some pilgrims were supposed to have gone up there to scrape tar off an old shipwreck to make good luck emblems to wear around their necks to prevent their crops being destroyed by excessive rainfall. The legend said they had left in haste after a bolt of lightning struck near them and had never returned. Silly ancients! Who ever heard of looking for a shipwreck on a mountaintop?

A couple of circles around the snow-capped dome, and then a long swift glide down the south side, and then we suddenly came upon a perfect little gem of a lake, blue as an emerald, but still frozen over on the

¹⁷⁵ Pages 77-83

shady side. We circled around and returned for another look at it. Suddenly my companion whirled around and yelled something and excitedly pointed down at the overflow end of the lake. I looked and nearly fainted.

A submarine? No, it wasn't, for it had stubby masts, but the top was rounded over with only a flat cat walk about five feet across down the length of it. What a strange craft, built as though the designer had expected the waves to roll over the top most of the time and had engineered it to wallow in the sea like a log, with those stubby masts carrying only enough sail to keep it facing the waves! (Years later, in the Great Lakes, I saw the famous 'whaleback' ore carriers with this same kind of rounded deck.)

We flew down as close as safety permitted and took several circles around it. We were surprised when we got close to it at the immense size of the thing, for it was as long as a city block and would compare very favorably with the modern battleships of today. It was grounded on the shore of the lake with about one fourth of the rear end still running out into the water, and its extreme rear was three fourths under water. It had been partly dismantled on one side near the front, and on the other side there was a great door nearly twenty feet square but with the door gone. This seemed quite out of proportion as even today's ships seldom have doors even half that large.

After seeing all we could from the air, we broke all speed records back to the airport.

When we related our find, the laughter was loud and long. Some accused us of getting drunk on too much oxygen, and there were many other remarks too numerous to relate.

The captain, however, was serious. He asked several questions and ended by saying, 'Take me up there, I want to look at it.'

We made the trip without incident and returned to the airport.

'What do you make of it?' I asked, as we climbed out of the plane.

'Astounding,' he replied. 'Do you know what ship it is?'

'Of course not, sir.'

'Ever heard of Noah's ark?'

'Yes sir. But I do not understand what the legend of Noah's ark has to do with us finding this strange thing fourteen thousand feet up on a mountaintop.'

'This strange craft,' explained the captain, 'is Noah's ark. It has been sitting up there for nearly five thousand years. Being frozen up for nine or ten months of the year, it couldn't rot and has been on cold storage, as it were, all this time. You have made the most amazing discovery of the age.'

When the captain sent his report to the Russian government, it aroused considerable interest, and the Czar sent two special champagnes of soldiers to climb the mountain. One group of fifty men attacked on one side, and the other group of one hundred men attacked the mountain from the other side.

Two weeks of hard work were required to chop out a trail along the cliffs of the lower part of the mountain, and it was nearly a month before the ark was reached.

Complete measurements were taken and plans drawn of it as well as many photographs, all of which were sent to the Czar of Russia.

The ark was found to contain hundreds of small rooms and some very large with high ceilings. The large rooms usually had a fence of great timber across them, some of which were two feet thick, as though designed to hold beasts ten times as large as elephants, somewhat like one sees today at a poultry show; only instead of chicken wire, they had rows of thinly wrought iron bars along the fronts.

Everything was heavily painted with a waxlike paint resembling shellac, and the workmanship of the craft showed all the signs of a high type of civilization.

The wood used throughout was oleander, which belongs to the cypress family and never rots, which, of course, coupled with the facts of it being painted and it being frozen most of the time, accounted for its perfect preservation.

The expedition found on the peak of the mountain above the ship the burned remains of the timbers which were missing out of the one side of the ship. It seems that these timbers had been hauled up to the top of the peak and used to build a tiny one-room shrine, inside of which was a rough stone hearth like the altars the Hebrews use for sacrifices, and it had either caught fire from the altar or been struck by lightning, as the timbers were considerably burned and charred over and the roof was completely burned off.

A few days after this expedition sent its report to the Czar, the government was overthrown and godless Bolshevism took over, so that the records were never made public and probably were destroyed in the zeal of the Bolsheviks to discredit all religion and belief in the truth of the Bible.

We Russians of the air fleet escaped through Armenia, and four of us came to America where we could be free to live according to the 'good old Book,' which we had seen for ourselves to be absolutely true, even to as fantastic sounding a thing as a world flood."

There are persistent rumors that remains of the ark are still to be found on Mount Ararat, in what is presently Turkey. The area is rather inaccessible and the Turkish authorities are uncooperative with expeditions that want to explore the place.

“The modern Ararat,” I quote again *The Pulpit Commentary*, “which rises in Northern Armenia, about twelve miles south of Erivan, in the form of two majestic cones, the one 16,254, and the other 12,284 feet in height above the level of the sea... All but universal tradition has decided that the loftiest of these two peaks (called ...Kuchi Nuch, i.e. the mountain of Noah, by the Persians) was the spot where the sacred vessel first felt the solid land.”

Noah decided to wait forty days before opening the window of the ark. It is hard to reconstruct the ark. There was a window that went all around the ark under the roof, 18 inches high, according to ch. 6:16. Evidently this allowed the passengers to look out. Otherwise the observation that the peaks of the mountains became visible, (vs. 5), would make no sense. Then there was the window that Noah opened; there was a covering on the ark, probably a tarpaulin, made of skin and finally the door.

Noah made experiments with two birds: a raven and a dove. The raven, being a meat eater could sustain itself sufficiently. Vs. 7 says: “it kept flying back and forth until the water had dried up from the earth.” According to *Adam Clarke* the Hebrew text says: “and it went forth, going forth and returning.” This could mean that the raven spent the nights at the ark, but fed outside during the day.

The dove was sent out three times. The first time it returned without any result. Noah concluded from this “the dove could find no place to set its feet.” We read in vs. 9 “But the dove could find no place to set its feet because there was water over all the surface of the earth; so it returned to Noah in the ark. He reached out his hand and took the dove and brought it back to himself in the ark.”

The second sending of the dove and its return has become a picture that engraved itself in the memory of mankind throughout the ages. We still see a dove with an olive branch in its beak as a symbol of peace. Its return must have caused a huge celebrating in the ark.

The Pulpit Commentary tells us that the appearance of the olive branch does not necessarily mean that trees had started to sprout out again, since olive branches will stay green under water. I will have to take their word for that. However, this is not the impression one gets from the context. In any case it meant that trees were sticking out of the water. In view of the value tradition has attached to the return of the dove with the olive leaf, we may safely see a spiritual significance in this. If the olive branch is a symbol of peace with God, and the dove is elsewhere in the Bible seen as a image of the Holy Spirit, we may use the picture as an illustration of what God does to the soul of a man who experiences salvation. Paul’s words are surely appropriate to quote here: “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”¹⁷⁶

As the inhabitants of the ark passed through death and the sentence of death passed them by, so we are saved from death and judgment in Jesus Christ. Jesus puts it Himself this way: “I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.”¹⁷⁷ This truth is faithfully portrayed in the picture of the ark. And having come out on the other side of death puts us in a relationship of peace with God.

Yet, that which is an almost instantaneous experience for us in Jesus, was a long drawn out process for Noah. Depending on how much time elapsed between the sending out of the raven and the dove, it must have taken three or four weeks between the first experiment with the birds and the last. But it was not until Noah finally heard the voice of God, giving him permission to go out of the ark, that he got out. *Adam Clarke* supposes that all the birds flew off the moment the cover was taken from the ark, and that is probably true.

We have to realize that it is exactly because someone else experienced the “crossing from death to life” in such detail, that it becomes an instantaneous experience for us. As soon as we enter in Jesus Christ, we enter God’s New World. The Apostle Paul says: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!”¹⁷⁸ For us this is a much more drastic transition than it was for Noah. Noah may have come from a world that was full of sin into one where sin was washed away, but he brought sin into the world again, since it remained in his own heart, as we will see in chapter 9. It is true that we still

¹⁷⁶ Rom.5:1

¹⁷⁷ John 5:24

¹⁷⁸ II Cor.5:17

have our sinful nature with us when we become a new creation, but we do not introduce sin into God's new order. Sin will eventually be left behind.

It seems natural that Noah with all the other humans, as well as all the animals would have come out of the ark immediately by themselves. But it takes God's specific instructions to bring this about. We read in vs. 15-17 that God gives orders for everyone to come out. On the one hand it is good to wait for the Word of God before doing anything, which was the attitude Noah took, but there is also a human tendency to get rooted in a situation. Creatures, who lived in the ark for a whole year, may have considered it home. It took the Word of God to make them move.

It takes a sense of realism to be able to discern what to do in a new situation. The easiest thing is to stay put in a familiar surrounding. The ark had given its inhabitants a sense of security during the flood. Why wouldn't it offer the same security on the post-flood world? It takes the Word of God for us to know what to do.

A similar situation we find when Israel is in the desert at the foot of mount Sinai. In Deuteronomy we read: "The LORD our God said to us at Horeb, 'You have stayed long enough at this mountain.'"¹⁷⁹ There, the Word of God reminds His people that they had not come to mount Horeb to stay, but that they had to conquer Canaan. Security is not in a place, but in obedience to the Word of God.

It is for the purpose of multiplication that God had saved most of the animal world. He wanted the earth to teem again with life as it did on the fifth and sixth day of creation. Vs.17 states three times: "multiply," "be fruitful," and "increase in number." "Bring out every kind of living creature that is with you; the birds, the animals, and all the creatures that move along the ground; so they can multiply on the earth and be fruitful and increase in number upon it." And the animals became an example for man. Because just as much as God wanted the fauna to multiply, so He wanted to replenish the human race on earth.

Vs.18 and 19 acquire a new significance if we look at them with the eyes of modern man. "So Noah came out, together with his sons and his wife and his sons' wives. All the animals and all the creatures that move along the ground and all the birds; everything that moves on the earth; came out of the ark, one kind after another." It does not only mean that the ark was vacated, but that the ark gave birth to the whole world population of our present day, both man and beast. I looked at my students in the Bible school in Irian Jaya, Indonesia, and I said to them that they were descendants of Noah, just as I am. And I look at my dog and I know that her parents came out of the ark, after being carried through death from the old world to the new.

I wonder if the ark had sunk into a gully, so that the inhabitants had to climb out, as if they appeared from a hole in the ground. This would explain the tradition of the mountain tribespeople of Irian Jaya, that their ancestors came out of a hole in the ground in Seima, (a valley in the Eastern Highlands in the Baliem valley).

Adam Clarke brings out that Noah apparently remained in the ark a complete solar year of 365 days. He figures that the time between the seventeenth day of the second month in the six hundredth year of Noah's life, through the twenty-seventh days of the second month in the six hundredth and first year, are counted according to Hebrew fashion as lunar months. The first six month of the lunar year were 30 days each and the last six months 29. The total would be 354 days in a year, plus the 11 days, which makes 365 days.

The interesting part to me is not so much the arithmetic, as the fact that there may be two different counting systems. This confirms my suspicion that the flood may have been caused by a major upheaval in the solar system, which could have affected the rotation and/or the orbit of the earth, so that a month and a year from after the flood were not the same as a month and a year from before the flood. It seems that a pre-diluvian year was exactly 360 days and a month exactly 30 and that the flood changed this into years of 365 and 1/4 day and the months into sets of 30 and 31 days with the month of February 28 or 29. Admittedly this is conjecture, but it is a point worth remembering.

Then Noah brings the first peace offering on the new earth. It is the first "act of reasonable service," as Paul would call it.¹⁸⁰ It is quite a massive sacrifice he brings, consisting of representatives of all the species of clean animals. The fact that God accepts it as a sacrifice as a "pleasing aroma" or "sweet savour" as the KJV calls it, classifies it as a "peace offering," or a "burnt offering" such as described in Leviticus.¹⁸¹ Probably the former. It is no sacrifice to atone for sin, but an expression of gratitude.

¹⁷⁹ Deut. 1:6

¹⁸⁰ See Rom. 12:1

¹⁸¹ See Lev. ch. 1; 3

When God smells the odor of the peace offering, He confirms that there will never again be another flood to destroy the earth. The verse is put in human terms, as if God is subject to changing moods. But this does not detract from the truth of the decision. We read: "The LORD smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart: 'Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done.'" vs. 21.

First of all we have to consider the basis of the decision. It is not so much what Noah did, as what he reminds God of. In human terms, God reaches forward in time to the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, not for the sins of the world, which was not a sacrifice with a pleasing aroma, but as a kind of surrender out of love for the Father. Paul says: "Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children And live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."¹⁸² Noah committed the act of surrender out of love that Adam never came to in Paradise. This is probably what would have occurred had Adam taken and eaten of the fruit of the Tree of Life. It took more than a millennium and a flood that killed everything on earth for man to come to the point in his relationship with God, where God hoped man would have started.

It was because Adam never surrendered himself to God as Noah did, that he left the door wide open for sin and death to enter. It was because of this that eventually the earth was cursed by God for man's sake. As it says in ch. 3:17- "To Adam he [God] said, 'Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat of it,' 'Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life.'" The reference to this verse shows that the flood was the result of this curse that God had pronounced over the earth when sin first entered the world.

Just as much as our salvation is based upon a legal matter that was decided outside us, but that is activated in our individual lives when we accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior, so was the flood based upon this curse and activated by the behavior of mankind. God brought the flood upon the earth, but at the same time man was responsible for the coming of the flood.

"As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease" (vs. 22). This verse could mean that the seasons, as we know them now in the moderate parts of our planet, were only established after the flood. If it is true, what we supposed earlier, that before the flood the globe had been blanketed in a thick layer of moisture that caused temperatures to be moderate and equal all over the earth, and that this moisture came down upon the earth in the flood, the flood would have caused a tremendous change in climatic conditions. Before the flood there would have been no parts with extreme cold, like the North and South Pole and no part with extreme heat, such as the tropics on the Equator. If the relationship between our planet and the sun was changed, and, maybe, even the orbit of the earth was no longer be the same as before the flood, then the seasons that God mentioned here were a new phenomenon. We cannot say this with certainty, but the verse leaves the possibilities open.

The way God's promise here comes to us, is as a consolation and assurance. There is no reason for panic, because God promised that the condition in which the earth is now will remain till the end of time. Whether this means that no nuclear disaster could wipe out life on earth, I am not sure. As a matter of fact, I believe that this may be the way in which mankind will finally destroy itself.

CHAPTER NINE

We can divide this last chapter about Noah's life in two parts: The verses 1-20 deal with God's promise to Noah and mankind, vs. 21-29 tell the story of Noah's sin and the curse upon Ham.

Vs. 1-20 - There is a parallel between vs.1-3 of this chapter and ch. 1:28,29. In the verses 1-3 we read: "Then God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth. The fear and dread of you will fall upon all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air, upon every creature that moves along the ground, and upon all the fish of the sea; they are given into your hands. Everything that lives and moves will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything.'" And ch. 1:28-29 says: "God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.'" Then God said, 'I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the

¹⁸² Eph. 5:1,2

whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for you.’ ” It is quite obvious what difference the fall into sin has made.

The command to be fruitful and to fill the earth is the same, but the relationship between man and the rest of the creation is no longer the same. Man is not the peaceful ruler anymore. The animals are no longer his friends, and he is no longer the friend of the animals. Man changed from vegetarian to omnivore. The death of his fellow creatures, the animals, has become a necessity to stay alive, both spiritually and physically. Killing has become a way of life. The fact that God sanctions it does not make it good. It is an accommodation to the situation in which sin has changed the conditions. The blood of the animal will serve to cover his sin, and the meat will be his food.

Theologians are divided in their opinion about whether man ate meat before the fall or not. The Bible does not give any indication one way or another. It could be that the use of meat for food was practiced, but only officially sanctioned after the flood. But then we can ask the question as to whether the fear of man was upon the animals before the flood too. *Adam Clarke* suggests that dominion of the animals over man may have increased before the flood to the point where, had the flood not occurred, wild animals could have wiped out mankind. There is no way of knowing whether this is true. In the same vein we do not know whether cannibalism was practiced before the flood either! The verses 5, and 6 would surely leave this possibility open.

It strikes me, though, that through generations of use we have come to the point where we accept the killing of animals and the eating of their meat as normal, without often realizing how contrary to this is to the basic principles of creation. I think Gandhi was wrong in abstaining from eating meat, but he surely had a point which I can appreciate. Usually, vegetarianism is based on a denial of the existence of sin. The same goes for Schweitzer’s “Reverence for life.”¹⁸³

Vs. 4 is clearly a prohibition to eat blood: “But you must not eat meat that has its lifeblood still in it.” Evidently the Hebrew is difficult to translate here, and consequently different interpretations abound. But the meaning is obvious that the blood of animals is not meant for food, since it has other purposes. I do not think it is merely a protection for the animal against human cruelty. In Leviticus, where this command to Noah is incorporated into the Mosaic law, we read: “ Any Israelite or any alien living among them who eats any blood; I will set my face against that person who eats blood and will cut him off from his people. For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one’s life.”¹⁸⁴ The idea seems to be that since animal blood is used to atone for sin, man is not allowed to use it for any other purpose.

The question remains what our interpretation of this prohibition should be now, after the death of Christ. Atonement by the blood of an animal was only a picture of the real atonement by the blood of Christ. The writer to the Hebrews makes this clear, when he says: “Because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus...”¹⁸⁵ We have the famous passage from the book of Acts. James is the spokesman of these words: “Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath. It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things. Farewell.”¹⁸⁶

I take it that the reference to the preaching of the law of Moses is inserted as a testimony to the Jews, who were living all over the area where the young churches were being established. If that is true, it would mean that the eating of blood in itself was not considered intrinsically sinful, but that if Jews would see heathen Christians doing this, they would reject the Gospel on the basis that it opposed the law of Moses, and the command that God had given to Noah. Animal blood has lost its significance as a means of atonement for sin since the blood of Jesus was poured out. We could even say that emphasis upon the prohibition to eat animal blood would diminish the value of the blood of Christ; which would be a very serious matter. We can hardly maintain at present that eating or not eating of animal blood would in any way

¹⁸³ Erfurcht vor dem Leben

¹⁸⁴ Lev. 17:10,11

¹⁸⁵ Heb. 10:4,19

¹⁸⁶ Acts 15:20,21,28,29

add to or subtract of our salvation. In a certain way the eating of blood would fit into the same category as the requirement for circumcision that brought such uproar in the early church.

Vs. 4,5 and 6 go together. We read: “But you must not eat meat that has its lifeblood still in it. And for your lifeblood I will surely demand an accounting. I will demand an accounting from every animal. And from each man, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of his fellow man. Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man.” The common factor is the blood, which is the seat of the soul in the Bible. Speaking about Jesus’ death on the cross, Isaiah says: “Therefore will I divide him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he hath poured out his soul unto death: and he was numbered with the transgressors; and he bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.”¹⁸⁷ The NIV says : “Because he poured out his life unto death.”

I take “I will demand an accounting from every animal” to mean that God holds man responsible for the killing of the animal, not that the animal would be called to give account for the killing of man, as some commentators think. Man is allowed to eat meat, but God will not allow any senseless killing. Here the spilling of animal blood comes in. The animal that is to be eaten has to be killed in such a way that the blood is poured out. This command was later incorporated into the Mosaic law. “ ‘Any Israelite or any alien living among you who hunts any animal or bird that may be eaten must drain out the blood and cover it with earth.’ ”¹⁸⁸ Vs. 11 explains the reason for this: “For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one’s life.” The link between the killing of an animal and the killing of a man is not only in the fact that both are killed, but that the animal substitutes for man. Man is allowed to live because the animal dies for him. He was created in the image of God, when God blew His Spirit into Adam’s nostrils. The killing of animals is allowed for various reasons, but the killing of a man never, except as the execution of the death penalty for murder.

So there are two references to the first chapters of Genesis in this chapter. Vs. 3 refers to ch. 2:16 and vs. 6 to ch. 1:26. The chapter starts out with a blessing and it ends with a curse. God blesses Noah and his children and Noah curses his grandson. The content of the blessing is fertility. We read in vs. 1 and 7 “Then God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth.” “As for you, be fruitful and increase in number; multiply on the earth and increase upon it.”

In the verses 11-17 we read about God’s promise never to destroy life on earth again by a flood. This promise is confirmed with the appearance of a rainbow. Whether the rainbow was a new phenomenon after the flood or whether it had appeared before, we do not know. If I understand correctly what caused the flood: the disappearance of heavy layers of humidity; it seems probable that the sun never interacted in such a way with the water vapors in the sky that the sunlight would break up into its basic colors.

The rainbow is in the Bible connected with the glory of God. We find it mentioned in Ezekiel, where the prophet sees the glory of God: “Like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the radiance around him. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. When I saw it, I fell facedown, and I heard the voice of one speaking,”¹⁸⁹ and in Revelations where John catches a glance of the glory of God in heaven. “The one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian. A rainbow, resembling an emerald, encircled the throne.”¹⁹⁰ The rainbow portrays the holiness of God. John says about the character of God, “This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.”¹⁹¹ The rainbow is light, broken up by a prism into color. We would not be able to imagine a world without color. We are attracted by color, often without knowing why. Evidently, the holiness of God appeals to the image of God in us. Once we are redeemed, God’s holiness is very attractive to us. Noah and his family must have experienced some of the thrill of God’s presence after the terrible ordeal they went through. God’s glory comes to them as an assurance that there will be no more judgment for them. They passed from death into life.

In vs. 16 God calls the rainbow a sign of “the everlasting covenant.” We read: “Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all

¹⁸⁷ Isa. 53:12 (KJV)

¹⁸⁸ Lev.17:13

¹⁸⁹ Ezek.1:28

¹⁹⁰ Rev. 4:3

¹⁹¹ I John 1:5

living creatures of every kind on the earth.” The expression “everlasting covenant” is used several times in the Bible in connection with things that are obviously not everlasting. God affirms an everlasting covenant with Abraham and Jacob and with David. Evidently, the earthly conditions are to be taken as a shadow of a heavenly reality. Just as much as the rainbow which we see with our mortal eyes is an image of God’s holiness, not the essence itself, so God’s promises have a deeper significance than for just the transitory conditions on earth.

In this context we have to understand the word “remember.” The omniscient God cannot forget, consequently, He does not have to remember. The expression is of course anthropomorphic, but also it is meant to show that there is a link between events on earth and things in heaven.

We should try to imagine what it must have been like to go through the flood and come out alive as the only survivors and then be confronted with the breathtaking beauty of a rainbow as an expression of the presence of a Holy God. No wonder Noah built an altar and put sacrifice upon sacrifice on it. The Bible does not say too little when it gives the testimony about Noah, that Noah walked with God. He knew God intimately, and was partaker of His glory. And yet, as the writer to the Hebrews says: “These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.”¹⁹²

Let us repeat one more time: The rainbow was the sign of the covenant between God and man. It was an expression of God’s holiness. The covenant was not only meant to show God’s deep sorrow over what happened, but also to alleviate man’s fear. What guarantee do we have that this planet is safe enough to live on? For people who have no choice but to live on it anyhow, this can be a condition that brings about ulcers. God’s holiness, that is God’s character guarantees us our safety. This guarantee does not only cover us against natural disasters, such as floods and earthquakes, but also in our struggle for life. Jesus said: “So do not worry, saying, ‘what shall we eat?’ Or ‘What shall we drink?’ Or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”¹⁹³

And in Hebrews we read: “Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.’ So we say with confidence, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?’ ”¹⁹⁴

Paul goes even further when he says: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”¹⁹⁵ All this is only valid, of course, for people who have entered into a covenant relationship with God. Those who do not believe in God’s holiness do better to fear.

About the “everlasting covenant” *The Pulpit Commentary* says the following: “Literally, the covenant of eternity. One of those pregnant Scripture sayings that have in them an almost inexhaustible fullness of meaning, which does not in the first sight disclose itself to the eye of the unreflecting reader. In so far as the Noachic covenant was simply a promise that there should be no recurrence of a flood, the covenant of eternity had a corresponding limit in its duration to the period of this present terrestrial economy. But, rightly viewed, the Noachic covenant was the original Adamic covenant set up again in a different form; and hence, when applied to it, the phrase covenant of eternity is entitled to retain its highest and fullest significance, as a covenant reaching from eternity to eternity.”

The verses 18,19, which close the account of the flood, seem to run ahead to the next chapter, where the genealogy of Noah’s sons is given. The point seems to be that the ark was the birthplace of whole world population. But the fact that Shem is mentioned first, puts the accent upon the Jewish race and the mentioning of the name of Canaan seems to prepare us for the following story, as well as for the events that are later told in the book of Exodus and even as far ahead as the conquest of the land in Joshua. With this running ahead of his subject, Moses want to emphasize that which is important, so that we are prepared to understand this when we get that far in his book.

So these two verses contain the germ of the chapters that follow. Ch. 10 will give us more details about the nation that came from these three men. Ch. 11 is foreshadows in the phrase “from them came the

¹⁹² Heb. 11:39,40

¹⁹³ Matt. 6:31-33

¹⁹⁴ Heb. 13:5,6

¹⁹⁵ Phil. 4:6,7

people who were scattered over the earth.” And the name of Canaan introduces us to the person who is going to be cursed in the next story, and so it seems to give more validity to the conquest of the country, later on in the Pentateuch.

The last part of the story of the life of Noah is not very complimentary. The NIV says: “Noah, a man of the soil, proceeded to plant a vineyard.” The RSV puts it differently: “Noah was the first tiller of the soil. He planted a vineyard.” But there does not seem to be any compelling reason for this translation. If the grape had survived the flood, it is logical to suppose that people had cultivated it before and had made wine with the juice thereof. It is also hard to believe that people would not have become drunk before the flood either.

The story of Noah’s drunkenness and the subsequent curse and blessing pronounced is wrought with problems. It is very easy to presume, as *Adam Clarke* does, that Noah was innocent, because otherwise God would not have given him “the gift of prophecy.” But the Bible gives us no reason to believe that Noah did not know what effect the wine would have upon him. And the fact remains that his stupor brought the worst out of him. It can not be denied either that only that which is inside can be brought out. In uncovering himself, Noah uncovered his sinful tendencies.

We have meditated upon the problem of nakedness in connection with the fall of Adam and Eve. It seems hard to reconcile what we read in ch. 6:9: “This is the account of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked with God,” with “When he drank some of its wine, he became drunk and lay uncovered inside his tent.” Yet it does not appear that Noah lost his status with God in this experience. We have to remember that being blameless and walking with God does not imply sinless condition. We must remember the definition of blessedness in David gives in the psalms: “blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.”¹⁹⁶ Noah was blameless, not because he did not sin, but because his sins were atoned for.

Still, there is no excuse of Noah’s behavior. We take away from the image of God in him, if we diminish his responsibility. I do not believe either that the fact that he prophesied and that the prophecy stuck, is proof of his innocence. We have the case of Balaam in the book of Numbers.¹⁹⁷ The implication of the story of Balaam is that if he had pronounced a curse upon the people of Israel, it would not have been without effect. That is why Balaam was prevented from saying anything that was contrary to the blessing the LORD had put on His people. There is no doubt about Balaam’s character.

So the curse Noah puts on Ham’s son Canaan does not prove anything about Noah’s character. The question remains whether what Noah did was in the will of the LORD. Obviously, God did not want him to get drunk. Ham was at fault in poking fun at his father’s indecent exposure, but Noah was still responsible for his behavior. And I have a large question mark in my mind regarding the validity of Noah’s curse.

But first we have to think about the situation that lay at the base of it all. We have touched upon the mystery of man’s feelings of shame in connection with the fall. The issue is not physical nakedness, but the condition of one’s soul. Adam and Eve were ashamed, not because of their bodies, but because of the corruption that was inside them. We have seen that God did not tear off their fig leaves and expose them. God gave them a better cover through the death of a fellow creature. We could say that God respects man secret, even the secret of his sinful condition, because He respects man. God’s atonement restores our dignity. So what Ham did amounted to the mocking of his father’s secret. He acted as if he, himself, had nothing to cover. He did as if God’s cover for his father was not enough. We may see through people’s covers and masks, but we are not allowed to expose them. What God has covered let no man expose!

This goes for the New Testament dispensation as well. Our sins may be washed away in the blood of Jesus Christ instead of covered by the blood of an animal, and our hearts may be born again by the Holy Spirit; we all have a sinful nature that has to be covered by God’s grace in order to make us fit for living. As fellow members of the body of Christ, we have to learn to live with this in one another. We have the assurance that God will perfect the work He has begun in each one of us. There will be no more masks in heaven and no more shame.

Paul says: “Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁶ Ps .32:1

¹⁹⁷ See Num. 22 and 23

¹⁹⁸ Phil. 1:6

This leaves us with the mystery of the curse and its effectiveness. Ham must have mocked Noah in front of his two brothers. We understand that when vs. 22 says: "Ham, the father of Canaan, saw his father's nakedness and told his two brothers outside," it does not just mean that he passed on the information. Not only did he not do anything to spare his father any embarrassment, but he talked also. Sometimes it cannot be helped that we see things and discover other people's secrets. It is when we pass it on that we become responsible. Paul says: "Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres."¹⁹⁹ Ham showed no love toward his father. That was his greatest sin. He had no guarantee that he would not fall into the same sin one day. Maybe he had already. That is why Paul says elsewhere: "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted."²⁰⁰

Shem and Japheth behaved in a most commendable way. But they must have talked also because, otherwise, Noah would not have found out how he woke up covered. The Bible gives us no indication as to what happened.

This brings us to the first prophecy and the first curse pronounced on the new earth. As a matter of fact, it is the first curse put upon a human being by another human. In ch. 4:11 it seems as if God curses Cain. But in the reading of the RSV we understand that it was the earth that cursed Cain, not God. "And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand." (RSV) Noah is the first man to curse another man.

I do not say this flippantly, but one should never exercise the gift of prophecy under a hangover. It seems to me that Noah's prophecy was just as much part of his sinful behavior as his drunkenness. The meanest part of it was that he hit his son where it hurt most: in his child. What did Canaan have to do with this? Some commentators imply Canaan's guilt, but there is no indication that the son knew even what his father had done or said. Satan has a way of attacking God's children in their own children. Those attacks are much harder to endure than those upon our own person.

In spite of the above, the prophecy sticks. Noah may have regretted later what he said, but he said it; and it could not be undone. It was as when someone pushes inadvertently the wrong button, but the mechanism works, whether the button is pushed on purpose or not. The framework for the future world population was put up and nothing has been able to change it until the coming of the Gospel.

Noah's curse has been through the centuries an excuse, even a pious excuse for nations and races to suppress and mistreat one another. The slave trade the Europeans carried out between Africa and North America was at least in part based on biblical grounds. Now is it hard to prove who descended from whom. Obviously the inhabitants of Canaan, were the ones mentioned in ch. 15:19-21: "The land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites." But there is no way to prove that the black inhabitants of the African continent are descendents of Canaan. They may be children of Ham, but the curse was only pronounced on Canaan, not on Cush, Mizraim or Put.

The big question, however, is in how far Noah's words were a real prophecy. Were they the Word of God, or the words of an angry man? And why did Noah pick Canaan, the youngest of Ham's sons and not Cush? Since there is no indication of Canaan's personal involvement in the incident, we have to presume that Canaan, as the youngest, was his father's darling. Noah tried to hit Ham where it would hurt him most. I find it hard to accept that Noah's curse was the Word of God. By saying this I do not mean to take away anything from the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture. I simply do not believe that it was God who cursed Ham or Canaan.

This does not mean either that Ham was not guilty of sin. His lack of respect for his father was a lack of love. How tragically does this incident illustrate men's sinful nature. Here is the only surviving family in a world that was washed clean by the flood. But there is no clean, new beginning. The germ of sin was carried through the flood. Sin survived the flood in the heart of man. The world was cleansed, but man was still vile.

Noah's curse condemns Canaan to slavery. The curse is tantamount to a selling of Canaan into slavery. In the two previous cases where God deals with the sin of an individual a curse is pronounced. In Adam's case the ground is cursed; in Cain's the earth curses the murderer. There the punishment seems to be built in. We cannot say that about Noah's curse. Noah introduces a new evil element in human relations. Noah invented slavery.

¹⁹⁹ I Cor. 13:6,7

²⁰⁰ Gal. 6:1

With the following blessing upon Shem the curse seems both aggravated and diminished. Noah does not bless Shem personally, but he blesses the God of Shem, thus indicating a special relationship between God and Shem's descendants. It could be that this revelation was not new, but it is the first time there is an indication that the line to redemption would run through Shem. But then in the same breath Canaan is made into Shem's slave. Undoubtedly, this prophecy was fulfilled in the conquest of Canaan, however imperfectly this was carried out after Joshua's death.²⁰¹ And for some of the Canaanites, this meant that they shared in Shem's salvation.

Noah's prophecy takes us through the line of history of salvation that God had started Himself in ch. 3:15: "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel." The offspring will be in the line of Shem and it is within the boundaries of his family that further selection will take place, that will ultimately lead to the fullness of time when God will become man through a virgin in Nazareth.

In blessing the God of Shem, Noah uses the double name YHWH and Elohim. In doing this he did more than only confuse the Yahwist and Elohist researchers of higher criticism. He indicated that the God of the covenant was going to keep His promise for salvation of mankind through Shem. Noah's prophecy should have been a cause for celebration. As it turned out it became part of a curse. It is amazing how often fulfillment of promises that God has given for man's salvation, materialize in the most dismal form and under the worst of circumstances. The great event of Yom Kipur, the entering of a human being in the presence of God in the Holy of Holiest, started with the death of Aaron sons, who were killed when they acted foolishly under the influence of wine. The LORD spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron who died when they approached the LORD. The LORD said to Moses: "Tell your brother Aaron not to come whenever he chooses into the Most Holy Place behind the curtain in front of the atonement cover on the ark, or else he will die, because I appear in the cloud over the atonement cover. "This is how Aaron is to enter the sanctuary area: with a young bull for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering."²⁰²

The choice of the place for the building of the temple in Jerusalem was determined during a plague that killed thousands of people. When David saw the angel of death above the threshing place of Araunah, he offered there and we read: "Then David said, "The house of the LORD God is to be here, and also the altar of burnt offering for Israel."²⁰³

So with Noah's curse and blessing we are confronted with this general phenomenon. God develops His promised salvation for mankind often in a thick disguise, under the most unlikely circumstances. This does not excuse man's sinful behavior, but it proves that God makes all things work together for good for those who love Him, as Paul says: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."²⁰⁴

The blessing part in vs. 26 and 27 may even be harder to explain: "He also said, 'Blessed be the LORD, the God of Shem! May Canaan be the slave of Shem. May God extend the territory of Japheth; may Japheth live in the tents of Shem, and may Canaan be his slave.' " Noah does not pronounce a direct blessing on Shem in the same way as he cursed Canaan directly. The praise is for "the LORD, the God of Shem!" This is a reference to the covenant God made with Shem and his descendants. God is called by the name YHWH. Noah speaks, prophetically, about God's promise to Abraham: "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."²⁰⁵

This blessing partly offsets the curse. Because even as a slave of Shem, Canaan will be blessed by the God of Shem, through Shem. We see a miraculous example of this the in Negro slaves who were brought to America and became Christians there. I never realized before that, in part, this is a fulfillment of Noah's prophecy.

Moses wrote these words from the vantagepoint of one who had seen the fulfillment of Noah's prophecy. The higher criticism will say that he put these words in Noah's mouth. We won't stoop to answer this allegation. But we have to admit that the prophecy gives a unity to the book of Genesis that can only be called supernatural. Moses may have been able to see part of the fulfillment in the Exodus and the prospect

²⁰¹ See Judges 1:27-35

²⁰² Lev. 16:1-3

²⁰³ I Chr. 22:1

²⁰⁴ Rom. 8:28

²⁰⁵ Gen. 12:2,3

of the conquest of Canaan, but he could have had no idea of how Japheth would come to live in the tents of Shem. This did not start to happen until the first heathen in Antioch turned to the Lord in Acts: "Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord."²⁰⁶

And so takes Noah's strange prophesy us to the end of his long life. Next to Methusalah, Noah was the oldest patriarch on record in the Bible. He represents the end of one world and the beginning of another. He saw death and came through alive. He was a man who walked with God and saved humanity from extinction. He also was the first sinner to enter the new world and to introduce a curse in it. He was a type of Christ, but an imperfect one. His life makes us realize that mankind had to wait for the One who was yet to come.

CHAPTER TEN

AFTER THE FLOOD AND THE TOWER OF BABEL

Ch. 10 and 11

It is hard to know what to do with chapter 10. *The Pulpit Commentary* says: "It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of the ethnological table. Whether regarded from a geographical, a political, or a theocratical standpoint, 'this unparalleled list, the combined result of reflection and deep research,' is 'no less valuable as a historical document than as a lasting proof of the brilliant capacity of the Hebrew mind.' Undoubtedly the earliest effort of the human intellect to exhibit in a tabulated form the geographical distribution of the human race, it bears unmistakable witness in its own structure to its high antiquity, occupying itself least with the Japhetic tribes which were furthest from the theocratic center, and were latest in attaining to historic eminence, and enlarging with much greater minuteness of detail on those Hamitic nations, the Egyptian, Canaanite, and Arabian, which were soonest developed, and with which the Hebrews came most into contact in the initial stages of their career. It describes the rise of states, and, consistently with all subsequent historical and archaeological testimony, gives the prominence to the Egyptian or Arabian Hamites, as the first founders of empires. It exhibits the separation of the Shemites from the other sons of Noah, and the budding forth of the line of promise in the family of Arphaxad. While thus useful to the geographer, the historian, the politician, it is especially serviceable to the theologian, as enabling him to trace the descent of the women's seed, and to mark the fulfillment of Scripture prophecies concerning the nations of the earth. In the interpretation of the names which are here recorded, it is obviously impossible in every instance to arrive at certainty, in some cases the names of individuals being mentioned, while in others it is as conspicuously those of people."

That is probably the most that can be said about this chapter. From a devotional viewpoint, there is little to be gathered on the surface. It seems that, like in previous chapters, Moses runs ahead of his subject. What is described here is the result of the confusion and subsequent dispersion of mankind over the globe. We would actually have to read chapter 11 before being able to grasp the message of chapter 10.

The table of nations is written in retrospect. It seems to be more an effort of orientation for the people of Israel on its way to the Promised Land than a record of nations however much importance it may have to the geographer, historian, politician and theologian, as *The Pulpit Commentary* puts it. Our saying this is no reflection on the historicity of the chapter.

The record starts with Japheth's sons. Of the seven only two are traced in their offspring: Gomer and Javan. *The Pulpit Commentary* makes a rather extensive effort to trace the peoples, who are descendants from the ones mentioned. So Gomer is supposed to have spread out as far as the Atlantic coast. Ezekiel mentions the name in prophecy: "Also Gomer with all its troops, and Beth Togarmah from the far north with all its troops; the many nations with you."²⁰⁷ According to writing of *Josephus*, the Galatians, who at that time were supposedly immigrants from Western Europe, correspond to the description.

²⁰⁶ Acts 11:20,21

²⁰⁷ Ezek. 38:6

We find Magog also mentioned in Ezekiel,²⁰⁸ and, of course, in Revelations. Gog is apparently a title like Pharaoh and Caesar. In Revelations we read: “And will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth; Gog and Magog; to gather them for battle. In number they are like the sand on the seashore.”²⁰⁹ The last remark about the descendants of Japheth is made in vs.5: “From these the maritime peoples spread out into their territories by their clans within their nations, each with its own language,” or as the KJV puts it: “By these were the isles of the Gentiles divided in their lands; every one after his tongue, after their families, in their nations.” It seems that this description pertains particularly to the sons of Javan, but it could bear on the whole of Japheth’s offspring also. Obviously the mention of the division of language points to the building of the tower of Babel. The sea-faring character of these people puts them at the farthest distance from the people of Israel. The Israelites, generally speaking, seem to have been afraid of water.

In the record about Ham, Put’s descendants are not mentioned. Only the lines of Cush, Mizraim and Canaan are followed. We get the impression that those people who were of no interest to Israel, or who never got to play a part in their history, were omitted.

The highlight of the chapter is Nimrod, the son of Cush. Highlight may be the wrong word in this context, because Nimrod is more outstanding as a rascal than for anything else. Five verses are devoted to one man. If we consider that only 32 verses are devoted to the whole world population, we have to say that Nimrod occupied a very prominent place in post-diluvian history. The Bible says about him that he was the first mighty warrior. KJV says “the first mighty one” (RSV - “the first mighty man”). Furthermore, he is called “a mighty hunter before the LORD.” And finally he is credited with the foundation of several cities that remained centers of power for centuries to come. He founded both Babylon and Nineveh.

He became a proverb in ancient times. Vs. 9 says: “He was a mighty hunter before the LORD; that is why it is said, ‘Like Nimrod, a mighty hunter before the LORD.’ ”

The founding of the cities, which were spread out quite a bit, presupposes the ability to travel considerable distances, much more than we would give people at that place in history credit for. *Adam Clarke* says about Nimrod: “Though the words are not definite, it is very likely he was a very bad man. His name Nimrod comes from ‘marad,’ ‘he rebelled’; and the Targum, on I Chron.1: 10 say: ‘Nimrod began to be a mighty man in sin, a murderer of innocent men, and a rebel before the Lord. The word that we render hunter signifies ‘prey’; and is applied in the Scriptures to the hunting of men by persecution, oppression, and tyranny. Hence it is likely that Nimrod, having acquired power, used it in tyranny and oppression; and by rapine and violence founded that domination which was the first distinguished by the name of a kingdom on the face of the earth.”

His name is further mentioned in I Chronicles: “Cush was the father of Nimrod, who grew to be a mighty warrior on earth,”²¹⁰ and also in Micah: “They will rule the land of Assyria with the sword, the land of Nimrod with drawn sword. He will deliver us from the Assyrian when he invades our land and marches into our borders.”²¹¹

In the chapter that precedes the flood, ch. 5 the highlight falls on Enoch, who walked with God. In this chapter, the first one after the flood, Nimrod catches the full attention. The flood does not seem to have done much to cleanse the earth!

Of Ham’s four sons only the lineage of three is traced. Put is left out of the picture completely. Again we see that mainly the peoples who played an important role in the later history of Israel are given prominence. Vs. 19 even treats the name Canaan more as a country than as a person.

Shem had five sons, but only the lineage of two of them is developed: Aram and Arphaxad. Evidently, the line of promise was continued in Arphaxad. The book of I Chronicles puts it more concisely: “Shem, Arphaxad, Shelah, Eber, Peleg, Reu, Serug, Nahor, Terah and Abram (that is, Abraham).”²¹²

Scripture itself does not claim to give us a complete picture. Even at this rather early stage in human history, the statistics were sufficiently overwhelming to lose one’s self in them. How much more in the world of today with its approximately 6 billion inhabitants? No modern computer has them all. Yet God knows every one of His creatures. Jesus’ reminder should be remembered here: “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the

²⁰⁸ See ch. 38 and 39

²⁰⁹ Rev. 20:8

²¹⁰ I Chr. 1:10

²¹¹ Micah 5:6

²¹² I Chron.1:24-27

very hairs of your head are all numbered. So do not be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.”²¹³ This chapter reminds us of the contrast between God’s omniscience and man’s incomplete knowledge.

There also is a way in which God does not know who we are. Paul says: “But the man who loves God is known by God.”²¹⁴ And Jesus says to some people, who never loved Him, “Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’ ”²¹⁵ The message of the Bible is that it is important to be known by God, because our names are registered in the Book of Life.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Obviously, chapter eleven moves back to the beginning of the previous chapter. The first nine verses tell us how the dispersion of nations over the whole earth started out. The rest of the chapter goes back to the genealogy of Shem.

There was some kind of a ‘big bang,’ which drove people apart forcefully. There are some questions that are not answered in this chapter, into which we will have to look.

The chapter starts out by saying: “Now the whole world had one language and a common speech,” or as the RSV puts it: “Now the whole earth had one language and few words.” The latter translation seems wrong to me. It would be highly unlikely that people communicated in few words. It could be that people were still able to use telepathy at that stage, and that they did not have to talk much, because they were able to read minds without the use of words. *Adam Clarke* is quite dogmatic about the fact that the original language must have been Hebrew. In spite of his arguments, I see no reason for the supposition. *The Pulpit Commentary* affirms that the Rabbins, the Fathers and the older theologians believe the original language to have been Hebrew. But they would not have been able to prove this either, although they were a few centuries closer to the period than we are.

The unity of speech was an indication that the people who started to repopulate the earth after the flood formed one body, which was well coordinated. Evidently, people were able to contribute ideas that were used in the forming and the execution of the project to the point where they would become a real threat to the plan of God with the earth. God was not being sarcastic when He said: “If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them,” otherwise there would have been no need for such a drastic measure as the confusion of languages.

So the “one language and one common speech” was probably more a matter of coordination than of talking alone. I am sure that people possessed individuality at that time, as we do now. But this did not push them apart. God’s original intent in giving people individuality was unity in variety. This is the principle that should govern the body of Christ in our New Testament times, but it does not. The principle of Babel was briefly superseded at Pentecost, but confusion soon took over again, and, presently, it reigns supremely.

So God considers the plan a real threat. The astronomer, Carl Sagan mocks the passage in one of his books, saying that he does not see why a supposedly almighty God should get so upset about such an innocent plan as the construction of a tower. If there would be nothing more in it than an unrealistic plan, topped by a hyperbolic declaration that the tower would reach to the heavens, Sagan certainly would have a point. But God’s reaction seems to indicate that more was at stake.

I have no proof for the following. What I am going to say could very well be one of my “Schultz-illusions,” like the theory that the Nephilim in ch. 6 were the product of genetic engineering. But could it be that the tower of Babel was really meant to be the starting point for reaching into the heavens? Could it be that people at that time would have possessed enough know-how to build space ships, and to travel in space, and thus export sin into the universe? If we hold on to the evolutionary suggestion that man developed from a primitive being into the sophisticated person he is now, there would be no basis for such a suggestion, but since we reject Darwin on other points, why not here? I firmly believe that man, who was much closer to Paradise than we are, who lived centuries longer than we do, had a sharper mind and a keener ability than we do too. It could very well be that it took modern science forty centuries or more to recover a knowledge that

²¹³ Matt. 10:29-31

²¹⁴ I Cor. 8:3

²¹⁵ Matt. 7:22,23

was common property at the pre- and post-flood period. It is certainly a matter to look into when we get to heaven.

Again, the fact that Moses describes the event in such a way that it looks like a very primitive effort to achieve things that are impossible, could prove that Moses himself did not have enough sophisticated knowledge to describe the story.

The event takes place in the plain of Shinar. It happened to the fourth generation after the flood. Shem's great grandson was called Peleg, according to ch. 10:25: "One was named Peleg, because in his time the earth was divided..." So we are still in the first century after the flood. The world population could not have been more than several thousand; probably less than one hundred thousand. Moving east from the Ararat mountains brings us approximately in Mesopotamia. It could be we are again in the neighborhood of the old Paradise site.

The plain was probably very fertile, being filled with deluvian deposits. There are no stones to be found, so people resort to baking bricks from clay, which is a respectable way of building. The story is told, however, from the viewpoint of one who is used to building with stone and cement. Archaeological finds confirm the solidity of brick with bitumen as mortar. But these details, however interesting, have little to do with the core of the story.

The real issue comes to light in vs. 4: "Then they said, 'Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.'" There are three points to be distinguished in the plan: the building of the tower, the making of a name and prevention from being scattered. The three go together. The making of a name was probably the most blasphemous part of the plan. It reeks of the rebellion of Lucifer, about which we read in Isaiah: "You said in your heart, 'I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of the sacred mountain. I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.'"²¹⁶

So it was not just a plan of evacuation in case of another flood. That may have been the first reason. And this would be an indication that the promise of God that a flood would never again destroy the earth was either completely forgotten or ignored. It usually does not take more than one or two generations for the Word of God to start gathering dust. So it could be that people did not take the Word of God into account at all, and made plans for themselves in case a similar disaster would occur. The tower might get them high enough to stay out of the water or, if we are correct about the space program, there would be the option to move to another planet. That was how it started. But the disregard for the promise of God brought about a sense of pride in human ingenuity that was completely blown out of proportion.

It is interesting to reflect how much Nimrod had to do in this. As we saw in connection with ch. 10:25, the division took place during the life of Peleg, the great grand son of Shem. If we take ch. 10:6-8 to mean literally that Nimrod was the grandson of Ham, we are two generations behind. But since Nimrod is not mentioned among Cush's sons in vs. 7 the words "Cush was the father of Nimrod, who grew to be a mighty warrior on the earth," may simply indicate that Cush was the ancestor of Nimrod. It seems more logical to assume that Nimrod played a role during the building of the tower and afterward during the dispersion. The way he moved around, founding cities, would not be typical of a spirit of wanting to cling together. The individualism of Nimrod is more indicative of people who want to go their own way, than of the functioning as a body of the people who had one language, one speech and one purpose.

If the above is true, at least one person took full advantage of the curse. He put up monuments for himself and built cities, making himself a name that rang loudly and clearly throughout the post-diluvian centuries.

One of the reasons for the building of the city and the tower was the desire to cling together. The flood must have changed the face and features of the earth drastically. Climatologically and topographically the generations of those who survived the flood found a world that had little in common any more with the planet they had left behind. The mountains must have grown higher and more uninhabitable. The global temperature must have dropped at some places and risen at others to uncomfortable levels. The curse of the ground must have let itself be felt more severely. People had the fear that they would not survive if they would move out of the fertile valley of Shinar. And yet, staying together indefinitely in the valley would have wiped out the whole world population with starvation after a few population explosions.

The implication of the above is that people feared that God would no longer take care of them. They did not trust His promise that never again He would destroy their planet by water. They did not want to

²¹⁶ Isa. 14:13,14

honor His Name, but wanted to replace it with their own, and they had no thought of trusting Him to keep them alive. They wanted security in their own hands, not in the hands of a God they had offended. They had no idea who God was. The thought that He would really love them and care for them never entered their minds. They believed that they were completely on their own. If they would not take care of themselves, nobody else would; certainly not God, who had destroyed millions of people.

So they worried and acted upon their worries. New Testament phrases come to mind, such as the words of Jesus: "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' Or 'What shall we drink?' Or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."²¹⁷

And the writer to the Hebrews says: "Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.' So we say with confidence, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?'"²¹⁸

It has been pointed out that the plan of the people was to go up and reach into heaven; not in order to find God, but to be saved from whatever could happen on earth. It was an effort to have a religion without God. On the other hand we read that God comes down to see. There is a faint shadow of the plan of salvation in this. The Gospel is that God came down, so there is no need for man to go up. Quoting Moses, Paul says: "But the righteousness that is by faith says: 'Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?' (That is, to bring Christ down) or 'Who will descend into the deep?' (That is, to bring Christ up from the dead)."

If God had been the issue for them, which it was, but they did not know, then their problems would have been solved. They wanted heaven without God; so when heaven came down, they missed the glory.

How God confused human speech we are not told. Since we have no example of unity in diversity, as the condition of mankind must have been at that time, we cannot really understand what happened. There must have been some safeguard in man, such as pain in the body, that was triggered by the touch of God. As the body starts to deteriorate and eventually to decompose, so a mental decomposition must have begun. God saw that unity of mind and purpose as a danger, not for Himself, but for mankind, and so He prevented the worse by breaking up man's unity. Obviously, the devil was ready to exploit the condition for the destruction of man, not for his improvement or salvation. In the same way as death delivers us out of a 'no-hope' situation, so this confusion must have thwarted the plan of the Evil One, and prevented total disintegration.

My brother, Eduard, has written a booklet (which was never published) entitled *That's Moin*, in which he proposes that English, such as it is spoken in one of the mid-Western states of the United States of America, be promoted to become the global language. The book completely overlooks the cause of the present situation. It would be nice if it were that easy!

The confusion of speech is reported as being brought about suddenly. It was obviously not a slow growing apart. Philologists say that it takes centuries for languages to develop and deviate from one another. If our theory is true that man had the ability to communicate without words in a telepathic way, it would seem likely that God closed that door, so people could not read each others' minds any longer. The confusion would then come about in that man would be forced to express in words what his thoughts and intentions were, which each one proceeded to do in his own way.

In C. S. Lewis' book *That Hideous Strength* there is a rather hilarious scene in which speech is being confused in a supernatural way, just when demons come to the climax of their purpose to take over

²¹⁷ Matt. 6:25-34

²¹⁸ Heb. 13:5,6

world dominion through the National Institute of Coordinated Experiments (NICE). Lewis gets probably close to the truth of what happened at Babel in this fantasy.

It seems to me that there is much more in this chapter than we can lay our finger on at present. This is the beginning of the world picture, as we know it now. People are spread out over the world, speaking thousands of languages; and it started here. There is an intriguing verse that speaks about the relationship between this event and the rest of the chapter, where Moses picks up the thread of the line of Shem. In Deuteronomy we read: "When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance, when he divided all mankind, he set up boundaries for the peoples according to the number of the sons of Israel."²¹⁹ This prophetic utterance has probably much more to do with revelation of God's plan of salvation than with arithmetic.

The Apostle Paul contributes to the discussion with his remark to the audience at the Areopagus. In Acts he says: "From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us."²²⁰

Even in the dispersion God did not mean to separate man from Himself. God meant for man to live within the boundaries of certain places, so he could be reached by the message of revelation that would be entrusted to Israel. I believe that is the meaning of the two verses quoted above.

In vs. 10 of this chapter the writer commences the genealogy of Shem, obviously with the purpose of pointing to the birth of Abram and God's call upon his life. So vs. 9 seems to be the right place to draw the line between the post-diluvian period and the life of Abraham, which will be our next chapter.

THE LIFE OF ABRAHAM.

A CENTURY OF FAITH.

Ch.11:10 - 25:10

Although the name Abram, who was later to become Abraham, is not mentioned until Ch. 11: 26 it is obvious that his story starts with the genealogy of Shem, which is given beginning with vs.10.

Moses goes first back to the tree he had started in chapter 10:21. There he traces the descendants of Shem up to the birth of Peleg and his brother Joktan. Here the intent is to show the continuation not so much of generations as of the promise God had given to Eve, which ran via Arphaxad to Abraham.

As in chapter 5, where the genealogy from Adam through Shem is given, there is here, too, a discrepancy between the numbers in the Hebrew text and the Samaritan and Septuagint texts. According to *The Pulpit Commentary* there are 292 years between the flood and the birth of Abraham, if we follow the Hebrew text. The Septuagint comes to total of 1270 years. The latter also has the name of Kainan between Arphaxad and Salah, which adds another 130 years. Luke follows the Septuagint and inserts Cainan as the son of Shelah in Luke 4:35. Abraham would have received the call of God 367 years after the flood. The commentary admits though that the calculations are rather uncertain.

There are two striking features in the list that is given to us from vs.10 through 26. One is that the pungent little phrase "and he died," which is repeated five times in chapter 5, is lacking here. Of course it is implied in the sentence that mentions that the person lived for so many years. But the sting seems to be taken out of it. On the other hand the life span of the patriarchs becomes shorter and shorter. Shem lives to be 600 years old, Nahor dies when he is "only" 148, Terah dies at the age of 205. This must be attributed to the effects of the flood, which changed the conditions on earth to the point where longevity was finished.

It seems that Moses was also impressed with the life span of the pre-flood people that he felt it necessary to emphasize that although some of them lived close to a millennium, they died also. When human life gets limited to the "four score," death is so close there is no need to mention it any more.

Abraham's immediate history commences with his father Terah. There has been some debate as to how old Terah was when Abraham was born. Ch. 11: 26 says: "After Terah had lived 70 years, he became the father of Abram, Nahor and Haran." *The Pulpit Commentary reasons* that since Abraham was 75 years old when Terah died, Terah must have been in his 130th year at the birth of Abraham. (See chapter 12:4).

²¹⁹ Deut. 32:8

²²⁰ Acts 17:26,27

Obviously, Terah's sons are mentioned in the order of their spiritual importance, not in the order of their birth.

Jews, Christians and Muslims claim Abraham as their father: the first and the last group in a physical sense and the Christians in a spiritual sense. As Christians we identify strongly with the Jews in our claim. The Muslim claim leads to Abraham via Ishmael. The Quran goes so far to apply some of the biblical accounts pertaining to Isaac as having actually happened to Ishmael. Muslims believe that Abraham sacrificed Ishmael on mount Moriah. The problem is, of course, that everybody believed otherwise until the Quran was written thirty centuries later.

The Apostle Paul calls him "the father of all who believe" (Rom.4: 11). The history of Abraham's life of faith spans one whole century. We read in Ch. 12: 4 that he was seventy-five years old when he left Haran and Ch. 25: 7 tells us that he died at the age of one hundred seventy-five. We shall see that this century of faith was not a smooth rising line, but a wavy curve with as many downs as ups. Abraham doubted as much as he believed. But at some moments his faith rose above everything else and looking over the history of the world we can still see those peaks.

In Ch. 11: 31 we read: "Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and together they set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan. But when they came to Haran, they settled there." If we put this verse next to Stephen's words in Acts 7:2-4 - "The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran. 'Leave your country and your people,' God said, 'and go to the land I will show you.' "So he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. After the death of his father, God sent him to this land where you are now living," we come to the interesting conclusion that God called Abraham, but that his father took the initiative. Evidently, when we read in the beginning of chapter 12 that God called Abraham, Moses takes a step back, like he did in the previous chapters. Stephen did not invent a new interpretation of this portion of Scripture; he gave the generally accepted tradition of the Jewish rabbi's.

The call came to Abraham in Ur of the Chaldeans. Abraham must have told his father about this and Terah decided to keep the initiative and go also. I do not know what Abraham could have done at this point, but it turned out that when his father started to obey the call that had come to Abraham himself, they got stuck somewhere along the way. God had not called Terah. God never calls 'the old man' to use a New Testament term. But the old man will do everything in his power to keep the initiative. Terah's move was not an act of surrender to the will of God. It was a concession to the will of God, so he could keep the lead himself.

The spiritual lesson in this is abundantly clear. Our human nature will make concessions to the will of God instead of acts of surrender. Our old man has to die, because it never surrenders.

Both the NIV and the KJV say: "(Now) the LORD had said (un) to Abram...," which puts the actual call before the beginning of chapter 12. This is consistent with Stephen's version of the event. The verse also says: "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you." But when Abram got up to leave, his father's household left with him.

There seem to be some discrepancies in the story. In Ch. 11: 31 we read: "Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and together they set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan. But when they came to Haran, they settled there." It seems that they knew where they were going. But in Heb.11: 8 we get the impression that Abraham left blindly. "By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going." It is of course true that Abraham did not know where he was going, even though God may have told him that he was to go to Canaan. He had never been there before.

The second problem is the blood relationship between Abraham and Sarah. In Ch. 20: 12 Abraham explains to Abimelech: "... she really is my sister, the daughter of my father though not of my mother; and she became my wife." But in Ch. 11: 29 we read: "Abram and Nahor both married. The name of Abram's wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor's wife was Milcah; she was the daughter of Haran, the father of both Milcah and Iscah." Some commentators believe that Sarai is identical with Iscah, which would make Sarah the daughter of Haran and not of Terah. Sarah would then be Abraham's niece, not his half-sister. In Hebrew culture the terms "father," "sister" and others were used in a much wider sense than in our Western culture. That may be the answer. We will talk about Abraham's deceit regarding Sarah later on.

As we saw, Terah took the initiative when God called his son Abram. His motives may have been more pure than we have given him credit for so far. He may have had the sincere desire to escape the environment of idolatry in which he and his family were living.

In the group that left Ur to set out for Canaan, there is no mention of Lot's wife. He may still have been very young and unmarried. The first time Mrs. Lot is mentioned is at the destruction of Sodom. It is possible that she was from that area and that Lot married her after arriving in Sodom.

Since the location of Ur is uncertain, we do not know how far the group traveled before they reached Haran. It could be as little as twenty-five miles. When Terah started to obey God's call that was directed to Abraham, he did not get very far. This seems a satanic effort to hinder the plan of God to continue His promise through Abraham. But the only thing the enemy could do was slow down the process, not defeat the plan.

We read in Ch. 11: 31 "...together they set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan. But when they came to Haran, they settled there." The intent was to reach Canaan, but they got stuck almost before they started out. They not only stopped in Haran, they settled there for a period that may have been as long as sixty years. There is a difference of opinion regarding the age of Terah when Abraham was born. If Terah was 70 at the birth of Abraham, he must have survived the departure for Haran by 60 years, since Abraham's age at his arrival in Canaan is given as 75. But if Terah was 145, as some believe, it is hard to tell. At any rate Abraham left immediately upon the death of his father at Haran.

CHAPTER TWELVE

"The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." (Ch. 12:1-3).

All three translations: NIV, KJV and RSV put the call of God to Abraham in the past. "The LORD had said..." This concurs with Stephen's testimony in Acts 7:2 - "The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran." However long the waiting period in Haran was, it must have been very frustrating to Abraham to have to wait so long before he was physically able to start moving toward the goal that God had shown him. At the death of his father he is finally free to obey the call of the Lord and to go.

I have had a somewhat similar experience shortly after my conversion. During a campaign by Youth for Christ I felt the Lord called me to go into full time service, but my father opposed the idea and wanted me to get a job. I obeyed him, thinking that God could overrule my dad's objection. He did and about one and a half years later my father passed away. When he died, I knew that I had to start looking for a place to get some formal Bible training and I finally ended up in Brussels, Belgium.

The more I look at the content of God's call to Abraham, the more I believe he must have been frustrated in his waiting in Haran. If God had only told him "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you," it would have been bad enough, but all those promises about blessings without end were included in that call and they were put on hold at the same time.

At first glance it does not seem that much more is involved than the moving of one man and his family from one country to another. At this point it does not look like an event of historic proportions. Abraham probably had no visions of the birth of the Son of God in this world, of the coming of the Holy Spirit upon man and the birth of the Church, when he pulled the door of his house shut behind him for the last time. Or rather when Terah shut the door. Yet Abraham's leaving of Ur was an event of cosmic and eternal proportions, similar to Noah's entering of the ark. It was the end of one dispensation and the beginning of another. (You would almost think I am a dispensationalist when you read these words!)

So it wasn't in Canaan that God told Abraham: "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." It was while he was still living in Ur. He must have committed these words to memory and repeated them to himself during all those years. And so he must have passed them on to Isaac and so finally they came to Moses, who wrote them down centuries later.

How Abraham received this call we are not told. He may have had a dream in which he heard the voice, or God may have spoken to him in an audible way. In Abraham's experience this was the first of a series of 'theophanies' or divine appearances that would reoccur during his life. The important part is that there was no doubt in his mind as to who had spoken to him. When God speaks you know it. C. S. Lewis says so much in his book *Till We have Faces*.

The way it written the Word of God comes back to him from the past and he realizes that this is the moment at which they take effect. There is a possibility that what is given here as one call and one promise did actually come to Abraham in parts and at different times. But we have no way of knowing this. Obviously the call for departure stems from the time in Ur. But it could be that the blessing wasn't heard until he arrived in Canaan. Even if this is not the case and if the whole came as one call, then the part will only have gained significance in Abraham's experience as he proceeded and found himself in situations where they could be applied.

The blessing can be divided in three parts: 1. The physical aspect; 2. the political aspect and 3. the spiritual aspect.

1. The physical aspect. "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you." At whatever time this promise came, there was a moment that Abraham realized that it was not coming through. The key to becoming a great nation was to have at least one child. And so far he had none. As the years went by it became obvious that Sarah could not or would had have any children. Living in time and space as we all do, Abraham could not see the end from the beginning and the reality with which he had to live, was that this promise was not going to be true. He was going to go down in history as the man who died without leaving behind children. That meant he was not going to go down in history at all. Nobody would remember him. It was the equivalent of being lost for eternity.

We do not need much imagination to see how the devil will have used this in Abraham's life. He had left Ur of the Chaldeans to follow the call of the only true God and it turned out that he had betted on the wrong horse.

2. The political aspect. "I will make your name great and you will be a blessing" He came into a land where nobody knew him. We read in vs. 6 - "At that time the Canaanites were in the land." The Canaanites must have been the offspring of Ham, according to Ch. 10:6, 15-19. For Abraham that was the wrong branch of Noah's children. However was he going to take a prominent position among those people and become a source of blessing to them?

3. The spiritual aspect. "I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." Abraham may have drawn the conclusion from this part of the blessing that he was in the line with the offspring that God had promised to Eve. The hope of eternal life must still have been very much alive in his days. If we find it still alive among the tribes of Irian Jaya, Indonesia, forty centuries later, it must surely not have been forgotten at Abraham's time. So Abraham must have believed this to mean that his son would be the Messiah. We can imagine how this promise must have added to the agony when no child was forthcoming.

But at the moment Abraham entered Canaan, he must have been full of expectations. The mention in vs.5 of all the possession and all the people they acquired in Haran seems an indication that there stay there had not been a brief one. Even at this point Lot's wife is not mentioned; so it could be that he did not get married until after they arrived in Canaan.

Abraham's obedience at this point is captured in the words of vs.4 and 5 - "he set out from Haran. They set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there." Finally, so many years after God first called him in Ur, he gets to the place where God wants him to be. We read that, after traveling through the land, he first settles at Sechem, at "the site of the great tree at Moreh." How great the tree was, we are not told. It may not have measured up to the redwood trees of California, but we have no way of knowing.

We are told that the Canaanites lived there at that time. So Abraham has arrived, but the place is occupied. He receives divine confirmation, however, that this is the place that God has earmarked for him. In Ch. 12:7 we read: "The LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him."

As far as we can tell this is the first time since Ur that God speaks to Abraham. He knows that he is at the place where God wants him to be. Again we do not know in what form the theophany came to him. But Abraham marks the place of God's appearance with the building of an altar. Which means that he brought a sacrifice. From the word of God to Abraham it is clear that he himself will not possess any of the land. It is also clear that there will be offspring. And the first part of the promise hinges on the second. It is especially this second part which play the main role in Abraham's life. This is going to be his main hope and the source of his greatest temptations.

The building of the altar has a double function. It is a physical reminder of a spiritual experience. Here God spoke to him. The devil often attacks in the realm of our spiritual experiences by telling us that they lack physical reality and therefor they must belong to the realm of our fantasies. By building a physical reminder, the altar, Abraham prevents this kind of attack. Secondly, by building and altar and bringing a

sacrifice, Abraham proclaims his own death before God. The sacrifice dies in his place. Only on the basis of total surrender is fellowship with God possible.

The mention that he built an altar “to the LORD who had appeared to him,” seems to indicate that Abraham is in the process of getting to know God.

There is no mention of a theophany at Bethel. Abraham takes the initiative here to call upon the Name of YHWH. No reason is given for the move. Most likely Abraham was forced into a nomadic kind of existence because of the availability of grazing grounds for his herds. More likely though did he want to see the land that the Lord had promised to his offspring.

The building of the altar is a reminder to us of the difference and similarity between Abraham’s way to approach God and ours. Abraham could not just go into God’s presence, without bringing a sacrificial animal, which he had to provide himself. For us the sacrifice has been provided in Jesus Christ. In a certain way this may have made Abraham more realistic in his relationship with God. Because we have been provided for, we often go to God as if no sacrifice were needed. On the other hand is our entrance into God’s presence unlimited and more real than Abraham’s. The blood of the sacrificial animal provided a covering for Abraham’s sin, which made his presence before God tolerable. We have been washed of our sins and have been accepted by God in Jesus Christ without any reservation.

We are not told what kind of sacrifice Abraham brought. It could be that the differentiation of five kinds we read about in Leviticus did not exist yet in Abraham’s days. Abraham’s sacrifice may have been a combination of the four bloody sacrifices Leviticus ch. 1-7 mentions. If this is true we should feel ourselves closer to Abraham. We enter into the presence of the Lord, because Jesus Christ is the sacrifice for our sin and our guilt; He is our peace offering and our burnt offering. The fact that it is easier for us to approach God harbors the danger of easy thinking on our part. We should never lose sight of the altar when we pray.

Then we read that Abraham called upon the name of the LORD. The first appearance of God to Abraham after his arrival at Sechem must have been a profound and moving experience for Abraham. Abraham probably wanted to catch some of that experience again, but God did not answer or appear to him. We all have to learn to build altars to the LORD, whether He appears to us or not. Our fellowship with Him has nothing to do with the feeling of His closeness or with any other feeling. The reality of it is a matter of faith.

Finally, Abraham’s building of an altar at the various places he visited may have been an effort to lay the foundation for the fulfillment of God’s promise that Abraham’s descendants would inherit the land. Altars make good foundation stones for the fulfillment of God’s promises to us.

The verses 9-20 recount the first major failure of Abraham’s faith and the damage done to his testimony. We may not sit in judgment over Abraham, because without the grace of God, we have no guarantee that we would have done any better. The famine was a factor beyond Abraham’s control. But his reaction to it was not. Up till now Abraham has traveled around in fellowship with God, but when hunger threatens we read of no altar being built or any prayer offered. The move to Egypt was not part of God’s plan with his life. If it was, the deal he made with Sarah was most obviously not.

The Pulpit Commentary remarks at this point: “No defence can be offered for a man who, merely through dread of danger to himself, tells a lie, risks his wife’s chastity, puts temptation in the way of his neighbors, and betrays the charge to which the Divine favour had summoned him” (Dykes).

I believe the situation was worse than Mr. Dykes puts it. We are not looking at one single incident to which Abraham reacted wrongly. Not only did he do the same thing twice, but it seems that there was an arrangement had been made between Abraham and Sarah that would take effect automatically every time the supposed danger to Abraham’s life would occur. We read in Ch. 20:13 that Abraham explains to Abimelech: “And when God had me wander from my father’s household, I said to her, ‘This is how you can show your love to me: Everywhere we go, say of me, ‘He is my brother.’ ““ We would almost say ‘so much for Abraham’s faith!’ This seems to blow Heb.11: 8 out of the window: “By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.”

Abraham was scared, because he did not lean on God’s promise. His faith had not been tested yet by the postponement of the birth of Isaac. But God had made it clear to him that his offspring would inherit the land. It shouldn’t have taken him too long to realize that at least as long as Sarah was not pregnant his life was not in danger.

But I can’t imagine what this arrangement must have done to the relationship between Abraham and Sarah. According to Eph.5: 25 “Husbands (should) love (their) wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.” Which means that a man should be willing to give his life to protect his wife. This

certainty should be the basis for the wife's security upon which a marriage is built. But Abraham demanded that his wife prostitute herself, because he was afraid to die. How Sarah must have despised him in her heart. Peter says that Sarah called Abraham "her master" (I Pet.3: 6). There is more irony in these words than the surface shows.

But as we said earlier, we should not sit in judgment upon Abraham. There are few examples in the world of husbands who were willing to give their lives for their wives. Also it shows that you can be a hero of faith like Abraham, who is called the father of all who believe, and be full of fear and trembling.

There is no proof that Sarah's honor was violated in a physical way. Most commentaries agree that the period of purification for a woman who was brought into the king's harem was a long one. So most likely the fraud was discovered before Sarah was taken to Pharaoh's bed. But that did not excuse Abraham. It was not because of his arrangements that Sarah was kept pure if she was. The deceit was only overruled by the grace of God.

We are spared the details of Sarah's humiliation in Pharaoh's court. Evidently, it was long enough, so that God could inflict serious diseases upon the king's household. The magicians must have gone to work to find out what caused the sickness and the problems was traced to Sarah. Divine guidance must have helped those men. After a period of time Pharaoh knows the cause of his problems and he calls Abraham. In the meantime Abraham prospers because of his deceit. Most of his riches in slaves and cattle date from this period. Pharaoh probably paid a bride price. Hagar was probably added to his household at this point. I suppose all this must have pricked Abraham's conscience.

It is not clear to me how Abraham figured that he would ever be able to leave Egypt with his wife. Vs.10 tells us that Abraham planned to live in Egypt 'for a while.' The KJV and RSV use the word 'sojourn.' Abraham probably started to turn again to the Lord at this point. The verses 18-20 show us the humiliating way Abraham was kicked out of the country. The fact that he did not have to pay back anything only added to the humiliation. We read: "So Pharaoh summoned Abram. 'What have you done to me?' He said. 'Why did not you tell me she was your wife? Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her to be my wife? Now then, here is your wife. Take her and go!' Then Pharaoh gave orders about Abram to his men, and they sent him on his way, with his wife and everything he had." He did not even leave a testimony behind!

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

These verses show us how Abraham had to trace his way back to the point where he had last built an altar and called upon the name of the LORD. In his book *My Utmost for His Highest* Oswald Chambers points out how God always leads us back to the point where we left Him. The time spent outside fellowship with God is lost time. Abraham had made no progress. As a matter of fact he had regressed. In material respect he had made considerable gains, but those gains turn out to be more of a hindrance in his life than a help.

Moses paints the picture in full color. We see Abraham leave Egypt and go back to where he came from. We see Sarah join him again. Did they have a happy reunion? We see him being slowed down with his wealth. Rich people do not travel light and fast. And we hear again of Lot. Most likely Lot had witnessed everything and had accompanied them to Egypt although this is not mentioned. We get the impression that progress was slow. Vs.3 and 4 tell us "From the Negev he went from place to place until he came to Bethel, to the place between Bethel and Ai where his tent had been earlier And where he had first built an altar. There Abram called on the name of the LORD." It sounds like a healing process and that is probably what it was. Abraham had injured himself quite badly and he needed time to recover.

We see Abraham retracing his steps both emotionally and spiritually. The mention of the names of places is full of memories. Moses jumps ahead in time by using the name Bethel. It was not until Jacob spent his first night away from home and had his dream that the name Luz was changed into Bethel, house of God. (See Gen. 28:17-29 - "He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven." Early the next morning Jacob took the stone he had placed under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on top of it. He called that place Bethel, though the city used to be called Luz.") It seems as if Moses wants to comment on Abraham's experience by the mention of this name. As if he wants to say that Abraham is going back to the "house of the LORD." There must have been for Abraham the association from the place with the experience with the Lord when he built his first altar there, because he comes again to the point where he calls upon the name of the LORD. This, it seems, he had not done during the time he was away in Egypt.

God can keep us from stumbling, but we have to want to be kept. The only guarantee we have is when we walk in fellowship with Him. Jude's promise is clear in Jude vs.24 - "To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy..." When we do stumble, it is not because we wanted to, or because He did not keep us. We only stumble when we are too far away from Him to hear His soft voice.

Lot's move is the basis for Abraham's intercession for Sodom and Gomorrah, and if it hadn't been for Lot's being taken into captivity, Abraham would never have chased the troops of the kings who invaded Canaan. There seem to be two reasons for Abraham's proposal to split up. The first is a practical one: There are too many animals between the two families in relation to the grazing grounds. The second one is spiritual: The shepherds of the two men fight and the surrounding tribes, the Canaanites and Perizzites, probably had a good time laughing at them. Abraham is concerned about his testimony. And rightly so.

So Abraham brings up the subject to Lot and suggests the separation. Abraham seems to be the gentleman in this matter. He offers Lot the first choice. We do not read that Lot presses Abraham to choose first, although as the elder of the two that would seem the polite thing to do. Lot seems to be too pre-occupied with his own interest to even consider that possibility. From the context we get the impression that Abraham has taken the position that if God has promised to give this land to his offspring, he does not have to concern himself with what part Lot will choose.

Vs.10 gives some interesting insight in the mentality of the two men. Abraham sees the Jordan valley with the plains of Sodom and Gomorrah as well as Lot does. The comparison with 'the garden of the LORD,' that is Paradise, is probably the thought that came into Abraham's head. But Lot compares it to Egypt. So he has been in Egypt and he had been impressed by what he saw. He makes no connection though between the beauty that is before him and Paradise. His mind is more on this world. "Lot looked up and saw that the whole plain of the Jordan was well watered, like the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt, toward Zoar. (This was before the LORD destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.)"

Lot must have known the reputation of the people in Sodom and Gomorrah, but this did not deter him from choosing that part of the country. We still do not know if Lot had a family at this point. We do not read about his wife and daughters until chapter 19. We shall see that Lot was slowly drawn into Sodom. He started out by pitching his tents near Sodom and ended up by living in the city. If he did have a family, he certainly did not give any thought to their spiritual well being. Lot's choice left him a bankrupt man at the end, living in a cave.

Lot is called 'righteous' by Peter. (II Pet.2: 7 "And if he rescued Lot, a righteous man, who was distressed by the filthy lives of lawless men." We'll get back to Lot later.

Abraham had left the choice with Lot, which meant that he let God decide where he was going to live. If I understand the context correctly, Abraham was at Bethel when the separation took place. At this point God appears anew to him. This is the third time. First, he hears the voice of the LORD at Ur, before he leaves his country. Second, the LORD appears to him at Sechem, when he arrives in Canaan. Now again, God assures him that the land he sees will belong to his offspring. After the first call Terah had slowed Abraham down. It wasn't until his father died that Abraham arrived at the place where God wanted him to be. The separation between Lot and Abraham was a kind of a death also. "Partir, c'est mourir un peu." After Lot's departure God invites Abraham to survey his inheritance.

In vs.14 we read: - "The LORD said to Abram after Lot had parted from him, "Lift up your eyes from where you are and look north and south, east and west." And vs.17 goes on by saying: - "Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you."

It seems that Psalm 37 is written for this occasion. The psalm is built around the theme "dwell in the land" and "inherit the land." God says specifically to Abraham "I am giving it to you." Yet he never owed anything 'de facto,' except for the cave he bought to bury Sarah. He possessed by faith.

Some quotation from Psalm 37 will put the issue of Abraham's inheritance in the right perspective. The Psalm speaks about more than the possession of real estate. "Dwell in the land" *and* "inherit the land" are images of a spiritual reality.

Vs.3 "Trust in the LORD and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture.

Vs.9 "For evil men will be cut off, but those who hope in the LORD will inherit the land."

Vs.11 "But the meek will inherit the land and enjoy great peace."

Vs.18 "The days of the blameless are known to the LORD, and their inheritance will endure forever."

Vs.22 "Those the LORD blesses will inherit the land, but those he curses will be cut off."

Vs.27 "Turn from evil and do good; then you will dwell in the land forever."

Vs.29 “The righteous will inherit the land and dwell in it forever.”

Vs.34 “Wait for the LORD and keep his way. He will exalt you to inherit the land; when the wicked are cut off, you will see it.”

The writer to the Hebrews sums it all up in Heb.11; 9,10 where he says: “By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.” And he goes on to say in vs.13-16 “All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.” These verses show us the real significance of what God said to Abraham.

The second part of the promise deals with Abraham’s offspring. God promised Abraham that He will make his offspring ‘like the dust of the earth,’ which God alone can count. Hearing this, Abraham starts moving around till he arrives at Hebron, where the third altar in the country is built. We get the impression that Abraham spent a considerable period of time at Hebron. It is not until chapter 20 that we read about his moving away from there. So actually when God invites Abraham to move around in the land, he settles down at one place and does not move. The restlessness of the early year disappears and makes place for the certainty that what God promised will come to pass. The altar at Hebron becomes a place of rest.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN.

This chapter is one of the more exciting ones in the life of Abraham, as far as action is concerned. It shows us that faith is not necessarily linked with pacifism. Lot becomes the victim of political turmoil of the country. He had settled in Sodom, and when the city is conquered, he and his family are carried away as prisoners of war.

There had evidently been a previous conquest of parts of Canaan by the kings that are mentioned in the first verse of this chapter, since the five kings of the Siddim valley were paying taxes to the first group of monarchs.

Amraphel king of Shinar, Arioch king of Ellasar, Kedorlaomer king of Elam and Tidal king of Goiim were rulers from the countries from which Abraham originated. Shinar is identified by *The Pulpit Commentary* as Babel. Evidently, when Abraham left Ur and later Haran, he followed the trail that the Babylonian army had already traced before him. When we realize the distance from the Euphrates to the Jordan, we have to admit that the establishment of such an empire by the Babylonian kings was no mean feat. They must have had some occupational forces in Canaan to enforce the tax collection during these twelve years. Also when the rebellion starts it must have involved more than just the kings of the Jordan valley, since the Babylonians swept through the whole country from West to East and North to South, before they finally meet the resistance of the kings of the Sodom, Gomorrah and the other plain cities.

In Ch. 14:5-7 we read: “In the fourteenth year, Kedorlaomer and the kings allied with him went out and defeated the Rephaites in Ashteroth Karnaim, the Zuzites in Ham, the Emites in Shaveh Kiriathaim And the Horites in the hill country of Seir, as far as El Paran near the desert. Then they turned back and went to En Mishpat (that is, Kadesh), and they conquered the whole territory of the Amalekites, as well as the Amorites who were living in Hazazon Tamar.”

Apparently Kedorlaomer was the leading figure and probably in this conquest the most powerful of the confederacy.

The four kings of the Siddim valley decide to take the initiative and attack before they are being attacked themselves. Strategically that was a wise move, although it turned out that they were no match for the Babylonian army. They were thoroughly defeated and barely escaped with their lives.

The amazing part of the battle was that they seemed unable to turn the condition of their own country, the area they should know better than their enemy, to their own advantage. They were playing on their own turf, but they were trapped in the bitumen pits, the existence of which they must have known. It should have been the attacking kings who would fall in those pitfalls. The Sodomites must have panicked to the point that they forgot where they were.

We get the impression that the cities were empty when the Babylonian kings arrived there. The only persons carried away seem to have been Lot and his family. Probably the rest of the population was either in the army or had fled. Lot may have taken the attitude that he did not want to be involved in the war, but this did not help. We read in vs.11 and 12 - "The four kings seized all the goods of Sodom and Gomorrah and all their food; then they went away. They also carried off Abram's nephew Lot and his possessions, since he was living in Sodom."

At this point we get some interesting information about Abraham's position in the land where he has settled. We read in vs.13 that he had become allies with some Amorites: Mamre, Eshcol and Aner. Evidently, they had accepted him, and probably these people worshipped God as Abraham did. As we will see later, there were several pockets of believers throughout the country. We meet Melchizedek and Abimelech in chapter 20. Abraham lived as a stranger in the country. He was called "the Hebrew" or the immigrant. Lot had tried to be accepted by the inhabitants of the city of Sodom to the point where he had moved within the city limits. But the people of the city always considered him a stranger. In chapter 19:9 we read: "And they said, 'This fellow came here as an alien, and now he wants to play the judge!'" He never had enough in common with them to be accepted. That is probably why Peter says about Lot that he was "a righteous man, who was distressed by the filthy lives of lawless men (For that righteous man, living among them day after day, was tormented in his righteous soul by the lawless deeds he saw and heard)" (II Peter 2:7,8).

The only way to be accepted by fellow humans is in Jesus Christ. This Old Testament image shows us the truth. In a certain way it was a compliment to Lot's testimony, however weak it may have been that he never was more than an alien in the city of Sodom. Lot does not have much that could serve as an example to follow, but at least the Bible gives him credit for what he had.

What we read in vs.14 and 15 is the condensation of an amazing story. The text says: "When Abram heard that his relative had been taken captive, he called out the 318 trained men born in his household and went in pursuit as far as Dan. During the night Abram divided his men to attack them and he routed them, pursuing them as far as Hobah, north of Damascus."

The KJV puts it more forcefully here: "And when Abram heard that his brother was taken captive, he armed his trained servants, born in his own house, three hundred and eighteen, and pursued them unto Dan." Literally, Lot was not Abraham's brother. But the strength of the bond of blood is better expressed in the word "brother" than in "relative." The Eastern people use the word more generously than we do. When Abraham calls Lot his brother, he expresses the love and compassion that he feels for the man he knows. This love makes him engage in an act of faith that would be foolishness from the viewpoint of war strategy. Abraham has 318 men in his own household who can bear arms. They are probably shepherds who have learned to protect the herds from wild animals and human robbers. Even if we double or triple the number by adding the people that are mentioned in vs.24: Aner, Eshcol and Mamre and those who came with them, we come up with barely 1000 troops of people who are no match for the experienced, victorious army of Kedorlaomer. Abraham had about as much chance as David did when he approached Goliath.

Abraham's campaign, in which he defeats the Babylonian army almost single handedly, is another example of the fact that one man on God's side is a majority. Abraham uses sound military strategy. He divides his small army and attacks during the night, achieving a complete surprise, which routs the large military force of Kadarlaomer. Thus Abraham achieves the impossible. If the LORD would not have been with him, it would have been sheer foolishness even to try such a thing. Obviously, Abraham acted in faith; but he also risked his life in order to save Lot's.

The campaign is a complete success, and at his return Abraham is greeted as a war hero by two parties who are totally opposite of each other: the king of Sodom and the king of Jerusalem, Melchizedek. The latter is a priest of 'El-Elion,' God Most High, the former was a representative of the powers of evil. The priest of the devil is the first one to congratulate Abraham with his victory, but Melchizedek dominates the picture.

The appearance of Melchizedek has given rise to all kinds of speculations about him. Some of this is due to the fact that David mentions him in Ps.110: 4 - "The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind: 'You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.'" If it hadn't been for the prophecy of this psalm we would probably never have heard of him again. But the writer to the Hebrews picks up the thread in a very forceful argument about the royal priesthood of Christ in Heb. 7. Especially the sentence in Heb.7: 3 - "Without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, like the Son of God he remains a priest forever," has given rise to the speculation that Melchizedek was not a human being, born of earthly parents, but maybe even an appearance of Christ before His incarnation. This kind of

hermeneutics is too fantastic to consider and there is no basis for this in the context. There is no mention of the ancestry of the king of Sodom either, but nobody has ever suggested that his was a satanic being in human form.

That Melchizedek was a type of Christ cannot be denied. The quotations of Ps.110 and Heb.7 leave no doubt about this. But this should not distract us to the point where we cannot look at him properly within the context of Genesis 14. He is called a king and a priest of God. The combination of these two offices was forbidden in Israel. The priests of the Old Testament were to be descendants of Levi. From the story of Uzziah in II Chron.26: 16-20 we learn that the Israelite were kings forbidden to perform priestly functions. (II Chron.26: 16-20 - "But after Uzziah became powerful, his pride led to his downfall. He was unfaithful to the LORD his God, and entered the temple of the LORD to burn incense on the altar of incense. Azariah the priest with eighty other courageous priests of the LORD followed him in. They confronted him and said, 'It is not right for you, Uzziah, to burn incense to the LORD. That is for the priests, the descendants of Aaron, who have been consecrated to burn incense. Leave the sanctuary, for you have been unfaithful; and you will not be honored by the LORD God.' Uzziah, who had a censer in his hand ready to burn incense, became angry. While he was raging at the priests in their presence before the incense altar in the LORD's temple, leprosy broke out on his forehead. When Azariah the chief priest and all the other priests looked at him, they saw that he had leprosy on his forehead, so they hurried him out. Indeed, he himself was eager to leave, because the LORD had afflicted him.")

The argument of the writer to the Hebrews is mainly built on the fact that Jesus combines the offices of king and priest again in Israel, as Melchizedek did in the days of Abraham. "The order of Melchizedek" is the order of priesthood that differs from the order of Aaron.

The appearance of Melchizedek also proves that there were pockets of believers throughout the land as we mentioned before. The alliance between Abraham and Mamre and also the incident with Abimelech in chapter 20 seem to be indications of this. That is probably the reason why God says that the sin of the Amorites had not yet reached its full measure at that time. As we read in Ch. 15:16 - "In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure."

So Melchizedek appears, brings out bread and wine as refreshments for the troops and blesses Abraham. And Abraham decides to give him a tithe of the spoil.

It is tempting to see a picture of the celebration of the Lord's supper in Melchizedek's treat for the men, but we may be reading too much in this text if we do this. On the other hand I remember Guido Gezelle's little poem in Flemish:

Who can see corn and not remember what precious food it is,
and not remember
Who can see wine and not remember what precious drink it is,
and not remember
Who can be a Christian and not remember
how he profits by Jesus' flesh and blood,
and not remember.

So even if we do not want to make a spiritual application out of this, it may remind us of the fact that Jesus brought us bread and wine, but that was before the victory. But the reminder of His blood is part of the victory. "They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb..." (Rev.12: 11).

Obviously Melchizedek wanted to express his gratitude to Abraham. The defeat of the Babylonian army meant peace and security for the little kingdom of Salem as well as for the rest of the country. Melchizedek recognizes the source of the victory. He knows that humanly speaking Abraham did not have a chance to make a dent in the political situation. If it hadn't been for the LORD Abraham would have been cut to pieces himself.

We read the blessing in Ch. 14:19-20 - "And he blessed Abram, saying, "Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. And blessed be God Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand." We do not know how much Melchizedek knew about Abraham's call, but he must have been aware of Abraham's relationship with God. Abraham had a testimony among the people of the area. The military victory was proof of the genuineness of this testimony. Abraham did not just talk piously; he had demonstrated that the God he served was stronger than Kedorlaomer and all his army.

We cannot overemphasize the magnitude of Abraham's victory. Here was an insignificant immigrant, with a small group of shepherds, less than 400, who readjusted the political balance of a whole

country simply because he had put his faith in God. I remember Stalin's cynical remark to Churchill when the two leaders discussed the military situation in Europe after Hitler had attacked Russia and Churchill mentioned the Pope. Stalin said: "And how many divisions does he have?" I know the image is not a perfect illustration, and I certainly do not want to equate the Pope with Abraham as a hero of faith (not Pius XII).

In the Netherlands political and religious freedom was obtained because of the faith of William of Orange, who confessed that he had made an alliance with "the Potentate of potentates." And although his military campaign against Spain was ineffective, it was the small country that won the war.

We have the privilege of being able to see the encounter between Abraham and Melchizedek in a historical perspective. Abraham was a link in the history of salvation. God had called him out of the land of Ur to form a nation to which He wanted to entrust the revelation of Himself in this world. The spiritual climate of the world was fast declining. Abraham and God's promise to him was what Noah and the ark were at the previous stage. But now here comes a man who is outside this plan of salvation. He is a member of a disappearing generation that still calls upon "El Elyon," God the Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. None of the two knew exactly who they were in God's plan, but they recognized each other in the LORD.

So Melchizedek pronounces a double blessing. He blesses Abraham in the Name of "El Elyon" and he blesses "El Elyon" for giving the victory to Abraham. Interestingly it is in this context that the writer to the Hebrews says: "And without doubt the lesser person is blessed by the greater." (Heb.7: 7). Obviously the author does not refer to Melchizedek's blessing of God. Even as a type of Christ, Melchizedek was not greater than the Father.

The fact that man can bless God is still a mystery to me. It will probably be explained in Heaven.

Then Abraham, recognizing Christ in Melchizedek, so to speak, gives him a tithe of the spoil of the campaign. What is meant is probably the goods taken from the Babylonian army, not the stuff that was taken away by the Babylonians from the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. That is the next item on the list. We do not know if tithing was customary at that time or whether Abraham invented it. It is the first mention of the custom in the Bible. In giving his tithe to Melchizedek Abraham wants to honor God, of whom this man was the representative. In doing this Abraham acknowledges that God was the owner of everything. The handing over of the tithe is a symbolic recognition of God's right over all.

Jacob knew about the custom, since he promised to tithe before the Lord, after he had the vision at Bethel. (Ch. 28:22). The Nation of Israel was instructed to tithe from their harvest and their flock.²²¹ They were allowed to convert their tithes into money and give the money instead of the crop or the animals.²²² Hezekiah revives the custom in The Book of Chronicles.²²³ And in Malachi, God challenges the people by saying: " 'Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,' says the LORD Almighty, 'and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.' "²²⁴

That the practice was still in vogue we learn from the Gospels.²²⁵ The writer of Hebrews elaborates on this giving of the tithe by Abraham to Melchizedek to prove that the prophecy of Psalms 110:4 "The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind: 'You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.' " was fulfilled in Jesus Christ, Who is our high priest. But this point is beyond the study of the life of Abraham, which is before us.

Enter the king of Sodom. His proposal to Abraham is very generous. He has suffered more than Melchizedek in this war. At least we do not read that the Babylonian kings had raided Salem. But Abraham turns down his offer, saying that he has bound himself by an oath, not to accept anything. The NIV says: "But Abram said to the king of Sodom, 'I have raised my hand to the LORD, God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth, and have taken an oath' ". The RSV seems clearer and more direct at this point: "But Abram said to the king of Sodom, 'I have sworn to the LORD God Most High, maker of heaven and earth.'" Abraham must have made this decision when he set out to pursue the enemy. I do not know if he could have foreseen the offer the king of Sodom made, but evidently he had made up his mind that he did not do this to

²²¹ Lev.27: 30-32

²²² Deut.14:23-25

²²³ See II Chron.31:5,6

²²⁴ Mal.3:10

²²⁵ Matt. 23:23 and Luke 11:42; 18:12.

increase his wealth. Abraham must have known about the wickedness of Sodom and the other cities of the plain, but whether this consideration entered into his decision is doubtful. After all, he could not have anticipated the offer of the king.

It seems atypical for a man with a reputation, as the king of Sodom had to make such a generous offer. It would have been more in line with the sin and greed of the city of which he was the ruler if he had asked for a tenth for himself, or even if he had offered the people to Abraham and kept the goods. On the other hand we have to admit that a king without subjects does not have much of a kingdom.

At this point, if not earlier, Abraham must have thanked the Lord for letting him take the oath. Moral choices are so much easier to make when we have committed ourselves to the Lord before. Abraham must have realized the strings attached to the offer. The mention of the “thread or the thong of a sandal” *sounds* like a good Old Testament equivalent of our modern expression “strings attached.” There is no such thing as a free meal.

If we see in Melchizedek a type of Christ, as David and the author of Hebrews do, we may take the king of Sodom to be a type of the antichrist, or Satan himself. I remember Bruno de Leeuw’s sermon about Ch. 14:21-23 years ago at our mission conference. His subject was “the devil’s shoelace.” He argued that if we accept the shoelace, we would get the boot to which it belongs. And if one has the devil’s boot, he will get the leg to which it is attached and he will soon discover that the leg belongs to the body of the devil.

We cannot separate the gift from the giver. It does matter where we get our money from and how we get it. It is better to be poor and belong to the Lord than to be rich and be in the power of the murderer of men.

Abraham’s request that the men who accompanied him be paid from the loot is entirely justified. We are never allowed to be generous at the expense of others.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Chapter 15 is one of the great chapters in the Bible upon which much of the whole of Biblical revelation hinges. Ch. 15:6 “Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness,” *forms* the main body of the doctrine of justification by faith, expounded by the Apostle Paul in his epistles.

This chapter has a couple of ‘firsts’ in the Bible: “The Word of the LORD”; “Fear not!”; “I am your shield” and “Sovereign LORD,” all in the first two verses.

According to Adam Clarke some commentators make quite a bit of the expression “The Word of the LORD,” comparing it to John 1:1 where Christ is introduced as “ho logos.” I do not think this thought merits that much emphasis since all the Old Testament “theophania” are appearances of Christ before His incarnation. But the expression is remarkable. In this context, however, I do not think it means more than that Abraham heard the voice of God speaking to him.

Obviously, the content of this chapter is spread out over at least two days. In vs.5 God shows Abraham the stars, which means that it was evening and in vs.12 the sun was setting, which must have been the next evening, if not later.

The chapter starts out by reminding us of the events described in the previous chapter. “After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: ‘Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.’” “After this” refers to the victory over the Babylonian kings. We would expect that Abraham would be riding the crest at this point. But human nature, being what it is, has a tendency to feel down after reaching a summit. We gather from the way God addresses Abraham that he felt depressed. Satan knows that the best time to attack is after a victory. There is no better remedy for a depression than an encounter with the Word of God.

God addresses Abraham very tenderly with “Do not be afraid.” Fear is the fruit of sin. That is why every confrontation with the holiness of God causes fear in a human heart. When Isaiah saw God’s holiness he cried out “Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.” (Is.6: 5) But John says in I John 4:18 “There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.” All demonstrations of fear come from a lack of love. But perfect love is a fruit that can only grow as a result of forgiveness of sin and justification.

There are many instances in the Bible where the sentence “Do not be afraid” occurs. I count seven in connection with the appearance of God or of an angel to men: Dan.10: 12; Matt.28: 5,10; Luke 1:13,30;

2:10; Rev.1: 17. Since our reaction as a sinful human being to God's holiness is fear, He assures us of His love and takes away our fear.

One of the most striking examples is perhaps when Gideon realizes that the person he talked with is the Angel of the LORD in Judges 6:22-24, where we read: *"When Gideon realized that it was the angel of the LORD, he exclaimed, 'Ah, Sovereign LORD! I have seen the angel of the LORD face to face!' But the LORD said to him, 'Peace! Do not be afraid. You are not going to die.' So Gideon built an altar to the LORD there and called it The LORD is Peace."*

So Abraham must have had that most human reaction to the encounter with the LORD, feeling as if he was about to die. And the LORD wrapped His arms of love around him and told him not to be afraid. I presume that this experience must have done more for Abraham's faith than anything else. That is why he came to believe God and had God's righteousness imputed to him. So he became the father of all who believe.

Secondly God proposes to cover Abraham with Himself. He says: "I am your shield." In the book of Psalms the LORD is several times represented as a shield that covers the believer. Some examples: Psalms 3:3 "But you are a shield around me, O LORD; you bestow glory on me and lift up my head." Psalms 5:12 "For surely, O LORD, you bless the righteous; you surround them with your favor as with a shield."

Psalms 7:10 "My shield is God Most High, who saves the upright in heart."

Psalms 18:2,30 "The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge. He is my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold." "As for God, his way is perfect; the word of the LORD is flawless. He is a shield for all who take refuge in him."

Psalms 28:7 "The LORD is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in him, and I am helped. My heart leaps for joy and I will give thanks to him in song."

Ps 84:11 "For the LORD God is a sun and shield; the LORD bestows favor and honor; no good thing does he withhold from those whose walk is blameless."

Psalms 119:114 "You are my refuge and my shield; I have put my hope in your word."

Psalms 144:2 "He is my loving God and my fortress, my stronghold and my deliverer, my shield, in whom I take refuge, who subdues peoples under me."

I do not think we will ever fully understand what it means that God covers us with His own person. It means that every arrow that is shot at us will hit Him instead of us. It means perfect protection and safety. It also means that when people see us, they see God. Unbelievable!

Both the NIV and the KJV say, "I am.... your very great reward" or "I am.... thy exceeding great reward." The RSV translates "I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." Needless to say that I favor the first two translations. God does not only give us a reward, He Himself is the reward. A greater gift does not exist.

Not only does God protect us; He gives Himself to us. What this means we see in Jesus Christ. As I John 3:16; 4:9 and 10 state: "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins." What more could we wish for?

Abraham's reaction to God's offer of Himself sounds rather negative. He does not seem to realize the eternal character of God's promise and the heavenly quality of it. He is more concerned with the situation on earth. It seems that there is incongruence between things in heaven and things on earth. God promises Abraham, so to speak, to be seated with Him in the heavenlies. But Abraham is concerned with what will happen with his possessions on earth. Yet Abraham is right. Things on earth will have to be congruous to the heavenly reality. Abraham was more right than he knew himself. If Abraham would not have a son, born from his own wife, the Word of God would not become flesh and the earth would remain an unredeemed planet.

That is why God answers Abraham seriously and promises him that he will not have to name Eliezer of Damascus his only heir. This promise is confirmed by an object lesson in astronomy. God takes Abraham outside. So the previous conversation must have taken place while Abraham was sitting in his tent, having his devotions. An inner chamber is ideal for quiet time. It is a good place to hear the voice of the Lord. If we can spend time alone with the Word of God, like Abraham did, we will also be healed of our fear and receive the assurance that God pledges Himself to us, imparts Himself to us as our reward.

We do not know what Abraham saw exactly when he looked up into the starry skies. The oriental skies are sometimes overwhelmingly clear and beautiful. In Abraham's time no pollution impeded the view.

We do not know how much knowledge of astrology Abraham possessed. He came from Babylon, where the art was advanced and probably practiced popularly. He may have seen and understood more than most modern men would, looking up in the sky. He did not know David's poem yet, but he must have had similar feeling as David when he sang: "When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?" (Ps.8: 3,4). Somehow we see more of God and of ourselves in the dark than in broad daylight!

In spite of our present knowledge of the universe is it hard for us to keep before our eyes the relationship between ourselves and the rest of creation. We have come far indeed if we realize that what we have in common with the rest of the universe is our Creator. Man is as much 'the work of your fingers' (as David puts it) as the moon and the stars. David felt small and insignificant because the immensity of the universe, but in a certain way man is greater and more significant. The Word did not become a star or a planet; it became flesh, that is man.

I do not know if Abraham had an inkling of the fact that his offspring would be the fulfillment of God's promise to Eve. Probably the hope for the return of eternal life as we see it presently still alive in the primitive tribes of the world was the predominant part of man's hope in Abraham's day. So I would not be amazed if Abraham had identified "the son coming from his own body" with the Messiah.

"Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness." (Ch. 15:6). This is one of the most amazing verses in the Bible. Paul uses it in Rom.4 and Gal.3: 6 in connection with our justification before God. First we have the fact that Abraham believed that God was going to give him what He had promised. We do not know his exact age at this point, but he was probably in his eighties. The writer to the Hebrews says that Abraham was 'as good as dead' when Isaac was born. That was of course more true poetically than in any other respect; but still it became more and more unlikely that Sarah would get pregnant through Abraham as time passed by.

The most amazing part of this verse, however, is the word "righteousness." *The Pulpit Commentary* says here: "neither for merit and justice, nor as a proof of his probity; but unto and with a view to justification, so that God treated him as a righteous person, not, however, in the sense that he was now 'correspondent to the will of God both in character and conduct,' but in the sense that he was now before God accepted and forgiven, which 'passive righteousness,' however, ultimately wrought in him and 'active righteousness of complete conformity to the Divine will'".

The word righteousness has acquired a broader meaning for us through its New Testament context. What we attribute to the concept was undoubtedly present in root form in the Old Testament, but it would have been impossible for Abraham to completely understand what we understand it to mean in the light of the atonement by our Lord Jesus Christ at the cross of Calvary. That is why we should try to go back and ask ourselves what Abraham understood when God told him that he was righteous.

God must have told Abraham that he was acceptable to Him because of his righteousness; otherwise, this verse would never have appeared in the Bible. Moses could not have made it up. It is too surprising to be a human invention. The experience of fear being taken away, the covering with God's presence as with a shield and the knowledge of the fact that the eternal, omnipotent and holy God would be his reward, must have awakened in Abraham the realization that God accepted him as equal. His faith seems an insignificant token payment in this context. How could anyone do anything but believe if being spoken to by God in such an unmistakable way?

So justification must have been for Abraham an experience. It was not a theological concept and nothing more, like it is often for us.

It was also related to the very practical issues of his life. He lived as a stranger in a foreign land. He had received the guarantee that his offspring would possess that land, but there was a missing link: he had no child. A missing link means the end of the chain. If one ancestor is missing, then there is no further generation. Justification for Abraham meant that God was going to solve this particular problem. If justification does not relate to our present problems, if it is not practical, it is not justification. To be justified by faith in God's promise means that we have the ability to unburden ourselves on God. As I Pet.5: 7 says: "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you."

Vs.7 takes us probably to a different scene, at a different time. It may have been the next day, but that is hard to tell. Abraham has had time to think things over. And when God speaks to him again, he has evidently been assailed by doubts. He may have thought that the previous experience was too good to be true. This is a common phenomenon. At the moment God speaks to us, there is no doubt in our minds, but then the enemy comes and starts poking sticks in our conviction. He tells us that it must have been a dream.

There is no connection between the spiritual and the physical reality of our daily life. And since the latter is the only thing our senses can observe, we start wondering if he may be right.

I remember the story of the farmer who was recently converted. While ploughing his field Satan came and told him that he had imagined things, so he started doubting. But then the joy of his newly found salvation broke through again. At the spot where he knew it was true, he planted a stick. A moment later the enemy tried again, but the farmer showed him the stick and told him to go away. Sometimes our faith needs a stick. Abraham asked God for such a token.

Vs.7 is the clearest proof that Stephen was right, when he said in Acts 7:2 - "The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran. 'Leave your country and your people,' God said, 'and go to the land I will show you.'"

In saying this God goes back to the very beginning when Abraham heard the voice of the LORD for the first time when he was probably still a young man. He sees the many years between Ur and Hebron pass before his eyes, when God tells him that he has arrived at the place to which God called him that far back. But after those many years he still does not possess one square foot of this land. There is just an oral promise; nothing is on paper. So he asks God to give him something in writing.

I do not think Abraham's request was necessarily a sign of unbelief. It did not fit in the same category as Zachariah's refusal to believe when Gabriel told him about the birth of John the Baptist in Luke 1:18-20. where we read: "Zachariah asked the angel, 'How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.' The angel answered, 'I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time.'" Zachariah did not believe in spite of the fact that he saw an angel who talked to him. Abraham knew that what God said was true, but in his spiritual struggle caused by the visible realities of every day life he needed some token to hang on to. That is why God did not reproach him his lack of weakness. God understands the limits of our faith.

The assurance Abraham is given is overwhelming. The ritual that follows seems to have been borrowed from the culture of that time. When a treaty or a covenant was made between parties one or more animals were taken and cut in half; and the people making the treaty would walk between the pieces to confirm the veracity of their promise. *The Pulpit Commentary* refers to the covenant between the sons of Jacob and the Shechemites in Ch. 34 and to a story from Homer's *Iliad*. In Ch. 34, however, we do not find a description of the ritual as it is given here.

The animals Abraham has to bring are those that were later used in the sacrifices prescribed in Leviticus ch. 1-7: a heifer, a goat and a ram, a dove and a young pigeon. This is another proof that the Levitical law was no Mosaic invention or a new ordinance given at that time; it confirmed existing customs, which had been approved by God before.

The animals represent all the offerings mentioned in Leviticus, starting with the guilt offering, the sin offering, the fellowship offering to the burnt offering, which are given in the reversed order in Leviticus. They also emphasize the social status from poor to rich. How much Abraham was able to differentiate, we do not know; but evidently Abraham knew what God expected him to do because without being told, he cuts the animals in half and prepares them as he would have if he had entered into a covenant with a fellow human being.

Then for a while nothing happens, because we read in vs. 11 "Then birds of prey came down on the carcasses, but Abram drove them away." This indicates that the carcasses are exposed to the sun for several hours. Abraham just sits there and watches while God is silent. Abraham may have been wondering why he had to do this. Waiting is the hardest thing a human being can be asked to do. Time goes twice as slow when we have nothing to do. At the end of the day Abraham is tired out, and when the sun goes down, he falls asleep. Then it becomes obvious that God asked him to wait in order to make him feel something of the waiting his offspring would have to do for centuries when they would be enslaved in Egypt.

Also God shares with him some of the terror that they would experience in their slavery. Abraham is asleep, but he is aware of a "dreadful darkness." Very rarely do we understand what it means that God suffers with us. Of course God cannot be afraid, but that does not mean that He does not share our fears and terror. Four centuries before Israel would go into slavery God harbored a dreadful darkness in His heart. That is why He could say to Moses in Ex.3: 7 "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering." And Jesus says to Saul on his way to Damascus: "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." Centuries before Herod issues the decree that the babies in Bethlehem should be massacred, the Holy Spirit grieves with the mothers.

Jer 31:15 “This is what the LORD says: ‘A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because her children are no more.’” Matthew understood the meaning of this prophecy, since he reports in Matt 2:17,18 “Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: ‘A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.’”

C. S. Lewis gives a beautiful illustration of this in his book *The Magicians Nephew* (pg.131) - “.... Are you ready, said the Lion. ‘Yes,’ said Digory. He had had for a second some wild idea of saying ‘I’ll try to help you if you’ll promise to help about my Mother,’ but he realized in time that the Lion was not at all the sort of person one could try to make bargains with. But when he had said ‘Yes,’ he thought of his Mother, and the thought of the great hopes he had had, and how they were all dying away, and a lump came in his throat and tears in his eyes, and he blurted out: ‘But please, please - won’t you - can’t you give me something that will cure Mother?’ Up till then he had been looking at the lion’s great front feet and the huge claws on them; now, in his despair, he looked up at its face. What he saw surprised him as much as anything in his whole life. For the tawny face was bent down near his own and (wonder of wonders) great shining tears stood in the Lion’s eyes. They were such big, bright tears compared with Digory’s own that for a moment he felt as if the Lion must really be sorrier about his Mother than he was himself. ‘My son, my son,’ said Aslan. ‘I know. Grief is great. Only you and I in this land know that yet. Let us be good to one another...’”

When my son Michel (Mitch) had his depression, and I had to take him to Australia to be hospitalized, I cried to the Lord in prayer and asked why this had to happen. My ‘why’ did not receive an answer, but I understood all of a sudden that my grief was a reflection of what God felt Himself about my son. I could not have been comforted more deeply!

Ch. 15:13 “Then the LORD said to him, ‘Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years.’” *The Pulpit Commentary* says about the 400 years: “.... according to the view which is taken of the point of departure for the reckoning of the 400 years.” It also differentiates three different stages in the prophecy about Israel’s time in Egypt: - (1) exile; (2) bondage; (3) affliction. The three together would then add up to 400 years. Stephen quotes this scripture in Acts 7:6 “God spoke to him (Abraham) in this way: ‘Your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years.’” There seems to be an inconsistency in Paul’s figuring of time in Gal 3:16,17, but there the point of departure is “the promises,” which can be dated as the time of the call in Ur or Haran, or the birth of Isaac, or the death of Jacob in Egypt. We read: “The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say ‘and to seeds,’ meaning many people, but ‘and to your seed,’ meaning one person, who is Christ. What I mean is this: The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise.”

We take of course the viewpoint that God gives to Abraham an amazingly detailed prophecy about the future of his descendants. Bible critics will say that this portion was inserted and that it is a proof of Moses’ hindsight, or even worse a mythological justification for the importance of the priesthood, by some priest like Ezra, invented after the return of Israel from the Babylonian captivity. If we do not believe in a God who knows and holds the future, there is no point in reading the Bible or studying the life of Abraham!

If, however, we hold to the inspiration of Scripture, then we can understand how this prophecy must have been a source of comfort and inspiration during the dark and horrible days of Egyptian slavery. People who read their “Bible” at that time must have been greatly strengthened by these words. I believe that God gave this prophecy as much for Abraham’s benefit as for theirs. There is no better source of help and encouragement to turn to in times of severe stress, such as the German occupation of Western Europe, the communist rule in Eastern Europe, China or Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, than the written Word of God.

It was to Abraham, who was a stranger in Canaan, that God said: “Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own...” *Abraham* must have understood this quite well. Yet his circumstances were quite favorable. He was a wealthy man, respected by the people of the area where he lived. But he probably never learned to speak the language without an accent. He knew that he was far away from the place where he was born and where his roots were.

There is some bliss in not knowing the future. There also is a price to pay for becoming a friend of God. Ps 25:14 says: “The secret of the LORD is with them that fear him; and he will shew them his covenant.” (KJV) When God starts sharing His secrets with the man who wants to walk with Him, He shares not only His joys, but also His sorrows. Part of the fulness of the fellowship of the Holy Spirit is that He groans within us. Or as the RSV puts it: “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know

how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.” (Rom.8:26).

God does not only predict Israel’s suffering but also the punishment of the Egyptians and the way in which they will be delivered. They will not leave Egypt as a bunch of outcasts, but as a free and wealthy people who have reason to be proud of themselves. The Israel that left Egypt does not give the impression of having known these scriptures, and if they were familiar with them, they did not believe in them.

It takes special grace and intimate fellowship with God to be guided in our every day life by the written Word of God. Very few of us manage to do that in every day. One of the most typical features of the life of Jesus on earth was the fact that He was directed at every step by what the Bible had said before about his life. The main decisions of his life were based upon biblical prophecy.

See Matt 26:54 “But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?”

Mark 14:49 “Every day I was with you, teaching in the temple courts, and you did not arrest me. But the Scriptures must be fulfilled.”

Luke 24:27 “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.”

John 5:39 “You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me.” His life was based on the understanding of Psalm 40:7 “Then I said, ‘Lo, I come; in the roll of the book it is written of me...’” (RSV).

Our position in this life is, of course, in principle different from the life of Christ. We are not the Word of God incarnated. But yet there is in the attitude of Christ toward the written Word of God a lesson for us to imitate. Scripture has not been written for us as it was for Him. We cannot say that the Scriptures testify about us, as Jesus said to the Pharisees; but that does not mean that its principles, admonitions and promises should not guide us.

In reading these future chapters of the book to Abraham, it must have become clear to Abraham that not having a child who would be the link to future generations would have been an impossibility. It must have strengthened Abraham’s faith considerably. God’s intent in this revelation was not that Abraham would fret about it for the rest of his life. Gen 15:15 “You, however, will go to your fathers in peace and be buried at a good old age,” must have set him at ease and must have taken away the unbearable tension. It is not God’s will that we go through life, burdened by the fate of future generations. Each day has enough with the evil thereof!

It is not clear whether the fourth generation stands for the total time between the giving of this covenant and the exodus, or whether four generations in Egypt are meant. It could be that God is talking here about four centuries as in verse 13. *The Pulpit Commentary* suggests that a generation may stand for 100 years. Quoting Bush it says: “Caleb was the fourth from Judah, and Moses from Levi, and so doubtless many others.” This would indicate that God meant this as an indication of the total time Israel would spend in Egypt. Very significant is the reason given for this delay in Gen 15:16 “for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.”

Sin seems to have an accumulative character in God’s dispensation. This means that God does not only consider certain acts of sin, but that He adds the sins of a lifetime and a generation, or even several generations. When the measure is full, the time of judgment has arrived. We see this exemplified in Jesus terrible prophecy about the generation of His time in Matt.23: 35,36 - “And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. I tell you the truth, all this will come upon this generation.”

We will all be judged not only on the basis of our personal acts, but also in connection with the burden of guilt we share with our generation and with history. God looks upon us as part of mankind, that species of His creation that broke with Him and turned His planet back to chaos. That is why it is so important for us to escape judgment through identification with Jesus Christ and His sacrifice. John 5:24 is much more important than we think. Jesus says: “I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.” The RSV may be clearer on this point: “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears my word and believes him who sent me, has eternal life; he does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.”

The prophecy also sheds light on the background of the conquest of Canaan. Reading the history about Israel’s entry in Canaan, many people miss the point of God’s judgment upon the earlier inhabitants. Israel’s taking of the land was similar in intent as the flood in the days of Noah. It was meant to wipe out evil. The fact that Israel was contaminated by the evil of the land instead of purging the land of evil does not

make the underlying principle invalid. The sins of the inhabitants of Canaan had reached their limit. The measure was full. The land spewed out its inhabitants. The conquest of Canaan by Israel was as much 'an act of God' as the flood and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Ch. 15:17 "When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces." The actual conclusion of the covenant takes place at night, after the sun has gone down. This means that the previous conversation between God and Abraham was held at daytime. About vs.17 the commentary by Jamieson, Faucet and Brown says: "On occasions of great importance, when two or more parties join in a compact, they either observe precisely the same rites as Abram did, or, where they do not, they invoke the lamp as their witness. According to these ideas, which have been from time immemorial engraven on the minds of eastern people, the Lord Himself condescended to enter into covenant with Abram. The patriarch did not pass between the sacrifice and the reason was that in this transaction he was bound to nothing. He asked a sign, and God was pleased to give him a sign, by which, according to Eastern ideas, He bound Himself. In like manner God has entered into covenant with us; and in the glory of the only begotten Son, who passed through between God and us, all who believe have, like Abram, a sign or pledge in the gift of the Spirit, whereby they may know that they shall inherit their heavenly Canaan."

There are speculations as to the significance of the "smoking firepot." Some see it as a symbol of the ovens of Egypt, where the Israelites were doing their forced labor. The KJV translates it as a "smoking furnace." I do not know in how far the idea of an altar would be valid in this context. Probably not. The symbol of the lamp or torch is generally seen as representing the presence of God. The emphasis in the first picture seems to be more on the smoke than on the fire, in the second it is on the light.

The most important point, as Jamieson, Faucet and Brown points out is the fact that God is the only party in the covenant who passes between the pieces of the sacrifice. Thus far in every sacrifice brought, it was man who identified himself with the slain animals as if he was saying, "this animal died in my place. I should have died." But for the first time we see that God identifies Himself with the sacrifice, thus giving the actual and ultimate meaning to it.

God's covenant is one-sided. Man's only obligation is to accept. God binds Himself to man in Jesus Christ for the salvation of the world. I believe this is what Paul says in Gal.3: 20 - "A mediator, however, does not represent just one party; but God is one." The covenant God made with Abraham is one-sided and unconditional. Man has the liberty to reject it, but there are no obligations to be fulfilled. The guarantee is that God identified Himself with the sacrifice. He allowed Himself to be cut in two, like the pieces of the animals, in order to bring fallen mankind back to Himself.

The boundaries of the land that God promised to Abraham were never fully occupied by the nation of Israel. In God's plan Israel was to possess the land between the Nile and the Euphrates. In the days of David and Solomon the limits were practically reached, but never fully as God intended them to be. Man has always been content with less than God has for him. See I Kings 4:21 - "And Solomon ruled over all the kingdoms from the River to the land of the Philistines, as far as the border of Egypt. These countries brought tribute and were Solomon's subjects all his life."

There are several examples in the Old Testament of prophecies that were only partly fulfilled, because man did not claim all that God wanted to give. I remember Corrie ten Boom's words about some missionaries: "They have given all to the Lord, but they have never taken all the Lord has for them." This is much truer in the New Testament dispensation than in the Old. Very few of us live on the heights of the Gospel of Paul's epistle to the Ephesians. This brings us to the end of chapter 15.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

This chapter is another of the low points in Abraham's life. If in chapter 15 we saw Abraham living by the Spirit, to use Paul's expression in Gal.5: 16, here he walks according to the flesh. The moments of defeat seem to be all connected together. We read in vs.1 - "Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian maidservant named Hagar..." If Abraham had not lied to Pharaoh about Sarah, as we saw in chapter 13, there would have been no Hagar in his household. Sin has a way of creeping underground and popping up. There is no mention of faith in God's promise, that Abraham would have a child. It is true that God did not mention Sarah in Ch. 15:4 when He said: "a son coming from your own body will be your heir." But both Sarah and Abraham feel that they should help God to fulfill His promise,

since the situation has come to the point where fulfillment would be impossible from a human viewpoint. Abraham is 85 at this time, which means that Sarah had turned 75.

The chapter is an object lesson in human psychology. The first feature emphasized is impatience. God's promise is taking too long. The factor of "waiting upon the Lord" is completely absent. Yet this is one of the basics of faith. Isaiah 28:16 says: "He that believeth shall not make haste." (KJV)

Secondly, there is a complete absence of the glory of the Lord. The arrangement Sarah proposes is 'make-shift.' It is based upon human customs, that are highly objectionable, if not in the light of that time, then in the light of eternity. Sarah admits that the child of promise should come from her. She does not give Hagar to Abraham as a wife, but as a slave, as an extension of herself. And if and when Hagar gives birth to a son, Sarah plans to claim the child as her own. She understood more about God's promise than meets the eye!

There is a world of reproach in Sarah's words: "The LORD has kept me from having children." This puts the blame for all that follows on God, and it gives a pious excuse for the arrangement Sarah proposes to her husband. We do not know how much nagging Abraham had to endure before he consented. Let's hope he did not give in immediately. But even if he agrees after some arguments and struggle, he remains ultimately responsible for what happens. From this moment of weakness comes the Arab-Israelian confrontation and the Islamic religion. Not waiting on the LORD can have consequences that reach from time into eternity. Vs.2 says clearly "Abram agreed to what Sarai said."

Sarah gave the order to Hagar, and Hagar obeyed as a slave girl obeys her mistress. But as soon as Hagar becomes pregnant the roles are reversed. All of a sudden Hagar becomes conscious of her own importance and that of her unborn child. She realizes that Sarah did not just "borrow her womb" to use a modern expression. Her pregnancy awakens her female instinct to the full. She starts to claim the child as her own - and probably Abraham as her husband. Most of all she lets Sarah know that she is pregnant and Sarah isn't. Evidently the shame hidden in barrenness was already prevalent at that time. This is more than Sarah can bear. Not only has her scheme collapsed completely, but she comes out as the loser!

We said that borrowing a womb was a modern expression. There are in fact interesting parallels between this story and the cases in which a fertilized egg was implanted in another woman's womb, for a price, and where the mother decided after the birth of her baby to break the contract and keep the child. The legal implication of those cases still has not been ironed out. The plan that Sarah and Abraham worked out was not less unethical than the modern, more sophisticated cases of our time.

We do not read what shape Hagar's despising of Sarah took. It showed itself probably in an attitude of insolence and some remarks. Sarah uses strong language in Ch. 16:5, putting all the blame on her husband. We read: "Then Sarai said to Abram, 'You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering. I put my servant in your arms, and now that she knows she is pregnant, she despises me. May the LORD judge between you and me.'"

What amazes me is that we do not read that she was ever that upset when Abraham put his scheme in action and forced Sarah into prostitution to save his own hide. But Hagar's reaction to her pregnancy hurt her to the quick. She conveniently forgets that it was she who conceived the plan to start with. There were probably several factors that contributed to the hurt. Sarah must have suffered because she was barren herself. As we saw already, she actually blames that LORD for that. The fact that Hagar rubs this in means putting salt on an open wound. But also Sarah discovers the limit of her power over her slave girl. She had taken it for granted that Hagar belonged to her soul and body. She may even have had doubts about the existence of a slave's soul. That seems to be an error common to slave traders and slave owners. Sarah discovers that Hagar is a human being! She may have understood that this discovery condemned her, since she had never treated the girl as a human being.

"May the LORD judge between you and me" is harsh language indeed. Sarah first blames God and then Abraham, conveniently taking no responsibility herself. There is obviously more behind the story than we are told. Abraham may have started to pay more attention to the woman who was bearing his child than Sarah anticipated. That was not part of the deal. She had meant for Abraham to have intercourse with her slave girl a few times and then leave her alone. Abraham may have started to treat Hagar as his wife. So jealousy was added to hurt. We do not read this, but this may be implied in Sarah's calling upon the LORD for judgment. In saying: "Your servant is in your hands," Abram said. "Do with her whatever you think best," Abraham simply turned the girl back over to Sarah, washing his hands of the whole affair as if he was not responsible for anything that happened. The whole affair illustrates what happens to human relations when God is left out. And yet God's promise was the starting point for it all!

“Then Sarai mistreated Hagar; so she fled from her.” The KJV and RSV say “And when Sarai dealt hardly with her, she fled from her face.” (KJV) “Then Sar’ai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her.” (RSV) The Bible does not go into detail, telling us how Sarah took out her anger and frustration on the poor girl. It was probably physical and verbal abuse. Sarah was no pussycat.

So Hagar runs away, but the LORD finds her. Vs.7 through the end of this chapter is one of the warm and precious passages of the Bible. We see God’s love and compassion for this girl. He speaks to her tenderly and Hagar realizes that God knows her and loves her. She returns to her mistress as Onesimus returned to Philemon centuries later after the Lord finds him in prison. Hagar was the victim of a family feud, based on religion. How ironic that the promise God gave to Abraham should cause so much havoc in human lives! Of course it wasn’t the promise, it was what human beings did with it. What Christians do with the Word of God has chased more people away from than drawn to salvation. Both Abraham and Sarah would have been responsible for the lostness of Hagar, had it not been for the fact that God found her.

In Ch. 16:8 we read that the Lord says to Hagar: “‘Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?’ ‘I’m running away from my mistress Sarai,’ she answered. Then the angel of the LORD told her, ‘Go back to your mistress and submit to her.’ ‘God addresses her as ‘Hagar, servant of Sarai.’ He wants her to accept what she is. God abhors slavery, but that does not mean that He allows slaves to run away from their masters. He wants every human being to be free, but in a much deeper sense than we often understand it. Paul understood this clearly, as we read in 1 Cor 7:20-23 - (“Each one should remain in the situation which he was in when God called him. Were you a slave when you were called? Do not let it trouble you; although if you can gain your freedom, do so. For he who was a slave when he was called by the Lord is the Lord’s freedman; similarly, he who was a free man when he was called is Christ’s slave. You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men.”) and in the epistle to Philemon.

The question “where have you come from, and where are you going?” is asked for the benefit of Hagar herself. The omniscient God does not have to ask questions to gain information. But in the same vein as God called Adam after he fall into sin (Gen 3:9 - “And the LORD God called unto Adam, and said unto him, Where art thou?” (KJV)), so God wants Hagar to know where she came from, where she is going and where she is. These basic points of orientation are often lacking in a person’s life and therefore many lives are lived aimlessly. The Gospel of John puts into perspective the acts of Jesus, when he says in John 13:3 - “Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God.”

When Hagar answers the question to herself and she realizes what she is doing, God tells her to go back and submit. There is no explanation and no apology; it is enough that God found her. Now as she has met Him submission does no longer seem impossible. Only after she has made up her mind to obey does the LORD give her the promise regarding Ishmael. We do not read in so many words that she had made up her mind to obey, but this seems to be implied in the fact that the promise is given. God usually does not give promises to those who are disobedient.

The promise is a mixed blessing. First, God permits Hagar to look beyond the present to see the multitude of people that would come from the baby she is carrying. From there He brings her back to the present. It is a boy! (Had it ever dawned on Sarah that Hagar’s baby could be a girl?) The boy is to be called Ishmael, which means “God shall hear,” or, “Whom God hears,” according to *The Pulpit Commentary*. The same commentary also remarks that this is the first instance mentioned in the Bible of the naming of a child before his birth. The dark side of the promise is the description of Ishmael’s character. The KJV calls him “a wild man,” the RSV “a wild ass of a man,” which is Americanized by the NIV as “a wild donkey of a man.” He will be unruly and quarrelsome, fighting with everybody and loving it.

Four or five thousand years ago the LORD knew about the Palestinian question, all that has led up to it and all that is to follow. Abraham paid a price for his deviating from the path of pure trust in the LORD’s leading. Sarah was more right than she knew, when she said in vs.5 - “You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering. I put my servant in your arms, and now that she knows she is pregnant, she despises me. May the LORD judge between you and me.”

But for the moment Hagar is blessed. She recognizes the experience by calling the place where she is “Beer Lahai Roi”; meaning “the well of Him that liveth and seeth me.” Vs.14 also tell us: “it is still there, between Kadesh and Bered.” Evidently when Hagar fled she meant to go back to Egypt.

More importantly, she recognizes the LORD as the One who sees her. In human relations to be known personally by a high placed person can be a great advantage. How much more important is it to be known by God. There is a great difference between acknowledging that God is omniscient and the recognition that there is a personal relationship between God and you. We read in Gen 16:13 “She gave

this name to the LORD who spoke to her: 'You are the God who sees me,' for she said, 'I have now seen the One who sees me.' "The Apostle Paul says in I Cor.8:3 - "But the man who loves God is known by God." Hagar's recognition is more than the acquisition of a certain knowledge about God. She has been touched by Him and this changed her. Love has started to grow in her heart. This means that in spite of Sarah's unreasonable and probably cruel attitude towards her, she can now submit, because she knows they have certain things in common. This incident illustrates vividly the imperfection and the perfection of human relations.

We do not read what happens when Hagar returns. Obviously, she is received back. How Sarah received her, we do not know. I am not optimistic on this point. Life will have been hard for Hagar. She does confide in Abraham though, because Abraham gives his son the name that the angel of the LORD mentioned to Hagar. The old man must have been puzzled, but he accepted the experience of Hagar as coming from the LORD. Hagar's changed attitude must have given credibility to her story.

Whether Abraham really believed that Ishmael was the son that God had promised is doubtful. At one point Abraham said to God, "If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!," but that was fourteen year later. (Ch. 17:18). He must have loved and enjoyed the boy, and it must have been very hard for him to send him and his mother away fifteen or sixteen years later.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

In this third appearance of God to Abraham the covenant is signed between God and man. It is another one of the peak experiences in Abraham's life. It happens thirteen years after the previous chapter. This is the first time God reveals Himself as "El Shaddai," God Almighty. We find the expression five times in the book of Genesis; besides this verse in Ch. 28:3; 35:11; 43:14 and 48:3. It is a plural of the root word for "powerful" or "to be strong." Thomas Aquinas translates it as "the One who is sufficient." *The Pulpit Commentary* says about "El Shaddai" that the term is used: "distinguishing Jehovah, the God of salvation, from Elohim, the God who creates nature so that it is and supports it that it may stand, as 'the God who compels nature to do what is contrary to itself, and subdues it to bow and minister to grace'; characterizing Jehovah the covenant God, 'as possessing the power to realize his promises, even when the order of nature presented no prospect of their fulfillment, and the powers of nature were insufficient to secure it.'"

Against the background of the promise God had given to Abraham and the condition in which both Sarah and Abraham found themselves, being respectively 89 and 99 years old, this revelation of as the One 'who compels nature to do what it contrary to itself' and 'as possessing the power to realize his promises, even when the order of nature presented no prospect of their fulfillment' is very significant. Abraham and Sarah have both come to the conclusion that the time for the fulfillment of God's promise is passed. They have accepted the fact that Ishmael, that unruly teenager, is the fulfillment of God's promise. And here comes God to tell Abraham that he is wrong.

Abraham had little or no idea that God was preparing the world for an event that was even more momentous than the birth of a baby after its due time. Paul put this in the proper perspective when he says in Rom.4:17 - "As it is written, 'I have made you the father of many nations'- in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist." (RSV). And he draws the line through to us by saying in Rom.4:22-24 - "This is why 'it was credited to him as righteousness.' The words 'it was credited to him' were written not for him alone, But also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness; for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead."

That is why Jesus can say: - "Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad." (John 8:56)

However, we are running ahead of our subject. God says to Abraham: "Walk before me and be blameless." We have to remember that God's speaking is creative. He calls into being that which does not exist. Abraham had not been blameless. His affair with Hagar was there to prove it. In chapter 15 we read that God imputed righteousness to Abraham because he believed God's promise. Here this righteousness is translated into perfection. God sanctifies Abraham to prepare the world for the resurrection of His Son Jesus Christ. This perfection is no static entity that was imposed upon Abraham, but it was the result of his "walk" with God that is his daily fellowship with Him. God set Abraham's feet on the path to glory. It is as if God shows to Abraham that there would have been no reason for Abraham's failure to take place, if he

had walked with God on a daily basis. Abraham had taken Hagar without consulting God. God could have kept him from stumbling, had Abraham asked.

What God demands of Abraham, He will later put as a demand before the whole nation of Israel. One example of the many we find in Lev 19:2 where God says: "Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: 'Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy.'" The same demand is put before us as New Testament Christians. In I Pet.1:15,16 - "But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; For it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy.'"

We have to realize that God's standard for us is humanly impossible. Yet it was God's intention in the creation of man to make him blameless and holy as Himself. We can apply Jesus' words to His disciples here in Luke 18:27 - "What is impossible with men is possible with God." The same words are quoted in Matt.19:26 and Mark 10:27. Sin has not changed God's mind about man. It seems to us that God is reaching far above us to an eternity that we cannot comprehend. Actually, He is just stating His goal for each of us. I am not preaching sinless perfection for us in our present condition. Fortunately we cannot see what God is doing in us. Sanctification is usually not a conscious experience. To quote Oswald Chambers in *My Utmost for His Highest*: "We want to be conscious saints and unconscious sinners. God makes us conscious sinners and unconscious saints."

So what God says here to Abraham is actually a statement about His goal for all of mankind, because the purpose of the whole plan of salvation is holiness. Paul expresses this several times in his epistles. In Eph 1:3-4 we read: - "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight." And I Thess. 4:3 we read: "It is God's will that you should be sanctified." Abraham is the main link in this plan of salvation. So this appearance of God to him is of cosmic importance. The eternal destiny of each one of us hinges on it.

The covenant that was made in chapter 15 is confirmed at this moment. God has given Abraham time to understand what He had done for him. His failure of faith, which resulted in his marriage with Hagar and the birth of Ishmael have given him a clearer insight both in the unreliability of his own person and the faithfulness of God. He knows now that there is no point of "trusting the flesh," as Paul expresses it Phil. 3:3. This does not mean that he will not have moments of relapse. We will see another example of this in chapter 20.

Abraham's reaction to God's revelation is the only one possible: he falls face down. He is overwhelmed. I know that we are in another dispensation. In a certain way our access to the throne is greater than of Abraham. But I often wonder what it would be to have a physical experience of this spiritual reality, such as Abraham had and Daniel and John. Both Daniel and John fainted in the presence of the Lord. Abraham remains conscious, although overwhelmed. But his body responds to the God's appearance by prostrating itself completely.

Both the KJV and the RSV say, "I will make my covenant between me and thee (you)," but the NIV says: "I will confirm my covenant between me and you." The LB paraphrases it as: "I will prepare a contract between us." Although grammatically the KJV and RSV are correct, the obvious intent is not a new covenant, different from the one in ch.15. *The Pulpit Commentary* says that it is an "intimation that the covenant already concluded was about to be carried into execution."

The essence of the covenant is stated in vs.7 - "I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you." The other articles of the contract lead up to this or are a confirmation. In the light of the history of salvation, this means that after the fall, in which man broke the bond of fellowship with God, God comes back and offers peace and complete restoration and even more. He does this in choosing one particular man, who will be the father of one particular nation, which will be the guardian of God's revelation. That is why Paul can say about Israel in Rom.9:4,5 - "Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen."

The covenant is eternal, but some of the articles are temporary provisions, such as the possession of Canaan and the rite of circumcision. If we would consider those parts of the agreement to be eternal also, we would have to believe that this planet would exist eternally and that Paul is wrong in the New Testament when he argues that circumcision makes no difference in our relationship with God. (See Gal.6:15).

The first article of the covenant consists in the establishing of a link between Abraham and posterity. He will be the father of a great multitude consisting of many nations. The latter phrase is consistent with the promise that was included in the call, recorded in Gen 12:3 "... all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." It clearly means that although Israel will be the guardian of the covenant, the covenant is not to be restricted to the nation of Israel alone. As Paul states in Gal.3:14 - "He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit."

The execution of the promise is first of all expressed in a change of name. Abram will henceforth be called Abraham according to verse 5. "No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations." Abram meant "a high father" and Abraham "father of a multitude of nations." In Hebrew the difference consists only in the addition of the letter "he." *The Pulpit Commentary* remarks that in changing Abram's name to Abraham God adds one letter of His own Name YHWH to the name of Abraham. He does the same when He renames Sarai into Sarah.

There are other instances in the Bible where the name of a person is changed. Jesus renames Simon to Peter in John 1:42. Jesus says to the church in Pergamum in Rev 2:17 "I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it," and to the church in Sardis in 3:12 "I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name."

In cultures such as we find in Irian Jaya, Indonesia, a change of name occurs always when someone turns from heathenism to Christ. Sometimes it is only an indication that a person is in favor of Western culture and wants to leave the Stone Age behind him. For Abraham it must have had a very deep significance. God changed his name to indicate the new reality. From a man without descendants he was to be the father of many nations. As we shall see Abraham initially thought that God's promise pertained to Ishmael. The fact that God announces the promise as if it had already gone into effect contributed, no doubt, to the misunderstanding. God does not say: "I will make you a father of many nations," but "I have made you..." But evidently God wants to give the promise a touch of eternity, where there is no past or future, but just present.

But even when God says specifically that Abraham will have a son from Sarah, Abraham has a hard time accepting this. He laughs at the impossibility. We shall see that there is a lot of laughing before and at the birth of Isaac - some laughs of doubt, some of joy.

The next clause in the covenant is about the country. Abraham has lived in Canaan as an alien ever since his arrival. God promises that both Abraham and his offspring will possess the land. Heb.11:13 says about this: "All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth." And in Heb.11:9-10 we read: "By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God." This new testament comment throws a new light on this passage. It indicates that Canaan, although it was to be the habitat of the nation of Israel and evidently has become so again in this century, is only a temporary image of a greater, spiritual reality. Again in Heb.4:8-10 we read: "For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day. There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; For anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his."

Abraham's part in the covenant is to submit to circumcision. It is important to realize that circumcision is not something one does to one self; it is being done. Abraham did not circumcise himself. In the New Testament circumcision is presented as part of the "works of the law," but this is not literally correct. That is why physical circumcision can be taken as an image of a spiritual reality, as Paul does in Phil.3:3 - "For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh." And Paul says in Rom.2:28,29 - "A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God."

In vs.11 God explains that the circumcision is to be a sign of the covenant between God and man. For Abraham it meant in the first place that he would have the sexual intercourse with Sarah, which would result in the conception of Isaac, as a circumcised man. This too has spiritual significance. Paul explains this in Col. 2:11 - "In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ." The

KJV uses the expression “in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh.” This may translate the idea more appropriately. We partake in the covenant God makes with us in the “circumcision done by Christ,” which is done when we submit to having our sinful nature put on the cross. Some things are to be done away with in our lives in order to enter into this unique relationship with God.

About people who do not want to submit to this circumcision God says in vs.14 - “Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.” This “cut off” does not mean physical death, but a being excluded from the covenant. *The Pulpit Commentary* says that the term “to be cut off” can mean capital punishment in some cases, but it seems highly unlikely to me that such a case is meant here. After all in most cases an infant was circumcised, not an adult. It must mean that the person who is not circumcised and refuses to submit to the rite as an adult is not considered to have part in God’s covenant with Israel.

Then God addresses Abraham about his wife, Sarai. He announces a change of name for her in the same fashion as Abram’s name was changed to Abraham. In her case God adds one of the letters of His own name YHWH also, as we mentioned before. The problem with Sarah’s name change seems to be that there is no radical change of meaning. Both Sarai and Sarah mean “princess.” “Sarai” probably meant princess in the more restricted sense of the word; someone who ruled over her household. “Sarah” gives the impression of an extension of the domain over which she rules. Henceforth she is no longer to be the strong voice in the household, but the mother of nations, kings and people.

Here for the first time does God declare clearly that Abraham’s link with his offspring through which the promise is carried on, will be through Sarah. We have seen already that both Sarah and Abraham understood this to be the case, since Sarah gave Hagar to Abraham as her slave girl, as an extension of herself, not as Abraham’s wife in her own rights. Now it turns out that Sarah was both wrong and more right than she knew.

In the dialogue of vs.17-22 Abraham is irreverent, to say the least. His outward attitude is correct. Both in vs.3 and vs.17 we read that Abraham prostrated himself before God. He must have looked up, or relaxed in the verses in between. But inwardly he laughs at God and tells him that what God proposes is impossible. It can’t be done! Abraham either had never understood what God planned to do, or he thought that he had misunderstood, or he suspected God’s plan but considered it too fantastic to be real. Too good to be true. It is true that the Gospel seems often too good to be true, but it is true anyhow. What Abraham thought about the announced birth of Isaac, we can think about the incarnation and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. It sounds too good to be true.

Abraham was not the first man in human history who lay prostrate before the LORD and did not really believe that what God said was true. He was not the last man either. Demonstration of outward piety can cover a lot of unbelief. Sometimes it is a substitute for faith.

God does not reproach Abraham his lack of faith, but He does end the encounter abruptly, as we read in vs.22 - “When he had finished speaking with Abraham, God went up from him.”

In vs.18 we read: - “And Abraham said to God, ‘If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!’ “In other words “Why do not you forget about the whole deal! Let’s just keep it at Ishmael.” Abraham meant much more than just that Ishmael should not die, but that he would be the fulfillment of God’s promise. In a certain way Abraham wanted to justify himself with this proposal. If God agreed with him, his affair with Hagar would become legitimate. It would no longer be a big mistake, a sin. Abraham and Sarah could have said that they were right after all.

God takes Abraham’s words literally. His answer is “Yes,” followed by “but...” This is not the “but” of doubt, like we express it as humans. It is the “but” of God’s possibilities as over against man’s impossibilities. “But God...” It is impossible to misunderstand God’s intent after hearing what is said in vs. 19 - “Then God said, ‘Yes, but your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him.’”

For the first time Isaac’s name is mentioned. “Isaac” means “laughter” or “he laughs.” In the first place this is a reference to Abraham’s laughter of unbelief in vs.17. Later it will refer to Sarah’s unbelief also, as we read in ch.18:12. But God has a way of turning man’s laughter of unbelief into a laughter of joy. That is what laughter should be to start with.

It has been said that Abraham’s reflection on his age and that of Sarah contradicts the fact that he married other women after Sarah’s death. In chapter 25:1-7 we read that he married Katurah and had six sons with her. We do get the impression that this happened after Sarah’s death, but this is not stated specifically. We will get to this at a later point. The fact remains that at this point Abraham considers himself and Sarah too old to have children. Heb.11:12 says about him: - “And so from this one man,

and he a good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.” It is true in our age that men and women past the age of ninety do no longer get children, but then men do not live to be 175 either! But the Bible stresses the fact that for both Sarah and Abraham it was physically impossible to have a child at their age. So this we accept.

The point in question is that God chose Isaac as the child with whom the covenant would continue. The crucial point of the covenant was the promise of the Messiah. It was not a matter of Isaac being saved and going to heaven and Ishmael going to hell, but of to whom the task of guarding God’s revelation in this world would entrusted. As we mentioned before God wanted to foreshadow the resurrection of Jesus Christ in the birth of Isaac. The Apostle Paul emphasizes this in Rom.4:24 where he links Abraham’s faith at the birth of Isaac with our faith in the resurrection of Jesus. He says: “But also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness; for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.”

The blessings promised to Ismael are basically the same as those God gave to Abraham himself. He would be fruitful and important in the history of man. But he would not be in the line of the Messiah. He would have no part in the process that would make the Word become flesh. That does not mean that he would not be allowed to share in the results. There are presently more Arab Christians than Jewish, especially in the Near East.

Abraham took God’s Word very seriously, because we read that on that very day he circumcised his son Ishmael and all the male members of his household and submitted himself to the rite also. At that time Ishmael was 13 years old and Abraham 99.

The law on circumsision is very sketchy in the Old Testament. It is only mentioned in passing in Leviticus: “On the eighth day the boy is to be circumcised.”²²⁶ The words there pertain more to the purification of the mother after birth than to what has to happen to the child. There are some strange instances in the early history of Israel where circumsision was neglected, as in the case of Moses’s son. In Ex.4:24-26 we read: “At a lodging place on the way, the LORD met and was about to kill him. But Zipporah took a flint knife, cut off her son’s foreskin and touched feet with it. ‘Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me,’ she said. So the LORD let him alone. (At that time she said “bridegroom of blood,’ referring to circumsision.)” It is not clear whose life was in danger. It could be Moses’ or his son’s. Since the oldest son of Pharaoh is mentioned in the preceding verse, it would be most logical to conclude that Moses’ son Gershom was about to die. It seems that Moses had given in to his wife’s objection against the circumsision of Gershom.

Circumcision was not enforced during the voyage through the wilderness from Egypt to Canaan. In Joshua, we read: “At that time the LORD said to Joshua, ‘Make flint knives and circumcise the Israelites again.’ So Joshua made flint knives and circumcised the Israelites at Gibeath Haaraloth. Now this is why he did so: All those who came out of Egypt; all the men of military age; died in the desert on the way after leaving Egypt. All the people that came out had been circumcised, but all the people born in the desert during the journey from Egypt had not. The Israelites had moved about in the desert forty years until all the men who were of military age when they left Egypt had died, since they had not obeyed the LORD. For the LORD had sworn to them that they would not see the land that he had solemnly promised their fathers to give us, a land flowing with milk and honey. So he raised up their sons in their place, and these were the ones Joshua circumcised. They were still uncircumcised because they had not been circumcised on the way. And after the whole nation had been circumcised, they remained where they were in camp until they were healed. Then the LORD said to Joshua, ‘Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you.’ So the place has been called Gilgal to this day.”²²⁷

It is clear though, that circumcision was considered a basic requirement for every Israelite male, and we do not read about any exceptions beside the two instances mentioned above.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The chapter is clearly divided in two parts: vs.1-15 the visit of the three men in Abraham’s tent and vs.16-33 the departure for Sodom and Abraham’s intercession.

²²⁶ Lev.12:3

²²⁷ Josh. 5:2-9

The appearance of God to Abraham, accompanied by two angels, is one of the most remarkable theophanies in the whole Bible. It is almost comparable to the Incarnation of Christ, in that God appears in human form; but the Incarnation was permanent. Here the Word became flesh only temporarily. It must have taken Abraham a while before it dawned on him Whom he was facing. He treated the company as humans, though with the utmost respect.

This incident must have happened approximately the same time of the year as the previous one. According to chapter 17:21 God appeared to Abraham one year before the birth of Isaac, and here again God announces in vs.10 that when He returns to Abraham one year from that time Isaac will have been born then. In the first report Abraham laughs and here Sarah does. Undoubtedly, this is a reason for Bible critics to see a duplicate story in both accounts.

The 10th verse appears to be open for different interpretations though. The NIV says: "Then the LORD said, 'I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son.'" The KJV appears to stick closer to the original by saying: "And he said, I will certainly return unto thee according to the time of life; and, lo, Sarah thy wife shall have a son." *The Pulpit Commentary* says here: "Literally, at the time of reviving; i.e. when the year shall have been renewed, in the next year, or rather spring; though other interpretations of the phrase have been suggested, as, e.g., 'according to the time of that which is born,' i.e. at the end of nine months." "The latter translation would mean that this second theophany took place about three months after the previous one. It seems more logical to me that some time elapsed between the two.

Most likely Abraham had conveyed to Sarah the message of the change of her name and the meaning and implication of this, as well as God's specific promise that she would have a child. She may have simply disregarded this information. After all it had been Abraham's vision, not hers. The purpose of the Lord's visit here may have been primarily to convince Sarah.

Vs.1-8 give a vivid picture of Bedouin hospitality, as it is still practiced now. Abraham sees three men and he invites them in, offering them rest, shelter and food during the heat of the day. The scene abounds with hyperbolas and euphemisms if we compare it to our modern way of treating guests. Hospitality is recommended as a Christian virtue in Heb.13:2 - "Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it." The author of the epistle to the Hebrews undoubtedly had Abraham's example in mind when he wrote those words.

Abraham's running towards the guests and his bowing down are foreign to the Western culture of our days, as are the words of welcome he utters. We read in vs.3 - "He said, 'If I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, do not pass your servant by.'" "The closest we come to this form of politeness is when a guest is told "our pleasure!"

One would wonder, if the "something to eat" in vs.5 turns out to be a huge and sumptuous meal, consisting of a whole calf and bread made with three seahs of flour, (which according to Adam Clarke would amount to more than 12 gallon,) cheese and milk, if then "a little water" for the washing of the feet, would not be the equivalent of a dip in Abraham's swimming pool! Abraham is not stingy. He was a wealthy man, but he knew how to share.

The eating of the food by the LORD and His two angels is of greater importance than it seems. Up to this point Abraham must have been under the impression that he was dealing with three human strangers. When afterwards he realized that he had harbored the LORD of the universe and two of His angels, he may have started to doubt his senses and the reality of it all. The leftovers of the meal would convince him. That is why we read in vs.8 - "He then brought some curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared, and set these before them. While they ate, he stood near them under a tree."

It is still customary among some tribes in Asia for the lord of the house to look on when his guests eat. This would not be considered proper in our Western culture.

The conversation starts in vs.9 "Where is your wife Sarah?" They asked him. "There, in the tent," he said." We may presume that it was the Lord, who asked the question; and that the way our verse puts it, as if the question came from all three of the men, indicates that Abraham did not pay attention at first as to who was speaking. Immediately following, he is wide awake and knows that this is not an ordinary man speaking.

Theologically the question is redundant. The omniscient God does not have to ask him where his wife is. But then the all sufficient God does not need to eat Abraham's food either. The obvious intent is to draw both Abraham's and Sarah's attention to what is going to follow. All God's questions to man are for man's benefit, not because God needs our information.

“I will surely return” has some of the force of the oath like affirmation with which Jesus introduces His sayings in the Gospels. The NIV translates the words “amen, amen, lego” with “I tell you the truth.” The KJV puts it more forcefully, though archaically as “verily, verily, I say unto thee.” God’s promise to Abraham has this same forceful affirmation of an ‘amen.’ We mentioned above already the possible translations of the phrase “about this time next year.” It may have meant that Sarah’s pregnancy was about to start and that Isaac would be born nine months hence.

It is hard not to smile when reading how Sarah listens at the door. It is amazing what a person will do when he thinks he is unobserved. Improper behavior of this kind is as old as mankind. When we realize that God sees our every move and thought, we will behave as if we are under constant surveillance by someone. A Christian can never let his hair down.

Sarah’s laugh must have been inaudible. Vs. 12 says: “So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, ‘After I am worn out and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure?’” “The Lord reveals not an audible chuckle, but Sarah’s inward thoughts when He asks Abraham: “Why did Sarah laugh..?” This revelation, however embarrassing it may have been for Sarah, since it showed that she was eavesdropping and that she doubted the truth of what she heard, was the best proof that the One who was speaking was no common man. The realization that God knows us through and through is rarely a pleasant one, at least not initially. When David meditates on this in Ps.139:1-5 “O LORD, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD. You hem me in; behind and before; you have laid your hand upon me;” his first reaction is to flee: (vs.7) “Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?”

God was going to perform a great miracle through Sarah, and the embarrassment was a necessary part of it. There are no Isaacs born into this world, and Christ is not formed in us without some exposure of our innermost being.

“Is anything too hard for the LORD?” We seldom realize that a lack of faith is equivalent to casting a doubt on God’s omnipotence. We are dealing with the Almighty God. “El Shaddai.” Yet we live and act as if God’s budget is quite limited and His resources are quite small. The New Testament tells us over and over again that with God nothing is impossible. In Luke 1:37 the angel Gabriel says to Mary: “For nothing is impossible with God.” Speaking about salvation of the rich, we read in Matt.19:26 - “Jesus looked at them and said, ‘With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.’” To the father of the demon possessed boy, who asked Jesus to heal his son, if he could, Jesus answers in Mark 9:23 “‘If you can?’” ‘Everything is possible for him who believes.’” So the key to unlock God’s omnipotence is our faith. That is why we read in Matt 17:20 that Jesus says to His disciples, “Because you have so little faith. I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.”

The Scripture does not hesitate to paint Sarah’s picture, warts and all. We see her eavesdropping, laughing in unbelief and to top it off, lying about it. I do not know which sin is the worst, probably the laughing. A lie is the most convincing proof of a severed relationship with God. Lies come from the devil, who is the father of all lies. He invented them. Yet even for God’s children it is easier to lie than to accept the embarrassment of exposing our innermost being. Sarah lied, we are told, because she was afraid. Actually she was embarrassed.

Later when Isaac is born Sarah turns this lie into a laughter of victory. There is a confession in what we read in Gen 21:6 - “Sarah said, ‘God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me.’” “This is what God does with confessed sins; whatever comes to light becomes light. Even our sins can glorify God, if we confess them.

The second part of this chapter, vs.16-33, deals with the departure of the LORD and the angels in the direction of Sodom and Abraham’s intercession. It is one of the most moving chapters in the Old Testament. The angels have come on a mission of destruction. One of the most terrible judgments in the Bible, next to the flood, is to be executed: the wiping of the surface of the earth of Sodom, Gomorrah, Adama and Zeboim, all the cities in the valley of Siddim.

The matter weighs heavily upon the LORD’s heart, so He decides to take Abraham into His confidence. We hit here upon a most mysterious truth, that human intercession is sharing in the burden of the Lord. God shares His feelings with Abraham to bring him to prayer for those who are lost. We will see how effective and ineffective Abraham’s intercession is. But the most important feature of the dialogue here is the confidentiality. In Ps 25:14 we read: “The LORD confides in those who fear him; he makes his

covenant known to them.” The KJV is even more wonderful here: “The secret of the LORD is with them that fear him; and he will shew them his covenant.”

Vs.17-19 are hard to interpret. The thoughts that are attributed to God are clearly anthropomorphic. The omniscient God does not reason that way. We almost get the impression that God says to Himself: “Shall I tell Abraham or not?” God deal in eternal decrees, so this cannot be the way it went. These words are written for the benefit of Abraham and for us. The thoughts are probably Abraham’s, projected upon the mind of God. That is, Abraham must have understood that this was the reason why God told him what was going to happen to Sodom and Gomorrah.

The verses show us more about the human mind than about the mind of God. This is the way we think about God and approach God, with the thoughts and feelings we know inside ourselves. There is nothing reprehensible about using our own mind as a model in trying to understand the mind of God. After all, we were created in His image and there must be some similarity between His personality and ours. As long as we are aware of the fact that we are projecting, that our imagination can bring us closer to God, but that we do not have the full picture, we should be safe.

Abraham understands that God takes him into His confidence. He receives prophetic insight. God shows him what is going to happen. The realization of this brings back to Abraham’s mind God’s original promise, that one that was given to him, when God first called him. Obviously, the Holy Spirit reminds him of this. The next thought is that God’s confidence puts him under the obligation to make his children walk in the way of the Lord. Abraham understands that the fulfillment of God’s promise is dependent upon the obedience of his children in whom and by whom the promise will be fulfilled.

There are several instances of promises God gave to people that never came about because of the unbelief and unfaithfulness of the people for whom they were meant. Israel never fully occupied all the territory that God had given them. The temple built by Zerubabel never occupied the central place that Haggai and Zacharia foretold. The people who received the promise did not take it seriously enough. God does not cancel His promises, but we do not see their fulfillment if we do not exercise faith. Abraham understood this clearly.

That is why we read that Abraham decides to “direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.”

Vs.20 and 21 give another instance of human interpretation of God’s acting. Obviously God does not have to come down from heaven and see for Himself. If He did, He would not be the omnipresent and omniscient God we know Him to be; He would not be God. There is in these verses first of all a foreshadowing of the Incarnation of the Word. But also God wants to justify Himself in the eyes of men. What happens to the angels, once they arrive in Sodom, is proof that the situation has gone completely out of hand in that city. God knew; now we know. But most of all Abraham would never have interceded for the people had God not come down to see for Himself. That may be the most important point.

Verse 22 has an interesting history. “... but Abraham remained standing before the LORD.” According to *The Pulpit Commentary*: “the Masorites text originally read, ‘And the Lord stood before Abraham,’ and was changed because it did not seem becoming to speak of God standing in the presence of a creature. This, however, is a mere Rabbinical conceit...” Several years ago I heard a moving sermon about this point by Denis Kinslow, in which he showed how God stood before Abraham, expecting him to start praying for the people in Sodom. As if God was saying to Abraham, I am going to destroy the city, are you not going to do anything about this?

Humanly speaking we can say that the fact that God had to destroy the cities of the plain tore Him apart, and He expects us to be torn apart in the same way. That is what intercession is all about. Abraham may have thought that he had to move the heart of the Lord. God was trying to move Abraham’s heart. Intercession is sharing the burden of the Lord.

All this coincides with Paul’s concept of intercession with the help of the Holy Spirit. In Rom.8:26 we read - “In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.” The RSV uses the expression “with sighs too deep for words.” God’s burden is heavier than human words can bear.

Abraham knows the situation in Sodom. He anticipates what the angels will find there and that God will wipe out the place. In his eyes God’s judgment is a foregone conclusion. In vs. 23 he presupposes that the wicked will be swept away. His thoughts are immediately with Lot and his family. Although the distances that separated them must only have been a few miles, contact may have been scant or non-existent.

He also presupposes that Lot will not be the only righteous person in the city. It turns out that he is wrong about that. His question is: "Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked?"

Abraham is right in feeling horrified about the coming destruction of the cities. He is wrong in his suspicion that God may not be perfectly righteous in the way He is going to execute judgment. Behind his question is the hidden suggestion that he may be more righteous than God in this. We find the same philosophy behind the cry: "If God is love this would not happen." The problem is, that we have a tendency to confuse our horror about the perdition of man with the content of the wrath of God. We tend to shift the burden of responsibility from man to God as if the sins man commits are actually acts of God. We do not realize how much we degrade man in the process by trying to diminish his responsibility. The above mentioned phrase "If God is love..." was uttered at the end of World War II when the horrors of Auschwitz and other German concentration camps were discovered. Very few people came to the conclusion that God had not done this but man. But just as Job held God responsible for what happened to him, so does modern man and so was Abraham about to do.

One helpful thought is that our sense of righteousness is derived from God's righteousness. This will help us to understand that we are not more righteous than God. Abraham did come to that conclusion when he said: "Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" The very basis of all ethical behavior is at stake here. If God, the Judge of all the earth, would not do right, there would be no difference between good and evil.

Abraham was deeply shaken and we have to understand that God wanted him to be. The vs.23-32 show that intercession is a progressive discovery of the mind of God. Abraham must have thought that in crediting Sodom with fifty righteous citizens, he was giving them a stingy allotment. He must have understood from the way God answered, that he was beside the mark, so he took away five. But after deducting five people twice, he realizes that the situation was much worse than he anticipated and he takes away ten at the time. Finally, he stops at ten. At the end of the intercessory prayer Abraham goes away with the impression that there are fewer than ten righteous people in Sodom and that God is justified in turning the city upside down. What he did not know was that there was only one righteous person in the whole place and that God would not allow the destruction of the city as long as that one person was still there. In 19:22 the angel says to Lot: "I cannot do anything until you reach it." (That is why the town was called Zoar.) That Lot was the only person becomes evident from the fact that his wife could not detach herself from the place and from the immoral behavior of his two daughters later on. God's righteousness and compassion is infinitely bigger and greater than ours!

As Abraham progresses in his intercession, he becomes aware of his own smallness in comparison with the eternal God. This means that he also gets a clearer view of God's greatness. In vs.27 he is amazed to realize that he had the nerve to address God on the subject. He sees himself as "nothing but dust and ashes." His discovery reminds us of David's words in Ps.8:3,4 - "When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?" But just as David answer his own question "What is man?" in a positive and glorious way, so does Abraham keep on speaking, as if his words to God would make a difference. And they did! It is doubtful if even Lot and his daughters would have made it out of Sodom alive, had it not been for Abraham's prayer. The answer to the question why God wants man to pray and why God modifies His behavior as a result of man's prayer is the key to understanding who man is. The more we understand this, the more effective we shall be in the affairs of the Kingdom.

Let us not forget that Abraham's intercession was God's initiative. God wanted to save not only Lot, but all of Sodom and Gomorrah. He looked for a man who could save the city, but He found none. Ezekiel 22:30 "I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found none."

Isaiah 63:5 "I looked, but there was no one to help, I was appalled that no one gave support; so my own arm worked salvation for me, and my own wrath sustained me." Abraham's prayer did some good but not enough. Had the man been there who could save the city, then the man would have saved it. We conclude this from Jesus' words to the inhabitants of Capernaum in Matt. 11:23-24 "And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths. If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you."

Twice Abraham uses the expression "May the Lord not be angry" (vs.30,32). This indicates that Abraham did not understand that his intercession for the cities was God's initiative. It seems that his prayer was cut short because of this fear. He says in vs.32 "May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak

just once more. What if only ten can be found there?" We do not know what would have happened if Abraham had persevered till the end.

The thought that this prayer was God's idea and not Abraham's is also expressed in the closing verse. We read: "When the LORD had finished speaking with Abraham, he left, and Abraham returned home." This dialogue is considered to be God's speaking to Abraham. We can say that in intercessory prayer God speaks more to us than we to Him.

God's glorious presence withdraws from Abraham, and then Abraham returns home. It must have been evening, the end of a heavy day. There was the laughter of Sarah's coming pregnancy and a sadness beyond tears for the destruction of the cities.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

I wished we could skip this chapter. It is probably one of the saddest chapters in the Bible. It shows the depth of man's depravity and the fury of God's wrath.

When the angels arrive at Sodom, they find Lot sitting in the gate. The gate was the most important part of the city, where dignitaries would take their seat and where disputes were settled. It has been inferred that Lot had acquired the status of a magistrate. Some commentators draw this conclusion from the remark of the man of Sodom in vs.9 "He wants to play the judge!" The context in which the latter remark was made surely does not make the inference conclusive.

But we have to remember that Lot came to Sodom as a wealthy man, and it seems that he had not lost anything during the raid by the Babylonian kings since Abraham recovered all the loot that was taken. This would have given Lot a position of influence in the city. The men of Sodom may even have endured some of his criticism of their immoral behavior. Peter remarks that Lot remained a righteous man in the midst of the licentiousness of Sodom. II Peter 2:7-8 says about Lot: "And if he (God) rescued Lot, a righteous man, who was distressed by the filthy lives of lawless men (For that righteous man, living among them day after day, was tormented in his righteous soul by the lawless deeds he saw and heard)--." So Lot's sitting in the gate may have more significance beyond the fact that he happened to sit there. It is also obvious that Lot had moved within the city walls.

Some commentators believe that Lot sat in the gate in order to intercept visitors and protect them from the violence of the inhabitants. But this is of course conjecture. We do not know. It is obvious that although Lot may not have participated in the sins of Sodom, he had compromised himself considerably by living there and accepting the position he had. The rest of the chapter shows the influence of Sodom upon his family. This point has important applications. We should always consider what the influence of the surrounding in which we choose to live and work will have upon our family. The atmosphere of a place will affect our children. Some people have no choice, and they have to pray that the Lord will protect them and their family from the world around them and from the devil. Lot choose the valley of Siddim and his move into the city was no doubt his free choice also.

There is a noticeable contrast between the stay of the angels with Abraham and with Lot. Lot receives them politely, like Abraham did; but Lot's offer of hospitality is refused off hand. The angels answer Lot that they intend to spend the night in the square. This throws Lot into a panic. Evidently, he knows what to expect. He may have witnessed scenes similar to the one that is to follow before. But this had not convinced him that he should move out of the city. Vs.3 tells us that he insisted strongly, and so the angels consent to spend the night indoors with him. We should remember that they are on a fact-finding mission. We learn this from the previous chapter, where God says to Abraham: "...I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know."

Lot prepares a meal, or probably his wife did. The KJV and RSV say that "he made them a feast," but that is probably an overstatement. Time must have been rather short for that. I believe that this is the first time that unleavened bread is mentioned in the Bible. The mention of this bread has probably no significance apart from the fact that it took less time to prepare than bread with yeast.

Vs.4-9 describe one of the most disgusting scenes in the Bible. Some liberal Christians have tried to down-play the fact that there is a strong condemnation of homosexual behavior in this portion of Scripture. It is true that the scene portrays also gang-rape and other forms of violence, but to deny that homosexual practice is condemned violates the principles of biblical interpretation. God warns the Israelites not to commit the sins that must have been common practice among the Canaanites at that time. It groups homosexual practice with intercourse with animals. We read: "Do not lie with a man as one lies with a

woman; that is detestable.”²²⁸ And Paul says: “In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.”²²⁹

The story of Sodom shatters the myth that homosexual tendencies are inborn, so that the person who finds himself to be so orientated can not really be held responsible for it. The fact that the whole male population turns out for this event makes such a theory hardly plausible. Homosexuality is a perversion. If we say that God invented human sexuality, we can conclude that homosexuality comes from the devil. I firmly believe that there is a strong demonic influence behind it.

It is also obvious that the effort of the men of Sodom to engage in this gang-rape seals their doom. The Lord now has the proof He has been looking for. This sounds like something redundant because God does not need proofs like these, but the proofs justify God’s actions before men and angels and prove His righteousness.

Lot’s reaction is almost as detestable as the actions of the Sodomites. Commentaries state that oriental hospitality requires that the host defend his guests with his own life. But Lot does not offer his own life. He is not willing to die himself, but rather to sacrifice his daughters instead. Imagine the effect upon the girls to hear their father say such a thing. Whatever respect they may have had for him was certainly lost at this point. Lot’s proposal shows how much he had come under the influence of the spirit of Sodom himself. The ethical boundaries have almost been wiped out in his mind. It makes one wonder how much righteousness was left in Lot.

His life and that of his daughters is saved by the angels. They pull him inside and strike the people of Sodom with blindness. This blindness may very well have been more a blindness of rage than a physical inability to see. The men must have been in a frenzy. The mentality of a mob is the most unreasonable and inhuman feature humanity can acquire. If the devil can take possession of a mass of humans then he can make them ungovernable and closed for any argument. It is amazing that even at this point Lot does not realize that he has lived all those years on a powder keg. He and his family still find it extremely difficult to separate themselves from Sodom.

Verse 13 and 14 make painfully clear how much of a testimony Lot had in the city of Sodom even within the smaller circle of his daughters’ in-laws. At this point the angels reveal themselves as angels and tell Lot what their mission is. Lot believes it because he does go and announces the judgment to come to his sons-in-law. “But his sons-in-law thought he was joking.” They must not have seen enough evidence of the presence of God in Lot’s life to give any credibility to his announcement. We can imagine Lot’s excitement. He had just barely escaped the mob that wanted to rape the angels. He must have been shaken up by the experience. But his sons-in-law either seriously thought that he did a good job in faking it, or they were so far removed from any spiritual reality that they could not bring themselves to give any consideration to Lot’s announcement. Treating a matter as a joke is a very effective cover for any emotional disturbance. The poor boys, however, did not live long enough to enjoy the joke or to pass it on to others.

We should note God’s generosity in wanting to include anyone whom Lot wanted under Lot’s umbrella. If the two sons-in-law would have joined the refugees, nobody would have asked questions of their motives. They did not have to be righteous in order to be saved. It was enough that they were connected with Lot. This arrangement gives us a glimpse of what God does for us in Jesus Christ. Our salvation is dependent upon our relationship with Him.

In the morning not much of Lot’s conviction of the night before is left. He can not bring himself to leave his home and the city. His considerable wealth prevented him from seeing his priorities. Most wealthy people are possessed by their possessions. You do not even have to be wealthy! Most often things have us instead of our having them. Vs.16 says that it was the mercy of the Lord that the angels pushed Lot and his wife and daughters out of the door and out of the city. “When he hesitated, the men grasped his hand and the hands of his wife and of his two daughters and led them safely out of the city, for the LORD was merciful to them.” God does not often push us, but when He does it is for our salvation. What a sad way to go! It is always said to have to flee, but how tragic when we have lost sight of our most elementary priorities. Life is more than clothing, house, livestock or any other kind of stock. That fact did not seem to penetrate to Lot.

²²⁸ Lev.18:22

²²⁹ Rom.1:27

When the angels tell Lot to flee for his life, he thinks he will not be able to make it to the mountains. Lot must have been an old man. If Abraham was ninety nine, Lot must have been at least in his seventies, maybe in his eighties. He figures that he will not have the stamina to run that far and that long. So he drives a hard bargain to go to the city of Zoar. His request is granted. The presence of Lot at that place guarantees the safety of the city. The town is said to be small. We do not know how small small is, but Lot saved at least a few more lives by running to Zoar.

The fact that Zoar is spared for Lot's sake is an amazing thing. It shows first of all how much liberty the angels had in carrying out their orders. It also demonstrates the compassion of the Lord through these angels. Lot must have been a sorry sight at this point, an excited, haggard old man on the run. I am sure that Lot found out that he could run much faster than he thought when the first rumblings of judgment were heard. I think of the story of the flight of the horse Bree and his girlfriend in C.S. Lewis' book *The Horse and His Boy*. The horses are chased by lions; at least they think there are two lions. In reality only Aslan pursues them. Anyone can break the speed record if he thinks he is chased by death.

As we mentioned already, the fact that the presence of Lot in Sodom would have made it impossible for the angels to carry out the destruction of the city shows the infinite mercy of God. Abraham's thought that God would let the righteous perish with the wicked was completely unfounded. God was at least ten times as merciful as Abraham.

The sun had come up when Lot reached Zoar. The angel had said that judgment would not start until Lot had arrived, so the overturning of the cities of the plain of Siddim happened early in the morning in daylight. It is hard to determine what actually caused the destruction. We read in vs.24 - "Then the LORD rained down burning sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah; from the LORD out of the heavens." We know that the area was rather unstable and that there were tar pits that would swallow up men. (Ch. 14:10). So it could be that the stuff that rained down from heaven actually was thrown towards heaven first in a volcanic eruption. The disaster may have taken only a few minutes. The inhabitants of Sodom must have been taken completely by surprise. They may never have known what happened to them.

In Matt.11:24 Jesus says to the people of Capernaum: "But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you." We conclude from this that the overturning of the cities was not the actual judgment. It was a prelude to the day of judgment, when the inhabitants of the whole earth will stand before God. It seems bad enough to be wiped off the face of the earth in seconds. If this is only a shadow of the actual punishment, what will punishment then be? As the writer of the Hebrew epistle says: "It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." "For our God is a consuming fire." (Heb.10:31;12:29)

If the eruption did not start until Lot and family reached Sodom, we must conclude that the looking back of Lot's wife does not mean that she only turned her head to take a peek. It must be a euphemism for her setting out to return to the city. I take it that the catastrophe began as she turned around and started out on her way back.

Jesus puts the event in the right perspective by comparing the judgment on the cities with the day of His coming. He warns people against wanting to hang on to their possessions. We read: "It will be just like this on the day the Son of Man is revealed. On that day no one who is on the roof of his house, with his goods inside, should go down to get them. Likewise, no one in the field should go back for anything. Remember Lot's wife! Whoever tries to keep his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it." (Luke 17:30-33) So her undoing must have been that she wanted to go back and collect some of her possessions.

When Abraham gets up in the morning, he walks to the place where the Lord had stood before him the night before, where he interceded for the cities. He can only see a dense smoke rising up from the place where yesterday there were at least four cities with lush pastures. We read in vs.29 - "So when God destroyed the cities of the plain, he remembered Abraham, and he brought Lot out of the catastrophe that overthrew the cities where Lot had lived." I take this to mean that God gave Abraham this assurance at that moment. We do not read that there ever was any other contact between Abraham and Lot. Surely Abraham would have taken in Lot if he and his daughters would have come to him.

At the place where formerly the valley of Siddim was we now find the Dead Sea, or as the Bible calls it the Salt Sea. (Ch. 14:3) From the Westminster Dictionary of the Bible I copy that Josephus called it Asphaltites. The designation Dead Sea comes from the Greeks who called it so as early as 200 AD. The water is chiefly supplied by the Jordan river, which flows into it from the North. The water level is said to be about 1292 feet below sea level. The sea is about 47 by 9 miles. At some points the depth of the

sea is about 1300 feet. The salt content of the water is almost five times as high as normal ocean water. (100 lbs. of Dead Sea water is said to contain up to 27.8 lbs. of salt).

When Abraham looked down he only saw the smoke. We can imagine what the burning tar must have looked like. The water must have come in gradually when the Jordan river found its way into this insatiable hole. The Dead Sea is a landmark of God's judgment, even up to this day. But Ezekiel gives us the promise that one day the water of the Salt Sea will become fresh, and the Dead Sea will come to life. Ezekiel 47:8-10 - "He said to me, 'This water [that is the water that trickled out of the sanctuary] flows toward the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah, where it enters the Sea. When it empties into the Sea, the water there becomes fresh. Swarms of living creatures will live wherever the river flows. There will be large numbers of fish, because this water flows there and makes the salt water fresh; so where the river flows everything will live. Fishermen will stand along the shore; from En Gedi to En Eglaim there will be places for spreading nets. The fish will be of many kinds; like the fish of the Great Sea.'"

The last part of this chapter, from verse 30 through 38 tell a story of almost worse human depravity than the first part. Lot and his daughters left Sodom, but Sodom had not left them. I do not have the stomach to go into the details. Lot's moving out of Zoar seems to be reasonable. But his fear was unfounded and it showed a lack of faith in the Word of God. The angel had promised Lot that Zoar would not be destroyed. But Lot takes nothing for granted and he moves into the mountains to live in a cave. He was just as inconsiderate as far as the lives of his daughters were concerned in this move as he was when he moved into Sodom. It condemned the girls to a hermit's life. For them celibacy meant a living death. No offspring was equal to ceasing to exist.

We cannot blame Lot for having been shocked to the depth of his being, but the fact that this turned him into a psychopath shows that he was unable to obtain healing in fellowship with God. Lot must have been a broken man when he went to live in a cave. He had lost everything he had lived for, and evidently he had become an alcoholic. If he would have been able to bestow love upon his daughters, he might have been able to experience healing; but the fact that his daughters showed him no respect, to say the least, shows how utterly beyond hope he was. But the worst was still to come. Lot's wife had turned into a pillar of salt; Lot himself turns into the only example the Bible gives of incest. It is true that Lot did not purposely do anything. His daughters did this to him. But he reaped the harvest of what he had sown earlier in his life. If Lot had tortured his righteous soul living in Sodom, as Peter says in 2 Pet 2:8 (For that righteous man, living among them day after day, was tormented in his righteous soul by the lawless deeds he saw and heard)-- it must have been his undoing when he discovered that he was the father of his own grandchildren. If Lot was saved and went to heaven, he was saved "by the skin of his teeth" as D.L. Moody called it once.

And yet, miracle of God's grace, our Lord Jesus Christ would not have been born if it weren't for Ruth, a daughter of Moab! God can even make the deepest pit into a mountain top

CHAPTER TWENTY

From the tragedy of Lot's life we move on to another tragedy in the life of Abraham. Abraham's sin may not have been as serious as the failure of Lot, but we can hardly say that we make spiritual progress if we move from chapter 19 into chapter 20. Abraham's accountability was greater than Lot's because he knew God so much better.

It would make more sense if the record of chapter 20 could be placed earlier in Abraham's life, but there is no indication that there is a reversal of chronology. So we take it that these events took place after God had appeared to Abraham and Sarah to announce the coming birth of Isaac. Sarah was probably pregnant at this time.

Adam Clarke suggests that the destruction of the cities may have been such a depressive sight that the patriarch could not stand it any longer there. Abraham moved away from the Dead Sea area towards the South in the direction of the Negev desert. But the main story of this chapter plays in Gerar which is closer to the Mediterranean coast in Philistine country.

While in Gerar, Abraham tells the same lie as when he was in Egypt. Some critics therefore believe that this story is a double of chapter 12. There we read in vs.11-13 "As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, 'I know what a beautiful woman you are. When the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife.' Then they will kill me but will let you live. Say you are my sister, so that I will be treated

well for your sake and my life will be spared because of you.” The settings of the two events are so different from one another, that this theory does not hold at all unless we allow for a major fraud in Scripture. We suppose that Abraham told the same story because he had the same fears. Abraham admits so much to Abimelech in vs.11.

Several questions pop up in relation to this account. It is hard for us to imagine that Abraham's life would be in danger because of the beauty of his ninety year old wife. But then the Bible tells us that Sarah lived to be one hundred twenty seven. So it is quite possible that at the age of ninety she was still a striking beauty.

The big problem though is the complete moral failure of Abraham at this point. It is as if his supernatural encounters have left no trace on his character.

In earlier stages the excuse has been that the Lord would not allow Abraham to be killed because of the promise of offspring. But now that Sarah is pregnant, Abraham may have thought that he had become disposable. If this is what Abraham thought, he must have ascribed a certain callousness to God, a callousness which he would have condemned in himself.

Abraham's second mistake was that he supposed that there was no fear of God among the Philistines. Gerar was not like Sodom. We get the impression that Abraham was received courteously since he was even treated well after the discovery of the fraud. It amazes us to see how much knowledge of God there still was in the land. Melkizedek and Abimelech may not have been the only ones to have a certain knowledge of the true God. The fact that Abraham had been on such good terms with Eshcol and Aner, as we read in ch. 14:13, indicates that these people may not have been the exception. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah may have given Abraham the idea that soon the whole country would be turned upside down because of similar conditions.

But the worst thing was of course Abraham's selfishness and his complete disregard for Sarah's safety and honor, which should have become even more important to him if Sarah was indeed pregnant. It may be significant that in this case it is Abraham who says "she is my sister" and not Sarah who says "he is my brother." Sarah may not have been willing to play the game any more, but Abraham forced her in to it.

Satan must have played a part in this also. He plays a part in every sin, but he would have been especially interested in letting Abimelech have sex with Sarah since that would have thrown doubt on the child she would bring into the world. And we see several times that the devil tries to cut the line which leads to the coming of the Messiah into this world. In the days of Esther he tries to exterminate the whole Jewish race. And after the captivity in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, he entices the returned captives to intermarry with the heathen nations, so that the Jewish identity would be wiped out. He had the same purpose in the days of Malachi. From Malachi 2:11,14,15 we understand that the coming of the Messiah according to the line God promised was endangered by Israel's practice of divorcing their Jewish wives and marrying heathen ones. The last belated effort was of course the massacre of the infants in Bethlehem.

Probably none of these thoughts played through Abraham's head at this time. His only concern was his own safety. How truly, says the author to the Hebrews, the fear of death makes us slaves of the devil. Heb.2:15 - "And (Jesus came to) free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death."

We do not know any of the details of what happened. Abraham must have had an audience with Gerar or with some one of his officials, maybe even with Sarah present. So Abimelech heard of Sarah and sent for her. There seems to have been no remonstrance from Abraham's side. Yet the whole atmosphere of the chapter seems to be one of respect for Abraham; there is nothing that sounds life-threatening. The lie seems to have been a matter of routine.

Verse 3 through 8 recount Abimelech's dream in which God warns him of the impending judgment. In the dream we find a mixture of moral concepts that are both acceptable and unacceptable to us. Adultery is presented as a deadly sin, but nothing is said about polygamy. Even in the New Testament we do not find any condemnation and then only implicit, of polygamy. In I Tim 3:2 Paul says: "Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach." It is this implied condemnation that makes us understand that a Christian should only be married to one woman.

It would of course be quite wrong to build a dogma favoring polygamy based on an omission in these verses. But it strikes us as strange that polygamy is one of the "gray" areas of the Bible.

Another strange thing is the lack of condemnation of Abraham's sin. The dream only condemns Abimelech. It is true that it is his dream and his conscience. Here again we cannot draw the conclusion that God's chosen ones would be free to sin as they please. The key to understanding this dilemma is probably in the fact that God protected Sarah and Isaac, not so much Abraham. Abraham told the lie in order

to protect himself. His life may have been much more in danger by his telling of the lie than without it. Of this side of the problem we read nothing though. This chapter deals mainly with Abimelech, not with Abraham.

We do not read how long Sarah was in Abimelech's harem. As we read in connection with the similar incident at Pharaoh's court in chapter 12, the time of preparation for a woman who was to be led to the king could be quite lengthy. In this case we only read that God appeared to Abimelech in a dream "one night." This must have been at least several weeks after Sarah moved in to Abimelech's, long enough to discover that a sickness was going around in the harem and maybe in the men's quarters too.

As we said, God does not condemn Abimelech for his polygamy; but he warns him about the consequences of committing adultery. In verse 7 we read: "Now return the man's wife, for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you and you will live. But if you do not return her, you may be sure that you and all yours will die." There is a touch of irony in the fact that God sends Abimelech to Abraham to be prayed for. This must have pricked Abraham's conscience deeply. His deceit is exposed, and God orders him to pray for those whom he deceived so that they will be healed. It would have been impossible for Abraham to pray effectively without confessing his sin before God and probably before Abimelech first. As Ps 66:18 says: "If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened." Abraham needed as much healing as Abimelech, and God provided this for both of them through Abraham's prayer.

Abimelech's following conversation with Abraham in vs.9-15 is very interesting. The king asks for an explanation and Abraham gives a rather lame one. Here we learn that the arrangement between Abraham and Sarah had been made in the beginning of their marriage as they set out together to follow the Lord's call. Abraham's excuse here was that he thought there would be "no fear of the Lord in this place." It turns out that Abimelech fears not only the Lord and obeys Him promptly, but behaves more 'like a Christian' than Abraham. Verse 15 is proof of this: "And Abimelech said, 'My land is before you; live wherever you like.'"

The Bible gives no further explanation about the blood relationship between Abraham and Sarah. Abraham calls her the daughter of his father but not of his mother. In mentioning this, Abraham says to Abimelech that he did not really tell a lie. Adam Clarke asks the pertinent question: "What is a lie?" In the literal sense of the word Abraham was right in that he had not said anything that was not true. But in keeping part of the truth back Abraham meant to deceive. A lie is made up not only of words but of attitudes and intentions also. Obviously Abraham had lied to Abimelech. But the problem went much deeper. The lie had been part of Abraham's marriage ever since the beginning. Truth is first of all "truth in the inner parts," as David puts it in Psalm 51:6.

There are situations, however, when we are dealing with evil people, where telling the whole truth would endanger people's lives and bring about disaster. I have to think of cases during World War II where it would have meant the death of Jews if the Germans had been told the truth about Jews being hidden at certain places. Some Christians have been able to save lives without telling lies - and yet they did not tell the whole truth either. All the ethical applications of such things have never been worked out yet. Abimelech's reaction is quite different from Pharaoh's. In Ch. 12:19,20 we read: "'Now then, here is your wife. Take her and go!' Then Pharaoh gave orders about Abram to his men, and they sent him on his way, with his wife and everything he had." But Abimelech wants Abraham to stay. Ch. 20:15 tell us: "And Abimelech said, 'My land is before you; live wherever you like.'" Abimelech must have seen something in Abraham that made him jealous. He may have had other, more down to earth reasons for his request too. It could be that Abraham's presence with his wealth and prestige would mean a boost to the image and economy of the country. Most likely Abimelech was afraid after what God had told him in the dream about Abraham. He may have thought that he would incur the wrath of the Lord upon himself and his people even further if he expelled Abraham.

It sounds ironic that Abimelech, speaking to Sarah, calls Abraham "your brother." There may be a whole world of ancient politeness hidden behind those words. In some cultures any reference to a marriage relationship cannot be mentioned by a man in front of a woman.

Another interesting feature is Sarah's public vindication. Abimelech pays a fine, much in the same way as some of the mountain tribes people in Irian Jaya would pay in similar cases. It makes one wonder if some of the same animistic superstitions that are customs in Indonesia were already alive here. Then Sarah is pronounced free of any blame in the affair although she is reported to have told the lie also according to verse 5. The only innocent party, according to the culture of that time, was Abimelech; and he is the one who has to pay! If a comparison with the above mentioned tribal philosophy is correct, Abimelech must have believed that Abraham could have used his spiritual powers to harm the Philistine king and his people. If

that is true, it would explain why Abraham is treated with so much respect. Pharaoh, who was considered a son of the gods himself, possessing spiritual powers, had no reason to fear Abraham, the Nomad. That is why Abraham was expelled from Egypt.

If the above is true, it shows how much the religion of Canaan had deviated from the truth, such as Abraham knew it. God was still known and there were pockets of true service to God as we found in the story of Melchizedek, but generally speaking; the God the Philistines knew was not the God Who had revealed Himself before in history. That is probably why four centuries later the moral practices of the Canaanites have made the country ripe for destruction. Prov.29:18 says: "Where there is no revelation, the people cast off restraint; but blessed is he who keeps the law." Mans' knowledge of God is dependent upon God's revelation.

Then Abraham prays for Abimelech, his wife and his concubines, and they are healed of their infertility. As *The Pulpit Commentary* suggests, probably a sickness that was known to cause infertility had broken out in the king's palace. It would have taken several months to discover that the women were barren and under the circumstances, with Sarah being probably pregnant, she could hardly have spent more than a couple of weeks in the king's harem, without giving birth or showing signs of pregnancy.

As we mentioned before, Abraham's prayer must have been a moral chastisement for himself. His relationship with God must have been broken during this episode. Abraham's prayer was meant to bring healing just as much to Abraham as to Abimelech.

Linked to this event is the treaty between Abraham and Abimelech, which is mentioned at the end of the next chapter.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

This chapter deals with three different topics.

Vs.1-7 The birth of Isaac.

Vs.8-21 The expulsion of Ishmael and Hagar.

vs.22-34 The treaty between Abraham and Abimelech.

The birth of Isaac.

It is not necessary to conclude from verse 1 and 2 that Sarah only became pregnant after the episode that is told in the previous chapter. All depends on the interpretation of the sentence "I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son," in chapter 18:14. Since we cannot be sure of the exact interpretation of those words, we cannot be sure about the beginning of Sarah's pregnancy either.

The first thing that strikes us in the opening verse of this chapter are the words: "The LORD was gracious to Sarah as He had said." Both the KJV and the RSV translate this with "And the LORD visited Sarah as he had said." Obviously, this does not refer to the visit of the Lord and the angels described in chapter 18. The fact that Sarah became pregnant was the result of God's visit or God's grace. It is interesting to note that the Hebrew word has a double meaning, which implies that the presence of the Lord and the grace of the Lord are inseparable. God and grace are identical. In other words: God is grace. This synonym is of the same order as in John's words: "God is love" in I John 4:8. There is a parallel between this verse and the visit of the angel Gabriel to Mary. There is an enormous difference between the two stories too, of course, because Sarah's conception of Isaac took place during normal intercourse with her husband Abraham. But for the presence of the power of the Lord Sarah, would not have become pregnant. Therefore the words addressed to Mary can at least in part be applied to Sarah also. "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God." (Lk. 1:35)

Hebrews 11:11 adds another feature by mentioning that faith played an important role. We read: "By faith Abraham, even though he was past age; and Sarah herself was barren; was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise." Although only the faith of Abraham is mentioned in the above verse, we may presume that the faith of Sarah had an equal share in this. The grace and the presence of the Lord imply the power of the Lord to make the miracle happen, but the miracle will not happen without faith of the human being involved. In a sermon I heard lately, the preacher made the important statement "God's promises are not self-fulfilling." How true this is!

In our modern time and age, we have lost the understanding of the part God plays in pregnancies. Most people are so preoccupied with sex and so bent on preventing pregnancy, that the miracle of conception has lost its splendor. Only when things go wrong and a couple that wants children finds themselves unable to have them, do people come to the conclusion that there is more in pregnancy than meets the eye. But even then God is very rarely drawn into the picture. Sarah knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that it was by the grace of God that she had become pregnant. Blessed is the woman who know she is pregnant by the grace of God. The exceptions, such as Sarah and Mary should show us that normal, natural pregnancies are acts of God's grace. In saying this I am not making any statement against or in favor of birth control. I am talking about the beginning of human life and the miracle of it.

Verse 3 tells us that Abraham gave his son the name "Laughter" or "Isaac." Sarah had laughed in unbelief, when during her eavesdropping, she had overheard God's announcement.²³⁰ Then Sarah had lied about it. God had turned Sarah's laugh of unbelief into a laughter of joy. God's miracles make us laugh. God is a God of joy. Jesus demonstrates the joy of the Lord a few times, hours before He died on the cross, when He prayed for His disciples. He leaves them His glory and His love. John 16:20-22 He says: "I tell you the truth, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy. A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world. So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy."

Verse 3 and 4 tell us that Abraham gave his son the name Isaac and that he circumcised him on the eighth day. It does not say specifically that Isaac received his name on the eighth day although it seems that it became a tradition in Israel to postpone the giving of the name till the day of circumcision. We read in Luke 2:21 "On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise him, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he had been conceived."

Isaac's circumcision is done in obedience to God's command to Abraham in Ch. 17:12 "For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner; those who are not your offspring." Isaac was the object of God's covenant with Abraham, and so this circumcision was of great importance; it was proof of Abraham's understanding that God had kept the promise which he had received when he was first called. Isaac was God's promise. God's promise is a person of flesh and blood. In this sense Isaac was the image of our Lord Jesus Christ. God's Word, that is God's promise, has become flesh, as John puts it in John 1:14.

The question as to when Isaac was weaned has been a point of controversy for centuries. From *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* I quote: "At what time children were weaned among the ancients is a disputed point. St. Jerome says there were two opinions on this subject. Some hold that children were always weaned at five years of age; others, that they were not weaned till they were twelve. From the speech of the mother to her son, 2 Mac. vii 27, it seems likely that among the Jews they were weaned when three years old: 'O my son, have pity upon me that bare thee nine months in my womb, and gave thee suck three years, and nourished thee and brought thee up.' And this is farther strengthened by 2 Chron. xxxi. 16, where Hezekiah, in making provision for the Levites and priests, includes the children from three years old and upwards; which is a presumptive proof that previously to this age they were wholly dependent on the mother for their nourishment. The term among the Mohammedans is fixed by the Koran, chap. xxxi. 14, at two years of age."

The general idea seems to be that at a certain age the male child is transferred from the mother's care to the father. This event was celebrated with a feast.

The expulsion of Ishmael and Hagar.

It was during this celebration where everyone was present that Ishmael mocked. No further details are given about what happened. The RSV translates vs.9 - "But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac." This seems to me a rather weak translation. If Ishmael had done nothing more than innocently play with his step brother, Sarah overreacted. We may presume that Ismael poked fun not only at Isaac, but more specifically at Sarah and probably his attitude was the result of disparaging remarks his mother had made. This makes Sarah blow up, and the feast probably ended in a disaster.

²³⁰Gen.18:12-14

There are two ways to look at this incident. Superficially, it seems that Sarah and Hagar had some personality problems. The incident described here looks like a continuation of the clash that started in chapter 16:4 and following verses. But either by intuition or by spiritual insight, Sarah insists with Abraham, that Hagar and her son no longer stay in the family. Sarah must have used some strong language. Vs.10 says: "Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac." There was obviously no love lost between Sarah and Hagar. But what sounds to us as carnal pride seems to hit the core of the issue, that is the inheritance. Not only would Abraham have divided his possessions between the two boys, but they both would have been able to claim his name. The issue is God's promise, that is the coming of the Savior Jesus Christ. That is why God sides with Sarah, not because she is right in her attitude, but she is right in her presumption.

Paul spiritualizes this incident in Gal.4:22-24 and 28-31. We read: "For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. His son by the slave woman was born in the ordinary way; but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a promise. These things may be taken figuratively, for the women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar." and "Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. At that time the son born in the ordinary way persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now. But what does the Scripture say? "Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman's son." Therefore, brothers, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman."

Obviously, Sarah had nothing of the sort of thought that Paul expounds in mind. Even if she would have been able to think that far, she would not have come any further than a vague hope about the coming of a Messiah. Of forgiveness of sin and justification by faith, she knew nothing. She could not know that Isaac, who was the fulfillment of God's promise to her, would be the embodiment of all God's promises to all men, always. But God knew and God told Abraham that Sarah was right.

Abraham became very upset about Sarah's demand. We understand from verse 11 that Abraham loved Ishmael and really considered him to be his son. According to *The Adam Clarke's Commentary*, does Sarah not only demand that Abraham send Ishmael and Hagar away, but that he divorce her. The Hebrew word used is "garash," which is used also in Lev 21:7 "They must not marry women defiled by prostitution or divorced from their husbands, because priests are holy to their God." So Sarah demands a legal action. Probably when she said "garash" she thought that Abraham should sell Hagar and Ishmael to someone else. But this Abraham was not ready to do.

The important lesson for us in this is that if the word "garash" implies legal action, then our salvation through faith in Jesus Christ is based upon God's legal action also. Paul does not just give a random illustration in Galatians chapter four. He points to the basis for our justification before God.

God tells Abraham not to be distressed. The matter is hard to understand for us because we think in terms of natural affection. We believe it is commendable that Abraham did not want to send his first son away because of the coming of Isaac. We should not use this chapter to justify favoritism of a parent. As far as emotional family ties are concerned Abraham's reluctance is exemplary. But the matter is probably not as easily defined as that. Abraham probably had some feelings of guilt toward Hagar and Ishmael. He may have said to himself over the years that he had been wrong in making Hagar pregnant. Now to send them both away would be unethical, and he would feel even more guilty in doing so. The fact that God tells Abraham to listen to Sarah does not negate any of the above. We may take Abraham's reluctance as an example.

But what God says to Abraham in his struggle also contains some deep lessons for us in dealing with past sins, guilt and forgiveness. Abraham gives the impression of never having forgiven himself about his affair with Hagar. God has performed a tremendous miracle for Abraham and Sarah. It seems that Sarah had the better understanding of this. Abraham missed out on something, because of his past sins. The birth of Isaac was life out of death; life of the same order as the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus' resurrection was preceded by His death on the cross. We will never be able to live the new life if we have not come to terms with the death that atoned for our sins. God wants Abraham to know that he is a new creature; that the old has past and the new has come.

There is also the lesson that family affection, although it is a gift of God, should not become an obstacle in our following of God. That is why Jesus says in Luke 14:26 - "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters; yes, even his own life; he cannot be my disciple."

God promises Abraham that, for the sake of Abraham, Isaac will become a great nation also. As a matter of fact, I believe there are more Arabs in the world at present than Jews. And probably, if we look at the situation in terms of spiritual promises, there are more Muslims than adherents to the Judeo-Christian faith. It is hard to accept, however, that the religion of Mohammed would be as much a fulfillment of God's promise as the coming of Christ into this world. If we accept that Jesus Christ is the Word of God, who became flesh, we cannot at the same time believe that Mohammed was God's prophet and that Islam is the end of all revelation. We hold to the truth of Peter's words in Acts 4:12 about our Lord Jesus Christ: "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."

In a certain way Abraham's experience in sending Ishmael away was a preparation for the sacrifice of his son Isaac we read about in the next chapter. Abraham learned how to deal with his feelings in obeying the will of God in a situation that did not seem to make sense.

Verse 14 tells us that Abraham did not waste any time in obeying. As soon as he knows the will of God, he obeys. "Early the next morning....," that is at the first opportunity, Hagar and Ishmael are sent on their way. The situation must have looked familiar to Hagar; she had gone through this before. We read the account of Hagar's first flight into the desert in Ch. 16:6-16. Bible critics see a double in the two accounts because of their similarity, but there is no reason to believe this to be true. There must be more than fifteen years between the two events. The first time Hagar fled, here she is sent away. When she fled she was pregnant, now her son is a teenager of about seventeen or eighteen. Adam Clarke suggests that Abraham must have given Hagar and Ishmael enough food and drink to make it to the next well, which Hagar missed. It is likely that Hagar followed more or less the same route as the one she had followed before, which led her in the direction of Egypt.

By missing the well, which she must have passed at a very close distance, she thinks that she has missed her chance for survival and she panics. The well in question was probably the same that Abraham mentions later on in this chapter in the presence of Abimelech and Phicol. In vs.30 and 31 we read: "He [Abraham] replied, 'Accept these seven lambs from my hand as a witness that I dug this well.' So that place was called Beersheba, because the two men swore an oath there." So Abraham must have sent Hagar to the well he had dug himself, for we are told that Hagar was wandering around in the desert of Beersheba.

The scene of Hagar putting Ishmael under the shade of a bush and sobbing at a distance is a pathetic one. Ishmael must have been parched at this point, and he is crying also because when God talks to Hagar, He mentions the crying of the boy. The worst thing parents can go through is the suffering of their children. It is much worse than any personal suffering. Hagar is sure that her son is going to die, and she cannot face that. She is convinced that the situation is so hopeless that even her presence with Ishmael will not alleviate the pain.

Again we see that God's pity is greater than ours. Ishmael's moans and his cries pierce the heart of God more than they pierce Hagar's. Vs.17 tells us "God heard the boy crying." The omniscient God hears every sound in the world. So the mention of the particular cry of a child is mentioned to show that God loves him even more than his mother will ever be able to love him. The same God, who revealed Himself to Hagar in chapter 16:8-13 speaks to her again and pronounces Ishmael alive. The promise "I will make him into a great nation," suggests that God sees life flow through Ishmael into generations to come. Dead bodies do not beget children. God tells Hagar that He needs Ishmael as a link to future generations. It is true that salvation is from the Jews, as Jesus says in John 4:22, but God loves the Arabs. "Friends of Israel" should keep this in mind!

In vs.19 we read: "Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. So she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink." God does not perform a miracle in the sense that He produces a well where there was none before. Sadness and sorrow often have a blinding effect on people. It cuts us off from reality. The devil manipulates our feelings very cleverly. It is the comfort of God's promise to Hagar that brings her back to reality. God opens her eyes. That is why it is important that we praise the Lord when sorrow or even disaster falls upon us. Thanking God will keep us in touch with reality. The well is there, the only thing we need is an eye-opener.

Isaiah 6:10 gives us a picture of what sin does. We read: "Make the heart of this people callused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed." Isaiah was not ordered to cause callousness, deafness and blindness; but he was to awaken the people of Israel to the reality of their sinful condition. Sorrow and despair can have the same effect upon us because they are the offspring of sin.

So Ishmael survived, probably because of the well his father had dug before. He and his mother settled in the desert of Paran. He eventually married an Egyptian girl. "God was with the boy," we read. If the Pentateuch had been written by some Jewish priests after the return of Israel out of captivity with the purpose of giving the nation a history to be proud of and to establish a historical foundation for the priesthood, as Wellhausen claimed, stories like these would not have occurred in it. These verses say that God loved and blessed the ancestry of the nations that were Israel's arch-enemies.

The treaty between Abraham and Abimelech.

The concluding verses of this chapter, vs.22-34, give us the account of another encounter between Abraham and the Philistine king Abimelech, who is accompanied by his army general Phicol. Superficially, it seems an amicable encounter; but I suspect that there is more in it than meets the eye.

In chapter 20 we speculated on the significance of the difference in treatment Abraham received in Egypt and in Gerar. He told the same lie at both places. In the above chapter we said: "Abimelech must have believed that Abraham could have used his spiritual powers to harm the Philistine king and his people. If that is true, it would explain why Abraham is treated with so much respect. Pharaoh, who was considered a son of the gods himself, possessing spiritual powers, had no reason to fear Abraham, the Nomad. That is why Abraham was expelled from Egypt." It seems to me that Abimelech's kind attitude toward Abraham is inspired by his fear of him and the divine powers he supposedly possessed. The king wants to make sure that Abraham is not going to turn against him at a later time and use his connections with the supernatural to destroy the Philistine nation.

In the light of the missionary work we have been doing in Indonesia, this opens a whole can of worms. Oftentimes the people to whom we preach the Gospel do not hear what we say. Almost everything we proclaim is interpreted in the light of their own world philosophy. Unless the written Word of God becomes rooted into the culture of a people, the devil will find ways to twist and turn the truth into patterns of their old animistic beliefs. I am afraid that Abraham and Abimelech were not talking about the same God either the first or the second time they met.

There is no doubt in my mind that Abraham knew God, probably better than many a Spirit-filled Christian in our times although he had some patterns of behavior that fell short of the standard of New-Testament ethics. But Abimelech only knew of God. His relationship with God was not based on love and submission. He treated God as he treated his idols, trying to limit His destructive supernatural powers for his self-preservation. I find that if we interpret Abimelech's attitude to Abraham in the light of the above, most of it makes sense.

Basically, what Abimelech says to Abraham in verse 22,23 is: "Do not use your supernatural powers to destroy us." Evidently Abimelech had interpreted Abraham's lie about Sarah as an attempt to bring about destruction of his nation. Abraham's explanation that he himself had been afraid and that he had told the lie in order to save his own life had been heard but not believed. Abimelech as a heathen would not have believed for one moment that a man who had received divine revelations and promises that reached into eternity would have been afraid for his own life. Heathen are excellent judges about the implications of real faith in God. Abimelech knew much better than Abraham himself, that Abraham had no reason to fear. How embarrassing! And what a lesson!

How can someone, who is afraid himself, convince someone else that there is no reason to be afraid? How can we preach, if we do not practice what we preach? When Abraham deceived Abimelech, he virtually shut the door for this man's salvation. Humanly speaking there was no hope that the Philistine king would ever understand that the God of Abraham was a God of love, a shield and an exceeding great reward. The only thing we can say is: "What is impossible with men is possible with God." (Luke 18:27)

Abimelech differed from the animistic tribes I mentioned above in his understanding of the value of a promise. He made Abraham swear by God. This does not necessarily imply that he trusted the same God. The policy of the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar centuries later was to make the people he subjected swear by the god they served. We read in II Chr.36:13 about king Zedekiah: "And he also rebelled against king Nebuchadnezzar, who had made him swear by God: but he stiffened his neck, and hardened his heart from turning unto the LORD God of Israel." (KJV) The implication is that there was some understanding about ethical absolutes. So Abraham swore and Abimelech's heart was put at ease.

Abraham still has one point on his agenda that has to be discussed: the well. There evidently had been a skirmish between Abimelech's servants and the servants of Abraham about this well. The account of this is not given to us. We could conjecture that the well had been filled by in by Abimelech's servants to

make Abraham understand that he was not welcome in that part of the country and that because of this Hagar had initially been unable to find it. But we do not know if any such thing happened. We do not even know if Abraham ever heard about the adventure Hagar and Ishmael had. But in as much as Abimelech had made Abraham understand that he was a welcome sojourner in the land of the Philistines, Abraham wants this misunderstanding cleared up.

The way this is done is hard for us to understand. Abraham makes a gift of seven ewes to Abimelech. This can hardly be seen as a gift for a well that Abraham claimed to be his. It could be, however, that Abraham felt that he had to pay for digging a well in land that had been claimed by someone else. But this may only be the interpretation given by a Westerner in the light of his own background and culture. Honestly, we do not know. But, the present is accepted, and the well become a monument because of the swearing ceremony that took place at this spot. Obviously, the exchanges of oaths had nothing to do with the wells but with the mutual security of the two powerful men. Abraham may have indulged in some political maneuvering. He paid for the well, so that he could claim that the swearing ceremony had taken place on his property.

The well of Bersheeba later became the boundary of the land of Israel. At this moment Abraham makes it into a shrine. We read in vs.33: "Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba, and there he called upon the name of the LORD, the Eternal God." It is not clear whether Abraham planted one tree, or a grove, as the KJV translates it. About this verse Adam Clarke comments: "On this important passage Dr. Shuckfords speaks thus: 'Our English translation very erroneously renders this place, he called upon the name of Jehovah; but the expression never signifies "to call upon the name"; kara beshem signifies 'to invoke in the name,' and seems to be used where the true worshippers of God offered their prayers in the name of the true Mediator.' I believe this to be a just view of the subject, and therefore I admit it without scruple." It is not completely clear to me what is meant by this comment. Abraham can hardly have had any understanding of a mediator in the sense that we know our Lord Jesus Christ. The sacrificial animal probably had no other significance for him than a cover for his sin. If the interpretation of this verse by Dr. Shuckfords is correct and Abraham interceded for the Philistines in the Name of the LORD, then we are looking at a precious moment in Abraham's fellowship with God. It means that he must have understood Abimelech's fears and faulty picture of God, and he prayed for him and his people, much in the same way as he had prayed for Sodom and Gomorrah before.

The expression "the LORD, the Eternal God" is in Hebrew "Yehovah el olam," that is "Jehovah, the strong God, the eternal one." This is the first time this designation is applied to God in the Bible. The use of this name for God implies that Abraham drew a line from time and space to eternity and looked at his moment in time in the light of eternity. In his essay *What if this were the world's last night,* C.S. Lewis uses an illustration of a woman who buy a piece of cloth. In order to judge the true color of the material she takes in outside to see what it looks like in the daylight. The lesson is that we should judge our lives and acts in a different light from our own. It is not easy to rise above the boundaries of our daily life and try to look at ourselves from God's perspective. We very rarely know what we are doing or understand the significance of our acts. More than in anything else, Jesus shows the perfection of His humanity in that He pauses from time to time to connect the transient moment with the transcendent God. Commenting on the faith of the Roman centurion in Matt. 8:10-12 He says: "I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Genesis 22 is one of the great chapters of the Bible. It deals with the most fundamental issues of human life and the basic principles of our relationship with God. It also takes us to the mountaintop of faith and it contains a prophecy regarding the most important day in the history of our planet. Abraham demonstrates that he loves "the LORD [his] God with all [his] heart and with all [his] soul and with all [his] strength." (Deut.6:5) It is a deeply moving account in every respect.

The chapter starts out by saying that God put Abraham to the test. The KJV uses the expression "God did tempt Abraham," but the modern meaning of the word "tempt" as an attempt to make one fall in sin makes this word unacceptable. Here again we can say that the omniscient God did not need the proof of Abraham's faith. The test was not for God's benefit, but for Abraham's and for us.

There are at least two other Scripture references that mention the testing of Abraham. The first one is Heb 11:17-20 "By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, Even though God had said to him, 'It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.' Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death."

The second we find in James 2:21-24 "Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,' and he was called God's friend. You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone."

To start with the latter, James connects Abraham's testing with his justification when God counted Abraham's faith as righteousness. James' approach to the subject has caused a lot of controversy, and some people, like Luther, accused him of perverting the true faith. But what James did was only showing that Abraham's faith, which caused him to be justified before God, resulted in this sacrifice, which justified him before man. We find the words "Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness" in Ch. 15:6, which describes an event that took place at least thirty years or more before the one we find in Ch. 22.

James' important contribution to the subject is that Abraham's act of surrender of that which is the most precious to him is based upon the work of grace that God had started in him years before. Abraham's faith was a living thing, which demonstrated itself in heroic acts of self-denial. It also brought Abraham in this unique relationship of personal friendship with God, which means that God took him into His confidence. We do not find the term "God's friend" in the account of the sacrifice. It is borrowed from Isaiah 41:8, where God says: "But you, O Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, you descendants of Abraham my friend."

The writer to the Hebrews comments on Abraham's reasoning in bringing this sacrifice. The text emphasizes the paradox of the act. After all, there was God's promise that Isaac would be the father of many nations. It made no sense that God would demand that Abraham kill his son, and yet that was apparently the case. Abraham's solution to the problem was that God would have to raise him from the dead. We see that faith is connected to logic. The contradiction was on the surface, not in the core. Abraham's faith was not an "upper story" experience, to use the phrase that Francis Schaeffer made popular. Abraham's hope for the resurrection also saw him through the emotional turmoil of his three days' trip to Mount Moriah. But we are running ahead here.

There is no way of knowing when this event took place and how old Isaac was at this point. The only thing we are told is that it happened "some time later." The fact that Isaac carried the wood for the sacrifice, as we read in vs.6, indicates that he would be a boy, strong enough to carry a load. He would at least have been a teenager. But that is the only firm conclusion we can draw. To make him 33 years old, just because the story foreshadows the death of our Lord Jesus Christ, is pure conjecture.

The dialogue of the first two verses is a startling one. God calls Abraham's name, and Abraham responds as a slave would to his master, ready to receive orders. The difference is that the order given is a highly personal one, such as no slave would ever be asked to perform. The first conclusion we must draw is that serving God involves all. We are called to serve God with everything we have and are. Our family and all the relationships of our human life are included in this.

The test does not come to Abraham as an academic question, such as "if you would be requested to do such and such, would you do it?" The devil often uses hypothetical cases to make us afraid. God does not do that. He demands obedience in well defined, specific cases. That is why we should not ask ourselves the question whether we would obey if we were asked to sacrifice one of our children. That would only cause unnecessary inner conflicts. It would also be immoral, because murder is sin.

The fact that Abraham was asked to perform an act that was actually against the will of God, (Exodus 20:13 says: "You shall not murder,") raises some difficult questions. Oswald Chambers thinks that Abraham thought he heard God's voice, but he did not hear it clearly. What he pursued was his idea of the will of God. Our text does not leave us that option. A more blasphemous idea I read years ago in a Dutch Sunday School lesson, where it was suggested that the Jehovah Abraham knew was still close to the Canaanite deities, that demanded child sacrifices. The concept of the God of Israel had not evolved yet at that time. Such a Darwinistic approach to the story is unacceptable.

The problem is that God is very specific in His demand. It is impossible to misunderstand who God wanted and what God wanted to be done to him. Verse 2 says: "Take your son, your only son, Isaac,

whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about.” The only less defined part of the order was the place of sacrifice.

The only satisfactory explanation can be given if we see the whole story in a prophetic perspective. God did not want Abraham to murder his son, but He wanted to share with Abraham the feeling of a Father Whose Son would be murdered. Abraham was God’s friend, as James correctly states. And friendship consists in the sharing of joy and sorrow. God had the death of Jesus on the cross of Calvary in mind when He asked Abraham to sacrifice Isaac.

We may object that Abraham could not have understood the lesson. But the fact that Abraham calls the place Jehovah-jireh indicates that he understood more than we would presume. In verse 14 we read: “And Abraham called the name of that place Jehovah-jireh: as it is said to this day, In the mount of the LORD it shall be seen.” (KJV)

Another amazing detail in God’s command is that the sacrifice is specified as a “burnt offering.” In Leviticus, we read the stipulations for the burnt offering.²³¹ The sacrifice could be made of various kinds of animals, such as bulls, rams or doves. Unlike any of the other sacrifices it was to be burnt up completely. The priest was allowed to keep the hide of the animal, but no part of it could be eaten by anybody. Also it had no connection with any sin committed. It was the most important of all the five categories of sacrifices that are mentioned in Leviticus, because it was the first of the list. It was “an aroma pleasing to the LORD.”

Like all sacrifices it portrayed the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ on the cross. But the emphasis of this sacrifice was different from the other ones. In three of the five sacrifices there is the feature of forgiveness of sin. The “guilt offering,” the “sin offering” and the “fellowship offering” were all connected with the havoc sin had caused in the relationship between God and man. In the “grain offering” the person who brought the sacrifice recognized God as his Creator and himself as the creature. It was the expression of an act of surrender of the human life that God had made. It said to God “You have the right to my life because You made me!” But the “burnt offering” has none of these features. It has nothing to do with any human sin or forgiveness of sin or with any human relationship. It is an expression of an act of surrender that is not of this earth. It is the seal of, what the epistle to the Hebrews calls, “the eternal covenant.” In Heb.13:20 we read: “May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep.” Before the world began, the Second Person of the Trinity surrendered to the First Person of the Trinity on the basis of eternal love. That is why Jesus is called “the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world.” (Rev.13:8)

In asking Abraham to sacrifice his son, his only son, Isaac, whom he loved, God drew Abraham into the mystery of the expression of “agape love” such as cannot be seen on earth. We grant that Abraham cannot have understood all of this, but there must have been something in the command that lifted his heart above all the reasoning of his head and carried him on a divine cloud those three days on the trail to the place where he saw the Lamb that God had prepared for him. If we leave this divine element out of the story, we are left with an immoral and inhuman trial of natural affections that would have led Abraham beyond the breaking point. God’s demand would have been more cruel than the rituals performed for Moloch, and Abraham’s obedience would have been an act of insanity.

God called Abraham by his new name “Abraham,” which means “father of many nations.” This adds another paradox to the call. Abraham is asked to put his new name on the altar. If Isaac were dead, this name would have become meaningless. This fact must also have been an indication to Abraham that God had more in mind than the killing of his son. That is where the writer to the Hebrews must have gotten the idea that Abraham reckoned on a resurrection. Heb.11:19 says: “Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death.”

Abraham’s obedience was immediate. He did not take a few days to think over God’s command or to let it sink in; he leaves the next morning. It sounds as if Abraham personally performs all the preparations for the trip. He saddles the donkey and cuts the firewood. This could mean, though, that he gave the orders. Two servants accompany them the first two days. We do not read whether Sarah was informed about the purpose of the trip; probably not. It would have added to the agony if Abraham would have drawn Sarah into this, and her opposition would have made Abraham’s obedience so much more difficult.

Initially, God had only indicated the general region in which the place of sacrifice lay. By the third day Abraham must have received more precise instructions. One of the general principles in obeying the Word of God is that more light is given as obedience progresses. These three days on the trail remind us of

²³¹ See Lev.1:3-17; 6:9-13

another period of three days of death which ended in a resurrection. The whole picture is full of details that run parallel to the actual event that is portrayed here, that is the death and resurrection of Jesus.

On the morning of the third day Abraham leaves the two servants behind and sets out with Isaac alone. Evidently, the servants had not been told the purpose of the journey. And even now they are left in the dark as to what is really going to happen. Thus far only God and Abraham know the secret. Had the servants known, they would probably have prevented Abraham from carrying out what he intended to do. After all you do not just let an old man go when you know he is going to kill his son. We read in verse 5: "He said to his servants, 'Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you.'" These words can be perceived either as a statement of faith or as an outright lie. Abraham was justified later in the day by the facts, but at this point he had no proof that Isaac would return with him. Yet, because of his faith in God, he was sure. He knew that God is the God of the living, not of the dead; and that God would not kill His own promise.

I think of Jesus' words to His disciples on the eve of His death on the cross. In John 14:18,19 He says: "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live." Yet Jesus had, humanly speaking, no more guarantee for His own resurrection than Abraham had for Isaac's. Both must have relied solely on the promise and character of God. Abraham's attitude is almost as victorious as Jesus'. We tend to think of Abraham as a poor old man, who is tested beyond endurance and for whom the three-day trip to Mount Moriah was sheer torture. Instead, we see a man who is radiant and confident, who proclaims victory over death.

The last stretch of the journey, which Abraham makes alone with Isaac, should have been the hardest; but here too we find the same joy and confidence as earlier on the trail. Isaac carries the firewood, Abraham the fire and the knife. Vs.7 and 8 give us one of the most heart piercing dialogues in the Bible. We read: "Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, 'Father?' 'Yes, my son?' Abraham replied. 'The fire and wood are here,' Isaac said, 'but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?' Abraham answered, 'God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.' And the two of them went on together." Isaac asks "Where is the lamb?" Abraham does not answer at this point "You are the lamb!" But he points to God as the provider. We do not hear any further questions. The phrase "And the two of them went on together" sounds laden with tension, but it can also represent a picture of joyful expectation of a miracle. Here again we have to pause and say to ourselves that if we leave God and the provision He is going to make for Abraham, Isaac and mankind, out of the picture, we get bogged down in a situation that is too horrible and too immoral to imagine. The point of this story is not that Isaac has to die, but that God substitutes for him.

The climax is reached in vs.9 and 10, when they reach the summit. God told Abraham where to build the altar. The Islam tradition has it that the rock, which presently is inside the mosque, which is called the Dome of the Rock, is the place. The Koran says, however, that it was Ishmael who was to be sacrificed. The problem connected with this adjustment: that this "mistake" was discovered almost four centuries after the facts, is simply ignored by the faithful. The rock in question was the place where the brass altar stood outside the temple. A visit to this place is still an impressive experience. Other traditions have it that the place of Abraham's sacrifice was the exact spot where later the cross was planted; that is, the hill of Golgotha. That would be only a few hundred yards away from the Dome. Nobody knows, and every theory about the location is pure speculation.

At this point Abraham must have revealed to Isaac what was going to happen. We do not read that Isaac put up any resistance. It would be hard to believe that Abraham, who was then one hundred fifteen or twenty years old, would have been able to overpower a strong young lad who wanted to fight for his life. We may presume that Isaac offered himself willingly. The picture of Isaiah 53:7 come before our eyes: "He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth." We do not know what kind of person Isaac was. We do not read about any rebellion in his life or even that he performed any amazing deeds. The most eventful happening is an argument about some wells in Ch. 26. Isaac seems to have had nothing of the features of a wild donkey like his step brother Ishmael. He probably did not have the spunk of his mother, and in chapter 26 he demonstrates the same fear for his life as his father had. This kind of meekness may have played a role in his lack of resistance. But I rather think that it was more the glow of his father's faith than anything else that made him decide to give up his life on Mount Moriah. And so he became in more than one sense an image of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This description of the sacrifice are very graphic. The Bible paints the picture before our eyes, stroke by stroke. Verse 9 and 10 - "Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son." There must have been some nervousness, betrayed by the trembling of a hand. Abraham cannot have done this in cold blood.

But then, as a flash of lightening comes the voice of the angel of the LORD. "Abraham! Abraham!" When we compare the call in verse 1 with the one in verse 11 we see the urgency of the moment in the repetition of the name. In verse 1 Abraham's name was called once and Abraham answered almost casually. He did not know what was coming. Here he expected the miracle, but the miracle came in quite a different way and shape than he anticipated. God never does what we think He will. In a certain way this was a let-down. There was no death and no resurrection. It was only the image of the real thing, not the thing itself. The writer to the Hebrews said: "Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death." (Heb.11:19) We see the figure of a resurrection. The real resurrection would have to wait another three centuries.

Yet, this was the day of Jesus Christ Abraham saw, according to Jesus' words in John 8:56 - "Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad." There was a death and a resurrection. It was not the death of Isaac, but of Abraham. Abraham had died when he showed his willingness to give up all he had. It had been a long process that started when God called him to give up his country, his people and his father's household to go to the land that God would show him.²³² There had been a great leap forward when he believed God and his faith was counted to him as righteousness.²³³ It had found its expression in the death of Sarah's womb and in his own body. The laughter at Isaac's birth had been the joy of resurrection. But the final death blow had been this experience of giving up Isaac. It is so much harder to die and keep on living than to die and be dead. This first kind of death is in the identification of the death of our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul says about this Gal.2:20 - "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." The only way to possess anything is to give it to the LORD and receive it back from His hand.

And there was the death and resurrection of Isaac. As we mentioned above, he did give himself up to be crucified with Christ; and for the rest of his life he lived this crucified life. As we will see later, it was not a life of perfection. Isaac did fall into the same sin as his father, at least at one point. And in his old days he had become indulgent to the point of using the powers of blessing that God had given him for his own satisfaction. But generally speaking, his was a life of peace, quietness and love. He learned the most important lesson a person can learn in his life when he was still young.

In vs.12 God's voice cancels the initial command for the sacrifice. "Do not lay a hand on the boy," he said. "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son." No, Abraham had not misunderstood God's initial command. True, God had pushed Abraham to the edge of human endurance and beyond and in a spiritual sense the sacrifice had been made, although not physically consummated. The reason given for the cancellation was "Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son." The phrase is pregnant with spiritual meaning.

The difference between a gift and a sacrifice lies in the totality. A gift may be a part of our possessions, a sacrifice is all of it, if not in quantity then in quality. A gift may include ulterior motives. A sacrifice is brought with a pure and single mind. The reason why Abraham did not give Isaac to God, but sacrificed him was that he feared God. This fear has no relationship with being afraid, but with being overwhelmed with a sense of awe and love. Abraham was at this moment the greatest realist in the world. He loved his son with his whole heart, he knew that his own place in world history would depend on what happened with his son, but he also knew that there were things beyond that which were of even greater significance than what he could see and touch. It is the fear of the Lord that gives meaning to our human existence. Our human love is based upon the love of God. Unless we love God more than anything else, we have no solid basis for our human love. If Abraham had loved Isaac more than God, he would have lost his son for eternity. In sacrificing him to the Lord, that is in recognizing the priority of God's love, he keeps him eternally.

²³²Gen.12:1

²³³Gen.15:6

Nobody in heaven will ever be able to better understand the depth of God's love in giving up His own Son than Abraham. He went through the agony himself. And yet in understanding, he only scratches the surface of God's love, because God's love is eternal. It is actually too bad that Abraham lived before Calvary, because this means that he did not fully understand what he was doing when he sacrificed Isaac. He looked forward to the lamb God would provide; we look back on the Lamb that was slain. Our difference in perspective should entail a difference in surrender. As C. T. Studd said: "If Jesus is God and gave Himself for me, than nothing I give to Him is too much."

After God has spoken to him for the second time Abraham sees the ram that is caught in the thicket. He needs no divine revelation to understand that God wants him to sacrifice the lamb instead of his son. Probably the ram had been there all the time while Abraham was busy building the altar and getting things ready for the sacrifice of Isaac, but he never saw it. God's provision had been there all the time. For us, for whom this provision has been made before we ever came into this world, the same thing goes; we are often too busy to see it. It was only after God had spoken to me, that I realized that no sacrifice on my part was needed, because God had provided one already for me.

Vs.14 is open for various translations. In the NIV we read: "So Abraham called that place The LORD Will Provide. And to this day it is said, 'On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided.'" The KJV brings out better the different shades of meaning by saying: "And Abraham called the name of that place Jehovah-jireh: as it is said to this day, In the mount of the LORD it shall be seen."

According to Adam Clarke the literal translation of "Jehovah-jireh" is "The Lord will see." But others translate the expression with "The Lord will be seen." Clarke says furthermore: "From this it appears that the sacrifice offered by Abraham was understood to be a representative one, and a tradition was kept up that Jehovah should be seen in a sacrificial way on this mount. And this renders the opinion on vs.1 more than probably, namely, that Abraham offered Isaac on that very mountain on which, in the fulness of time, Jesus suffered."

If the tradition of Islam is correct, at least as far as the location is concerned, the rock where Abraham offered his son Isaac, (not Ishmael) was the place where later the brass altar of the temple stood. It was the place where the shekinah glory appeared when the temple was built. When I say "tradition of Islam" it is understood, of course, that Mohammed adopted the existing traditions of his time.

Probably the best conclusion is that the word "jireh" expresses both the provision of the Lord and His presence. God provides by being there. That is implied in the Name "Immanuel" = "God with us" and in the fact that the Word became flesh.

In vs.15-18 we read that God speaks to Abraham for the second time that day to confirm the earlier promises of blessing. The blessing had never been based upon the obedience of Abraham, and even now this has not changed. God had promised the same things to Abraham, even before he left Ur. In Ch. 12:3 we read that God said: "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

And here in vs.17 and 18 - "I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, And through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me." The image of the stars was used already in Ch. 15:5 - "[God] took him outside and said, 'Look up at the heavens and count the stars; if indeed you can count them.'" Then he said to him, 'So shall your offspring be.' "The added part of the promise is the victory. "Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies." The KJV brings out the intent more clearly with the expression "and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies." The gate was the central place of authority. The promise goes farther than the future occupation of the land of Canaan by the people of Israel, it is a promise of victory over every form of evil. Jesus uses the expression in Mt. 16:18 "upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." (KJV)

As I said, Abraham's obedience does not change anything in the nature of the promise given, but it adds another dimension to it. From now on there is a relation of intimacy and friendship between God and Abraham. They went through the same painful experience together of giving up their son. A common bond of suffering melts hearts together, whether of man or God.

The story is almost too deep and wonderful to leave alone. It touches us in our deepest affections. We have to understand that it touches God in His deepest affections also. The closer we draw to our heavenly Father the more beautiful this episode in the life of Abraham will become for us. If we have discovered that nothing, *nothing* was too much for Him to give to us, then we will come to the point where

we realize that there is nothing that is too much for us to give to Him. The Apostle Paul captures this in Rom.8:31-39 - "What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all; how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died; more than that, who was raised to life; is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, Neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." ENOUGH!

The last five verses of this chapter inform us and Abraham about the descendants of Nahor, Abraham's brother. The obvious intent is to show the link between this chapter and the story that is told in chapter 24, where Isaac marries Rebekah. Abraham must have heard the word from travelers between Mesopotamia and Egypt. This would indicate that Beersheba was located on or in the vicinity of the travel route. We do not get the impression, however, that Abraham received news frequently from his homeland. After all Nahor did not have his twelve children in the space of one or two years. In leaving Ur and later Haran, he had effectively left his land and his father's house behind him. He had become a stranger in a foreign land.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Sarah died when one hundred twenty-seven years old. *The Pulpit Commentary* points out that she is the only woman in the Bible whose age at death is mentioned. The KJV renders the Hebrew repetition which the NIV omits, by saying: "And Sarah was an hundred and seven and twenty years old: these were the years of the life of Sarah." I am not convinced that the mention of her age has the significance that the commentary attaches to it. The implication is that, if Sarah was ninety when Isaac was born, she saw her son grow into manhood. He was thirty-seven years old when his mother died. This has some bearing on the story in the following chapter.

We are further told that she died at Hebron. At the end of the previous chapter we find Abraham living in Beersheba, which is about forty miles away. It is not clear whether Abraham had moved in the meantime, or whether he was moving around the country because of his flocks. We read that Abraham went to mourn for her. The KJV says: "and Abraham came to mourn for Sarah, and to weep for her," which may mean that Abraham was at Beersheba when his wife died, but this is not necessarily so.

Abraham observed certain ceremonies of mourning, that must have been customary to his time. We find similar ceremonies still being carried out in New Testament times. They are still being observed among some of the tribes in Irian Jaya. Among the latter there seems to be little emotional sorrow for the separation from a loved one. It seems to pertain more to the animistic notion that the spirit of the deceased could come back to the living and do harm and therefore it should be appeased by weeping and sometimes physical mutilation of one's own body, such as cutting off of fingers or ears. How much of this philosophy was present in Abraham's mourning, we do not know. We do not get the impression that it was only an expression of grief. It seems to have involved certain ceremonies, which are not described.

At the basis of such ceremonies lies the lack of understanding of life after death. There did not seem to be any rejoicing in the fact that a person, who had lived with God, had passed into glory. There should, of course, at every death be a healthy spontaneous outlet for emotions of grief because of the separation, but none, or very little of this seems to be present in the grieving ceremonies. Mourning ceremonies start at a pre-determined moment and they end when the time is up, not when there are no more tears left. The Apostle Paul says that the grieving of those who have no hope is based on ignorance. He says: "Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope."²³⁴

I have been trying to imagine what it would be like to lose a spouse in your old age. That seems to me the time when you need each other more than at any other moment. I have been praying that unless

²³⁴ I Thes.4:13

that Lord would decide to take us at the same time, He would take my wife first. I do not want her to go through the agony of separation. I trust that God's grace, the sweet assurance of His presence and the realization of glory into which the beloved has gone ahead, will sustain me and keep me from falling apart.

The rest of this chapter, from verse 3 through 20, gives us a very interesting sample of the custom of those days. Abraham decides that he wants to own a place where he can bury Sarah. Sarah's death emphasizes the reality of his condition. There is no square foot of ground in the whole land of Canaan that Abraham can call his own. He has been able to buy the water in a well from Abimelech but nothing more. The surrounding area does not even belong to him.

It is amazing how death makes us more realistic than life. It is when Sarah is dead that the fact stares Abraham in the face that he is an alien and stranger in the land in which he has lived most of his life. It makes one realize the truth of Ecclesiastes: "A good name is better than fine perfume, and the day of death better than the day of birth. It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of every man; the living should take this to heart. Sorrow is better than laughter, because a sad face is good for the heart. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure."²³⁵ The sarcasm of Solomon tells us that life has a tendency to distract us from the reality in which we live. Better would it be to say that sin in life has a dulling effect upon us. Death makes us think more clearly.

Abraham must have looked around before he faced the Hittites. He knew what he wanted to buy, and he probably knew how much he should pay for it. We learn that business in the olden days was different from our time. It was a ritual and part of a social event. Abraham does not just go in and pay. Being familiar with the customs of his time, he probably did not expect anything else. So Abraham makes a deal with the Hittites, particularly with Ephron, the son of Zofar for a cave which is called Machpelah, meaning "Double." It has been debated among scholars whether this means a cave within a cave, or a cave with two entrances, or a cave for two bodies. It must not have been a simple hole in the wall.

The Hittites address Abraham as "a mighty prince." "Nesi Elohim" literally means "a prince of God," according to Adam Clarke. It is not clear whether they would have looked at Abraham the same way as Abimelech did in chapter 20 and 21. Obviously, they do not display the same fear of him since they sell the cave and the surrounding field to Abraham for a good price. This, in spite of the show of generosity.

Abraham read between the lines without any difficulty. As Westerners we have a hard time negotiating with people who do not say what they mean. This is due to the fact that we do not know what they are supposed to mean. Abraham knew that he was not supposed to accept anything free of charge. And since Abraham was a very wealthy man, money was not a problem in the deal.

So the negotiations go back and forth. There is a middle man, which would not necessarily mean that Abraham did not know Ephron, as most commentators suppose. The use of a third party was probably part of the Eastern ritual of politeness. Abraham is more direct in his request, but of the selling party nobody says what he actually means. Finally, Abraham is made to understand that he can only have the cave if he buys the field also; the price for both being four hundred shekels of silver. There is no way of ascertaining how much this sum would amount to in modern day currency. We do get the impression, however, that it is not cheap. The Hittites must have realized that they had Abraham over a barrel and they took full advantage of it. We also get the impression that Abraham did not care how much he would pay. He had more important things on his mind than silver.

Stephen appears to make reference to this transaction in Acts where, when talking about Jacob's sons, he says: "Their bodies were brought back to Shechem and placed in the tomb that Abraham had bought from the sons of Hamor at Shechem for a certain sum of money."²³⁶ There seems to be some confusion in Stephen's speech between the deal Abraham made with Ephron and the purchase of a piece of ground by Jacob from Hamor. In Gen 33:19 we read: "For a hundred pieces of silver, he bought from the sons of Hamor, the father of Shechem, the plot of ground where he pitched his tent." A possible solution, which I find mentioned nowhere, would be that Sukkoth and Machpelah were the same place and that the Hittites of the area had simply reclaimed what they had sold so that Jacob had to buy it again. According to the Westminster Dictionary of the Bible, the Sukkoth of Jacob would be East of the Jordan river, which is a different place than Mahpelah, which is South of Jerusalem.

²³⁵ Eccl.7:1-4

²³⁶ Acts 7:16

We learn two things from this story: First, that the only piece of land Abraham ever possessed was a grave. This reminder of death accentuated the character of his pilgrimage as a stranger in the land. Abraham was rich in heavenly promises, but poor in earthly fulfillment's.

This is richly illustrated in Heb.11:9,10 and 13-16, where we read: "By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God." "All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country; a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them."

The second lesson is about politeness. The politeness in this story is obviously a veneer and not an inner value. Politeness has value if it is an expression of inner respect and love. Without an inner basis politeness becomes nothing more than a slick way of taking advantage of another person. We owe people respect because man is made in the image of God. If we love God we will love the people He made and we will be polite to them. As the Apostle John says in I John 4:20 - "If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen." God is polite to us, so we should be polite to one another.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR.

This chapter tells a romance in Old Testament setting. It is a romance of human love, showing how "the two get each other" and also a spiritual romance, in which a faithful servant trusts the Lord and experiences His guidance into the minutest detail.

We are told that "Abraham was now old and well advanced in years." This means that he was probably around 140. This would make Isaac about 40 years old. Abraham realizes that his son will have to get married, and he wants this to happen before he dies. He has seen enough moral decadence in Canaan to determine that a Canaanite woman would be Isaac's undoing. If we are correct in the assumption that Lot had married a girl from that land and Abraham had heard what happened to Lot after the destruction of Sodom, Abraham must have had ample reason for his decision.

His feeling of responsibility for his son's married bliss was probably in accordance with the custom of his time. God's words from Ch. 18:19 may have played a role in his attitude also. We read "For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him."

Anyhow, the time for action has come, and Abraham calls his trusted servant. He is probably the one Abraham mentions in chapter 15:2 who would inherit his estate: "Eliezer of Damascus." If he is the same man, he cannot have been that young himself. He was the head servant some sixty years earlier. Abraham has complete confidence in the man, who evidently shared not only Abraham's interests but also his faith in the living God.

The solemnity of the charge the servant receives is indicated by the oath he has to pronounce, accompanied by a rather unusual act: the laying of his hand under Abraham's thigh. According to *The Pulpit Commentary* the place indicates euphemistically the male organ. The only other place in Scripture where we find this gesture accompanying an oath is in Ch. 47:29, where Jacob requests Joseph to do the same.

The content of the oath is that Eliezer has to get a wife for Isaac from Abraham's family living in Aram Naharim or as the KJV puts it Mesopotamia. Eliezer does not foresee a difficulty locating a girl who wants to marry a rich man, but the big question will be whether the girl would be willing to leave her country, her people and her father's household and go to the land that God showed to Abraham.

We hit here upon one of the most important principles for a good marriage: Is the woman willing to follow the leading of the Lord? It has been my personal experience that the fact that God gave the same calling to me as to my wife bound us together more than any other factor. Eliezer asked the most important question there was to be asked in this situation. It shows that he was a man of high intelligence and deep spiritual insight. He knew what to look for.

Spiritual unity is the most important part of a marriage. It is true that “people who pray together, stay together.” This does not mean that other factors are of no importance, but without the first one there is no guarantee of success.

Another important charge the servant receives is that under no condition should Isaac be enticed to return to the place from which his father was delivered. Abraham had an experience Isaac had not had. Isaac was “a second generation Christian.” He lacked the experience of being brought out of darkness into God’s light. The faith of his parents has profoundly influenced him, and he must have come to a place of personal faith and surrender because he did give himself without any obvious struggle to become a sacrifice himself. But he never knew the horrors of idolatry firsthand as his father had. Canaan was full of idol worship, probably more so than Haran. But Abraham lived here as a stranger, and it was not difficult to distance himself. In Haran their own family practiced idolatry. For Abraham his leaving his country, his people and his father’s household had been final. It had been a way of no return. It is very important to burn your bridges behind you when following the Lord.

Abraham must have been very conscious of the fact that Isaac was to be the one through whom the Messiah was to come who would be the blessing for the whole earth. The choice of a wife had to be put against the background of this promise. The line would have to be kept pure. Isaac was, under no conditions, to go back. We will see later that this determination weakens as the generations progress. Isaac and Rebekah do not object against Jacob going to Haran to get a wife. The sharp lines of the promise had started to fade by then. For Abraham these lines were etched in his mind.

But yet Abraham is not dogmatic about the matter. He has learned to leave things in the hand of God. He has seen how God can make it seem as if all the promises and blessings are cancelled. He learned this lesson when he put Isaac on the altar and took up the knife to kill him. So here, too, he foresees the possibility that Isaac will not marry the way Abraham had planned it; and he keeps the possibility open for Eliezer to be free from his oath. That is an act of faith also.

In verse 9 we read that the servant stakes his life and his honor upon his word and swears the oath. From now on he will be solely responsible for the realization of God’s promise to save the world and conquer the devil. This is no overstatement. Eliezer may not have been able to put it in those words, but his undertaking was much more important than he thought. Anyhow he sets out as if the salvation of mankind depends on what he does, not knowing that it does! We should never underestimate the importance of our obedience to God. Its effects go far beyond the horizon of our life.

The place the servant set out to was Aram Naharaim. The Westminster Dictionary of the Bible says about this: “Aram of the Rivers, referring either to the Euphrates and Tigris, or, more probably, to the Euphrates and Khabur. It is commonly believed that in this region Paddan-Aram, was situated. (Ch. 28:5; 24:10). This is the Aram where the Patriarchs dwelt before they went to Canaan, where the ancient cities of Haran and Nisibis stood, where later Edessa, the noted seat of Syrian culture, arose; the Aram which the Hebrews speak of as, ‘Beyond the River’ (II Sam. 10:16).”

The “all kind of good things” mentioned in verse 10 included the bride price, part of it which was produced in vs.22 and the rest in vs.53. We do not read that Abraham was even consulted about these things.

We do not read anything about the journey, which must have taken several weeks, during which Eliezer passed through his own country where Abraham must have bought him. If the thought of defecting and going home ever played in Eliezer’s mind, he must have dismissed it promptly. The next thing we know, he arrives at his destination.

He stops at the outside of the town of Nahor at the well where the women would come to draw water late in the afternoon after the heat of the day. And he prays. His prayer is given in vs.12-15. We do not know if Eliezer was in the habit of praying. He does not address God as his personal God but as the God of his master Abraham. And he furnishes God with all kinds of information that shows that he did not have too much of an idea of God’s omniscience. But his prayer is very practical and to the point. He does not address God as a territorial deity; otherwise, a prayer to the God of Abraham, who was in Canaan, would not have had any effect in Haran. His prayer is also completely unselfish. He does not ask anything for himself. It is not for his sake that he has to succeed. He wants God to show kindness to Abraham, not necessarily to himself. He gets more than he asks for.

Verse 14 says: “May it be that when I say to a girl, ‘Please let down your jar that I may have a drink,’ and she says, ‘Drink, and I’ll water your camels too’-- let her be the one you have chosen for your servant Isaac. By this I will know that you have shown kindness to my master.” It is obvious that he believes in the divine purpose of this trip; consequently, he expects an immediate answer. As George Mueller discovered

centuries later, when you know a prayer is according to the will of God, you can expect an immediate answer.

Before he said “amen” his prayer was being answered. Enter Rebekah, a most beautiful girl, who fulfills all the requirements of the prayer. She gives a drink to Eliezer and then waters the camels. There must have been several men with Eliezer, but none of them stirs; it is Rebekah who runs down to the well and brings up the heavy water jar, which she probably carries on her head. The description of her action as well as of Eliezer’s attitude is very graphic. We get the impression that Moses enjoyed the details of this story very much. We should remember that all this was probably put on paper several centuries later. The tradition must have been repeated orally from generation to generation: “This is the way our grandfather Isaac got his wife!”

Vs.21 gives an interesting picture: “Without saying a word, the man watched her closely to learn whether or not the LORD had made his journey successful.” Eliezer said to himself: “Is this really true?” He got exactly what he had asked for and that without any delay. It was too good to be true. When Rebekah is done, Eliezer produces his first gifts: a golden nose ring and two bracelets, the weights of which are given as “a beka” and “ten shekels.” That was an expensive drink for men and beasts!

Only then Eliezer finds out that he is talking to Isaac’s niece, the grand daughter of Abraham’s brother Nahor. This brings him to an act of worship. The prayer he then utters was probably and audible one, in contrast to the first one, just previous to Rebekah’s arrival. He says in verse 27: “Praise be to the LORD, the God of my master Abraham, who has not abandoned his kindness and faithfulness to my master. As for me, the LORD has led me on the journey to the house of my master’s relatives.”

Then the story gains momentum. Rebekah runs home and tells her mother. The women probably had separate living quarters, but soon the men find out too. And Laban, Rebekah’s brother, who was most likely the interested party in any bride price deal, and whom we will get to know later in chapter 29-31 hurries to the place where Rebekah met Eliezer. The sight of the nose ring and the bracelets have probably increased his speed.

Later, we get to know Laban as a cunning schemer, but here he appears very accommodating and gracious. He even uses the right kind of religious language although we learn later that he kept idols in his house.²³⁷ Rebekah evidently had told him of Eliezer’s prayer.

Hospitality was probably a common virtue in those days in Haran too. Even without the expensive gifts Eliezer would not have had trouble finding a place to overnight. But the fact that he is connected to the family gives considerable weight to the matter. They have to take him in. Here we learn for the first time that there were other men in the party.

How conscientious a man Eliezer is we see from his refusal to eat before he has discharged his commission. His priorities are spiritual, and he knows that nothing can detract so much from things that have spiritual importance as food and comfort. His hosts get the signal that the message is urgent. The introduction in vs. 34-41 has more than psychological importance although that is an important part of the message.

Probably for the first time Laban and Bethuel hear about Abraham’s condition. At least this would be the first time they get a firsthand report. Eliezer starts out by briefly sketching Abraham’s wealth in vs. 35. Isaac’s miraculous birth is mentioned in vs.36, probably more details were given than we read here. Vs.37-41 tell the story of the oath, with strong emphasis upon the willingness of Isaac’s bride-to-be to come and live in Canaan. All this proves that Eliezer is a man of high intelligence.

The repetition of what happened at the well is meant to show that there is a supernatural feature in all the events. Eliezer may have initially given the impression that he was a little too liberal with his master’s gold, as if he wanted to buy the affection of Rebekah and her family. The nose ring and bracelet stand in a different light against the background of the prayer at the well and its prompt answer.

I am also sure that Moses delighted in repeating this part of the story so that he could paint the character of the servant in live colors and also give us this delightful taste of God’s pleasure in human romance.

A last masterly touch is the mention of the second prayer at the well. Eliezer says: “I praised the LORD, the God of my master Abraham, who had led me on the right road to get the granddaughter of my master’s brother for his son.” He puts Bethuel and Laban in a position where they can hardly refuse now. If they would say “no” it would be a refusal of the hand of God. And who would want to go on record as one who disagrees with God’s guidance? Eliezer’s words are both spiritually true and good diplomacy!

²³⁷Gen.31:30-35

In vs. 50 we meet Bethuel personally for the first time. His name has been mentioned before as the father of Rebekah, but so far only Laban did the talking. Some commentators think that the Bethuel mentioned here may not be the father of the bride but one of the brothers since Laban, the brother, seems to have the say in the discussion. They suppose that the father would be the authority and would do the talking instead of the brother. If the ancient culture was anything like that of the tribal people in Irian Jaya, we see that it would normally be the brother of the girl, not the father who would decide about marriage and bride price. In my opinion the picture is a normal one, and Bethuel's consent would only be a formality.

When Eliezer receives the formal consent of the family for the wedding, he makes an eloquent gesture of worship by bowing down in a wordless prayer. It looks as if he is too overwhelmed for words.

Before he sits or lies down at the table again, he brings out the gifts in abundance. Rebekah gets her dowry and Laban and Milkah receive costly gifts. Bethuel is left out. He is supposed to be wealthy himself and a gift might be considered an insult. Only after this huge celebration does the servant sit down and eat.

Eliezer is in a hurry to go home. He wants to leave as soon as he gets up the next morning, much to the consternation of the family. The brother and mother object. They think that Rebekah should stay at least ten days with them. Obviously, some time for preparation is needed; but the servant, who was so careful to prepare for his long trip to Haran, does not seem to understand that a girl who leaves her home for good and who is going to make a trip of several weeks would need time to prepare. He seems ready to leave within the hour.

The decision on this point is left to Rebekah herself. It is the only decision she is allowed to make. Her opinion about the wedding was never asked. It is true, of course, that in accepting the gifts and the dowry she demonstrated that she accepted the wedding proposal. Her female intuition may have told her at the well already what Abraham's servant was up to. So she is not left out as radically as it seems. Her immediate consent leaves no doubt about her feelings. It is doubtful though that the party set out the same day. Some preparations must have been necessary.

Twice the Scripture speaks here about Rebekah as if she had more than one brother. In vs.59 we read: "*So they sent their sister Rebekah on her way,*" and in the following verse she is addressed as "our sister." Other members of the family are not mentioned, but evidently they were there.

She is sent off with the blessing that seemed to have been customary in the Old Testament: "Our sister, may you increase to thousands upon thousands; may your offspring possess the gates of their enemies." Literally: "our sister, thou become to thousands of myriads." This blessing came true, although initially it did not seem so, as we shall see later.

No record is given about the return trip. The next thing we know is that the caravan arrives at Beer Lahai Roi. This was the name Hagar gave to the place where she met the Lord the first time, when she fled from Sarah some fifty or more years before. In Ch. 16:13 we read: "She gave this name to the LORD who spoke to her: 'You are the God who sees me,' for she said, 'I have now seen the One who sees me.' That is why the well was called Beer Lahai Roi; it is still there, between Kadesh and Bered." It is unclear whether this is the same well that is mentioned in chapter 21, where Hagar went the second time when she was sent away with Ishmael; the place where Abraham and Abimelech concluded their treaty - at Hebron. The fact that Abraham is not mentioned does not necessarily mean that he had moved to another place.

Actually Abraham has moved out of the picture at this point. We may consider this the beginning of Isaac's story. The first 10 verses of the next chapter close off Abraham's life completely. We do not even read that Eliezer reported to Abraham although he surely must have done so. Isaac also must have been completely informed about his father's actions and he obviously expected the party to return sooner or later.

The man Isaac, whom we see before us in vs.63 seems a quiet, reflective person. He goes out in the field in the evening to meditate. The picture breathes quietness of surrounding and character. The sun is setting, the air becomes cool and the heart comes to rest. This was the hour at which the Lord God would come to Adam and Eve before their fall into sin. The human heart responds to the pulse of nature. Much of our tension and nervousness comes from the fact that we have no field to meditate in the evening. Or rather most people have a heart that can meditate under any circumstance. We are engaged in the rat race.

The next thing we know there are two people looking up. We read in vs.63 about Isaac: "and as he looked up, he saw camels approaching," and in vs.64 - "Rebekah also looked up and saw Isaac." They are too far off for their eyes to meet. But the chemistry seems to reveal itself already. The attraction is there. Rebekah does the cultural thing. When she finds out who the man is who is approaching, she puts on her

veil. Isaac is not supposed to see her until they are married. Marriage must have been an act of faith in those days. That is why Jacob burnt himself as we will see later.

Eliezer reports to Isaac. So he knows the hand of God in Rebekah's coming to Canaan. The chapter concludes with: "Isaac brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah," (which meant that she was put in the position that Sarah had occupied; she became the mistress of the house) "and he married Rebekah." (This probably refers to the ceremony that took place; there was an official wedding) "So she became his wife," (referring to the honeymoon) "and he loved her" (indicating the deep emotional involvement. Love is here the fruit of marriage, not the basis of it), "and Isaac was comforted after his mother's death." There is a world of emotion packed in this last part of the verse.

The last sentence of this verse shows us the deep psychological insight Moses must have had in human nature. Being a man, I cannot speak for a woman. But for a man, the death of his mother is one of the hardest separations to bear. And there is in marriage a fulfillment of the love a boy learned from his mother. This, in my opinion, is one of the things that makes being married such an exhilarating experience. Isaac found the consolation he had looked for after Sarah's death in his life with Rebekah. *The Pulpit Commentary* points out that the word "death" in this verse is not in the original. "As if the Holy Spirit would not conclude this beautiful and joyful narrative with a note of sorrow."

The story of Eliezer's search for a bride for Isaac has been spiritualized. I do not object against that as long as the facts remain what they are. The story has been seen as an image of the Holy Spirit's searching for a bride of Christ. It is true that if Isaac would not have married Rebekah, Christ would not have been born into this world. Their romance has a key place in God's plan of redemption.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The first ten verses of this chapter conclude the story of Abraham's life. It seems strange that at the conclusion of the biography, another wife, Katurah, is introduced. She is called Abraham's concubine in the Book of Chronicles, which would indicate that the marriage took place while Sarah was still alive.²³⁸ On the other hand, *The Pulpit Commentary* ponders the following point: "Since the patriarch's body at 100 years was practically dead, it is almost certain that his marriage with Katurah took place after the renewal of his powers; and it is easier to suppose that his physical vigor remained for some years after Sarah's death than that, with his former experience of concubinage, and his parental joy in the birth of Isaac, he should add a second wife while Sarah lived."

But it is impossible to ascertain whether this outburst of fertility, (after all six sons is no mean achievement) took place earlier in Abraham's life or not. It could very well be that the biographer wants to complete the picture, without giving a chronological account at this point. That Abraham would learned from his experience with Hagar, as *The Pulpit Commentary* suggests is no given factor. He had not learned anything from his experience with Pharaoh! He repeated the same sin later in life at the court of the Philistine king Abimelech.

Many have tried to locate the descendants of the six sons Abraham begot from Katurah, but not much has been established with certainty. Only the children of two of the sons are mentioned: Jokshan, the second boy, and Midian the fourth. We read in verse 3: "Jokshan was the father of Sheba and Dedan; the descendants of Dedan were the Asshurites, the Letushites and the Leummites." The name Sheba has a familiar ring, if he is the one after whom the country was called from where the queen came to visit Solomon in I Kings 10. Whether the Asshurites can be identified with the Assur that led the ten tribes into captivity, is not certain.

We find Midianites in Ch. 37:28, who buy Joseph from his brothers and sell him in Egypt. It seems doubtful that Abraham's grandson's would have multiplied so fast that they could come in hordes and buy their own cousin, barely one hundred years later. So this phase of Abraham's life leaves us in the dark.

The obvious point of the story is to emphasize that Isaac was Abraham's only legal heir. We read in verse 5 and 6: "Abraham left everything he owned to Isaac. But while he was still living, he gave gifts to the sons of his concubines and sent them away from his son Isaac to the land of the east." This much Abraham had learned from his wife Sarah. He knew that as far as God was concerned he had only one son. He was the one God had called in Ch. 22:2 "*Your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love.*" By the

²³⁸ See I Chron. 1:32

way, this verse may give an indication that Abraham did not have any of Katurah's six sons when Isaac was old enough to be sacrificed.

It was through Isaac that God would reveal Himself further in the world, not through any of Abraham's other sons. The book of Genesis does not give primarily the story of the lives of the patriarchs, but the story of God's revelation.

Abraham dies at the age of one hundred seventy-five. Compared to the ages of the pre-deluvian people Abraham dies rather young. We see that after the flood the life span of people decreases gradually. Noah lived to be 950, but Seth died at the age of 500. Abraham's father, Terah reached 205. I believe that the altered condition of our planet as a result of the flood, is the deciding factor.

Verse 8: "Then Abraham breathed his last and died at a good old age, an old man and full of years;" indicates more the quality of Abraham's life than the length of it. "A good old age" has little to do with the number of years. Some people are worn out by the age of 60. When somebody dies at 95 in a demented state, I do not want to call that a good old age. Old age, yes, but "good," no. It is my prayer that the Lord will let me keep my mental alertness and abilities till He takes me Home.

"Full of years." Adam Clarke says about his expression: "The words years is not in the text; but as our translators saw that some word was necessary to fill up the text, they added this in italics. It is probable that the true word is 'days,' as in Ch. 35:29; and this reading is found in the Samaritan text, Septuagint, Vulgate, Syriac, Arabic, Persic, and Chaldee. On these authorities it might be safely admitted into the text. It was the opinion of Aristotle that a man should depart from life as he should rise from a banquet. Thus Abraham died 'full of days,' and satisfied with life, but in a widely different spirit from that recommended by the above writers- he left life with a hope full of immortality, which they could never boast; for he saw the day of Christ, and was glad; and his hope was crowned, for here it is expressly said, 'He was gathered to his fathers'; surely not to the bodies of his sleeping ancestors, who were buried in Chaldea and not in Canaan, nor with his fathers in any sense, for he was deposited in the cave where his wife alone slept; but he was gathered to the "spirits of just men made perfect, and to the Church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven."²³⁹

Isaac and Ishmael meet for the burial of their father. Whether this is their first meeting after the boy Ishmael mocked his step brother some seventy years before, we are not told. It seems unlikely that there would have been frequent meetings between the two, if any. Burials often repair relationships. There must have been some kind of recognition on the side of Ishmael, that Isaac was Abraham's legal son. The burial in the cave where Sarah was buried emphasized this.

There is no mention of embalming or any other kind of preparation or rite. But if Ishmael had to be informed about his father's death and had to travel from where he lived to meet Isaac at Machpelah, several days, if not weeks must have elapsed. Without any kind of embalming the burial could not have been postponed any length of time. Most likely the Egyptian customs were known in Canaan and practiced to some extent in this case.

Abraham's remains were put to rest in the only plot of ground he ever possessed in the land of his pilgrimage. His spirit and soul went to the place where he became the symbol of rest for all who had ever put their trust in God. That is why Jesus could say in Luke: "And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom."²⁴⁰ Jesus mentions Abraham first, when He talks about Heaven. We read in Matt.8:11 - "I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven." And that Abraham is alive and that he guarantees our resurrection we learn from Matthew: "But about the resurrection of the dead; have you not read what God said to you, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead but of the living."²⁴¹ What a testimony!

THE LIFE OF ISAAC, THE SACRIFICED LIFE

Chapters 25:11- 35:29

²³⁹Heb.12:23

²⁴⁰ Luke 16:22 (KJV)

²⁴¹ Matt. 22:31,32

A few verses are devoted to the condensed history of Ishmael. We read in ch. 25:12-18 that he had twelve sons, whose names are given, and that he lived to the age of one hundred thirty seven. His children are reported to have settled close to the Egyptian border, and we are told that they fought with one another. At least that is what I gather from ch. 25:18 "His descendants settled in the area from Havilah to Shur, near the border of Egypt, as you go toward Asshur. And they lived in hostility toward all their brothers."

Then the Bible turns its attention to Isaac. The account of his life starts with his marriage to Rebekah. He is then forty years old. Life still begins at forty, as the saying goes. But Isaac existed before that time too. His life actually started in chapter 21 amidst the laughter of his mother. We read in Ch. 21:6 "Sarah said, 'God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me.' "In a deeper sense Isaac's life started when he jumped off the altar where his father sacrificed him and where another creature died in his place. The account is in Ch. 22:13 - "Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son." Isaac was born again at the place where the Lord provided for him, at Jehovah-jireh.

The mention of Isaac's age being forty shows that he married three years after the death of his mother. We read in Ch. 23:1 that Sarah was 127 when she died. Since she was ninety years old when Isaac was born, he must have been 37 at that time.

We would almost say that Isaac's prayer for his wife was one of the most redundant prayers of the Bible. But we should realize that it took Isaac twenty years before he prayed this prayer. There is a space of twenty years between vs.20 and 21. Verse 26 tells us that Isaac was sixty years old at the birth of the twins. "Isaac prayed to the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was barren. The LORD answered his prayer, and his wife Rebekah became pregnant." If we pause and ponder, we come to the conclusion that these verses teach us a lot about the relationship between God's promises and our prayers. Of course God wanted Rebekah to become pregnant. She was the key to the fulfillment of all God's promises to a lost world. But evidently Isaac and Rebekah had never surrendered their bodies to the Lord for the fulfillment of this specific promise. God's promises are only realized through our prayers.

Daniel understood this principle. We read in Daniel: "In the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, understood from the Scriptures, according to the word of the LORD given to Jeremiah the prophet, that the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years. So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes."²⁴² We understand that without Daniel's prayer, Israel would never have returned to Canaan. Without Isaac's prayer, the Word would not have become flesh; Jesus Christ would never have been born into this world. Although Isaac must have known the outline of God's plan of salvation, he can never have understood the extreme importance of his prayer.

In a different way and on another level, Isaac and Rebekah experienced the same kind of death as Abraham and Sarah had faced. God wanted them to know that the life He gives is life out of death; resurrection life. As James says "You do not have, because you do not ask God."²⁴³ This does not pertain only to the things we want, but also to the things God wants. One of the lessons we can draw from the above is that prayer is in the first place an expression of a relationship with God even if we ask for things. As Solomon says in Proverbs: "Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight."²⁴⁴ Prayer is acknowledging Him in all our ways. That is why we have to pray: "Your kingdom come" and: "Come, Lord Jesus!" Without this prayer neither the kingdom nor the Lord will come. Without prayer we will never be what God wants us to be.

So after twenty years of frustration Isaac finally came to the place where God could give him what He wanted him to have all the time. Isaac became first a priest in praying for his wife and then a father. That should be the way men function in marriages.

We may suppose that Rebekah prayed also with Isaac, or at least that she said "amen" to his prayer. But she really does not start to pray herself until she becomes pregnant. After some months of pregnancy when a child normally start to make his presence known inside the mother's womb, there is a racket going on that is out of proportion. This is not the moving of a child; it is war. And war it turned out to be. Rebekah is upset because she does not understand what is going on. So she seeks the Lord herself.

²⁴² Dan. 9:2,3

²⁴³ James 4:2

²⁴⁴ Prov.3:5,6

Verse 22 is translated rather simply in the NIV. Rebekah says: "Why is this happening to me?" The KJV stays closer to the original which says: "If ... so, why ... thus?" The RSV makes it more dramatic; probably unnecessarily so: "The children struggled together within her; and she said, 'If it is thus, why do I live?' So she went to inquire of the LORD." (RSV).

God reveals to Rebekah not only that she is going to have twins, but also what the destiny of these twins will be.

Verse 23 says: "The LORD said to her, 'Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger.'"

We understand very little about fetal life. We believe that life and personality exist from the moment of conception. In the debate about abortion rights, if we may call it a "debate," the pro-choice movement maintains that a fetus is a non-person for the first several months and consequently abortion cannot be called murder.

There are two instances in the Bible of a fetus that reacts to spiritual realities. There is John the Baptist, who jumped up in his mother's womb when his mother heard the voice of Mary, who was pregnant with Jesus, greeting her. In Luke's Gospel we read: "When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy."²⁴⁵ How an unborn baby can hear and express joy about what he hears is beyond my comprehension. I do not believe the medical science has come far enough to understand this either.

Here we have two babies in the same womb, starting to act out a future history of animosity and war. It was as if the Holy Spirit was getting a hold of baby Jacob and Satan was trying to get Esau and so the two were at loggerheads. Strange and unbelievable as this may sound, that seems to have been the case. There was a pre-natal war going on between light and darkness, between the truth of God's revelation and Satan's attempt to darken it and keep it hidden. It seems a prelude to what we read in John: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."²⁴⁶ We understand why Rebekah was upset. This was more than a normal pregnancy.

The 23rd verse indicates that God chose Israel to be the vehicle of His revelation in this world, the nation that would give birth to the Messiah. The thought is expressed in stronger terms in Malachi: "'I have loved you,' says the LORD. But you ask, 'How have you loved us?' 'Was not Esau Jacob's brother?' The LORD says. 'Yet I have loved Jacob, But Esau I have hated, and I have turned his mountains into a wasteland and left his inheritance to the desert jackals.'"²⁴⁷ These verses show the physical and political results of the election. Israel survived, at least in part, the Babylonian captivity; but Edom was wiped off the map. The reason for this was not that Israel had given evidence of godly behavior and Edom had not. They had both sinned equally or maybe Israel worse than Edom. But God had a plan with Israel that could not be discarded.

The Apostle Paul elaborates on the theological aspect of God's election, based on this verse and the one in Malachi, in Romans: "Not only that, but Rebekah's children had one and the same father, our father Isaac. Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad; in order that God's purpose in election might stand: Not by works but by him who calls; she was told, 'The older will serve the younger.' Just as it is written: 'Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.'"

Just as in Ch. 21:12 God had said to Abraham: "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned," so now He said the same thing to Rebekah about Jacob. The promise given to Abraham and embodied in Isaac, was to be continued in Jacob. That is the ground upon which "the older shall serve the younger." It was important that both Rebekah and Isaac understood that in God's eyes Jacob would be the oldest son although Esau was born first.

Rebekah must have been in her late thirties when the twins were born. Verse 24 gives more a confirmation of the prophecy than the discovery of a fact.

The way Scripture describes the birth of the twins is cute. "The first to come out was red, and his whole body was like a hairy garment; so they named him Esau." Esau means "the hairy one" according to *The Pulpit Commentary*. He must have looked like a little animal, a furry little ball. "After this, his brother came out, with his hand grasping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob." The second child holding

²⁴⁵ Luke 1:41,44

²⁴⁶ John 1:5 (RSV)

the hand of his brother when he came out of his mother's womb, earned him the name Jacob, meaning "Heel-catcher." This name took on greater significance as Jacob grew up and turned out to have the tendency to trip up other people for his own benefit. That is why Esau exclaims in ch. 27:36 - "Is not he rightly named Jacob? He has deceived me these two times: He took my birthright, and now he's taken my blessing!"

From the birth of the twins, the story hastens to the story of the birthright. We see them both grow up in one verse. Esau the impetuous hunter, Jacob the quiet shepherd, homebound and scheming. From a human viewpoint Esau has our sympathy. He loves nature. He is outgoing in more than one sense of the word. Esau does not have anything to hide. Jacob's quietness is suspicious. The proverb says "Quiet waters are deep," but some quiet waters can be murky.

Parents should be impartial toward their children. And although we understand why Isaac would feel drawn to his son Esau and Rebekah to Jacob, who kept her company at home, yet the attitude of the parents is to be blamed. It turns out that Isaac's love goes through his stomach. We also get the impression that some estrangement has crept in between Isaac and Rebekah. There does not seem to be much communication. We should remember that Isaac is probably around eighty years of age now and Rebekah in her sixties. Their favoritism is objectionable and, as it turns out, disastrous.

Obviously, both boys are familiar with God's prophecy to Rebekah before they were born. In vs.23 we read: "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger." If the boys would have had any faith in this prophecy, Jacob would not have felt the need to resort to treachery and Esau would not have made the statement that he was going to die. As it stands they both believed that they had to work out their own salvation. The difference in character even expresses itself in the food they deal with. Esau hunts wild animals, Jacob cooks lentil soup. The hunting makes Esau exhausted. He is not just out of breath; he has pushed himself beyond the point of endurance. Jacob has no trouble breathing while cooking the soup.

Esau expresses his desire for food in a very graphic way. Literally he says: "Let me swallow the red, red..." The words show his impatience and his voracious appetite. His words procure him with a nickname that sticks to him throughout eternity: "Edom," which means "red." His descendants must have become proud of the name, probably because it is related to Adam, which refers to the clay from which the first human was formed. It may have acquired the meaning of "real human being," a title several of the primitive tribes of Irian Jaya give to themselves!

Jacob makes clear that "there is no such thing as a free meal!" Obviously, he has been scheming for a long time to obtain what God had promised. Waiting upon the Lord was a foreign concept to him. He may have been a quiet person, but below the surface there must have stirred turmoil. Jacob was a creep. He takes full advantage of the situation. He is also a good psychologist. He reads Esau correctly. His brother is impetuous; he will never take the time to reflect upon the consequences of his actions. It wasn't that Esau did not care about his birthright. He had no time to think about it. You do not think about birthrights when you are hungry. Jesus defines people like these as people who have "no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away."²⁴⁸ This lack of perseverance is portrayed in the parable of the sower as "rocky places," that is a solid mass of rock, with a thin layer of dirt on top. Esau's heart had not been broken.

Jacob may have presented the deal as a joke, and Esau may have taken it like that, as a flippant talk between brothers. But Jacob was dead serious. The tragedy is that there was no need for deceit. God does not need slyness and human cunning in order to fulfill His prophecies. Jacob could have been quiet and generous. He could have given his brother food without any charge, and he would have been the winner. In the kingdom of heaven nobody wins because of his shrewdness.

Esau's answer is complete nonsense. He is hungry, but he is not in danger of dying. When he says: "Look, I am about to die," Esau said. "What good is the birthright to me?" he actually indicates that he does not care. This could mean two things: He may have been so sure that he would get it anyhow since he knew to have his father on his side, or he completely disregarded the spiritual significance of the blessing. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews seems to indicate the latter: "See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son.

²⁴⁸ Matt.13:21

Afterward, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. He could bring about no change of mind, though he sought the blessing with tears.”²⁴⁹

We could ask ourselves the question how much Jacob valued the birthright. How much was he willing to pay for it? Would he have given more than a bowl of soup for it? Jacob must have eaten that soup himself for the rest of his life. He must have seen it before his eyes years later, when in the night before he met Esau, he wrestled with the angel in Pniel. In a sense Jacob paid more dearly for this soup than Esau did. When the balance is made up, sharp business deals are more expensive for him who makes them than for the one who is taken in. Esau despised his birthright, but Jacob despised it too.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Vs.1-6 of this chapter describe the revelation of God to Isaac personally. The occasion is a famine. We are reminded that there was another famine in Abraham’s time, when Abraham went to Egypt. That must have been shortly after Abraham first entered Canaan, almost ninety years earlier. (Isaac is in his seventies now. His father was 75 when he arrived in Canaan and 100 years old when Isaac was born.) That is not a bad record for famines.

It is at this occasion that God warns Isaac not to go to Egypt. Isaac must have been familiar with the story of Abraham’s sojourn in Egypt and with some of his less commendable behavior as we will see a little later on. This was not the first time Isaac heard the voice of God. He was present, even as the main character on the scene, when God stopped the hand of Abraham, who was about to slay his son. He knew in his body what it meant: “The LORD will provide.” And to this day it is said, “On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided.”²⁵⁰ We get the impression that up till this time his whole life had rested on this moment on the mountain of the LORD. He had lived a sacrificed life from then on. Not a perfect life, but a surrendered one.

There are several things we can find fault with in Isaac’s character. He had preference for one of his sons above the other, which is a basic parental sin; and he indulged in comfort and good food. He does not show a burning vision, which we would expect from the son of God’s promise. He knew his father’s struggle of faith and toilsome pilgrimage only by hearsay. But this did not mean that his life was not based on the truth of God’s revelation. Some people’s lives seem flawless but for the foundation.

Isaac probably still lived at Beer Lahai Roi, the residence last mentioned in ch.25:11. When the famine strikes he moves to Gerar in Philistine country, where his father stayed when his mother was pregnant with him. It is there that God appears to him. The food situation was probably more favorable in Philistine country, as it was closer to the coast than it was farther interior.

As New Testament Christians we have what the Old Testament saints longed for but never possessed - the indwelling of Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. As Jesus says in Matthew: “But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.”²⁵¹ Yet I often wonder what it would have been like to hear the angel of the Lord speak to you in an audible voice. If this happened to Isaac when he was a teenager, as we suppose, it must have made the deepest possible impression, enough to last him the rest of his life. But even deep spiritual experiences have a way of wearing thin, and there is a danger of vegetating on the past. And Isaac’s life shows the signs of a slow spiritual decline.

Then the Lord appears to him again after half a century when about half of his life is gone. God warns him not to go down to Egypt. And the same blessing that was given to Abraham is bestowed upon him. The blessing is a confirmation of the oath God had made to Abraham. The mention of the oath is obviously meant to put a solid basis under Isaac’s faith. God wants our spiritual life to be based not on our experiences, but on His promises - that is, on His Word.

There always remains the problem of the second generation Christian, if we may call Isaac that. Some of the joy of discovery, what C.S. Lewis called “Surprised by Joy,” is often lacking in the child of

²⁴⁹ Heb.12:16-17

²⁵⁰ Gen.22:14

²⁵¹ Matt.13:16,17

the Christian family, even if the child believes. There is a special spark in those who, in Paul's words: (have been) "rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought into the kingdom of the Son he loves."²⁵² Or as Peter puts it: "(who have been) called out of darkness into his wonderful light."²⁵³ Unless there is a personal encounter with the Living God, that spark will not be transferred from one generation to another. It can not be done artificially.

There was no fixed rule against going down to Egypt. Abraham did it, although he probably never asked the Lord about it. Later Jacob sought the Lord, and he was allowed to go. In ch. 46:3,4 the Lord says to him: "I am God, the God of your father," he said. "Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you into a great nation there. I will go down to Egypt with you, and I will surely bring you back again. And Joseph's own hand will close your eyes." But here the road closed. If God is pragmatic about going to Egypt, we better not be dogmatic about it. There are rules that are obvious expressions of God's will and character, about which we need make no further inquiries. But life is full of crossroads where we have to stop and ask God for directions. It is to Isaac's credit that he did this.

God does not only tell Isaac where not to go but also where to go. "Live in the land where I tell you to live" is a word of positive guidance. If our life does not belong to us, our residence does not either. We should never make this our own choice. It may be possible to accept circumstances as indications of God's will and the Lord can keep us from making mistakes. But we should always be open to a call to go or stay. The important point is the surrender of our right to choose for ourselves.

God's blessing is added to God's choice for us. We read in the first place that God promises His own presence. The place God wants us to live is the place where God is with us. The two go together. In that is the key to happiness regardless of circumstances. That is Asaf's testimony: "Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. But as for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the Sovereign LORD my refuge; I will tell of all your deeds."²⁵⁴

The promise to Abraham is repeated, but we deduct from the mention of Abraham's obedience that the fulfillment of God's promises is not an automatic affair. There are several instances of Old Testament prophecies that have remained unfulfilled because they were never claimed and the commands were not obeyed. Obedience is the key to the enjoyment of the blessings. Abraham's example is given as a warning to Isaac.

Isaac must have been familiar with the words of the promise to Abraham. Undoubtedly, the story had been passed on orally. He was also very much aware of Abraham's obedience, having himself been the subject of it at one occasion. God's Word must have hit home in a dramatic fashion. If he had any plans to move to Egypt, which is a likely supposition, he decided to stay and obey. Human reasoning would have told him he acted foolishly, but obedience to God's will must have put his heart at ease.

The episode described in vs.7-11 is hard to understand. We know where Isaac learned the trick to let his wife pass as his sister. Abraham had tried it twice. Through its generations the family must have had a fear of death and a complete disregard for the honor of a woman, even the honor of one's own wife. If the theophany Isaac experienced had any effect upon his life, it evidently did not influence his moral judgment. Just as in the case of Abraham, no excuse can be found for this behavior; it is dishonest and despicable to the highest degree. So much for the sacrificed life!

We can never use this as an excuse for trying to get away with sin in our lives, but the episode does emphasize that holiness is not a product of our own character. If the overall appraisal of Isaac's life is that he was a hero of faith and that he was placed as such in God's Hall of Fame, it is not because of his strength of character but because of the moments of the divine touch that came upon him. Holiness and grace are inseparable. No one can take any credit for living a holy life, but everyone should live it. And we are held accountable if we don't.

As we indicated above, Isaac's deceit was inspired by his fear of death. He went to Gerar with the idea: "They are going to kill me!" Yet he would have had every reason to quote the verse in Hebrews, and say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?"²⁵⁵

In spite of Isaac's lie, nothing happens to Rebekah. The Philistines must have had a good memory. The legend of Abraham's deceit, which must have been ancient history by then, since it happened 70 or 80 years

²⁵²Col.1:13

²⁵³I Pet.2:9

²⁵⁴Ps.73:25,28

²⁵⁵Heb.13:6

earlier, must have become part of the stories that still went around about this Hebrew family of Nomads. If our assumption is correct that people interpreted Abraham's lie as a ploy to destroy the Philistine nation with the use of the supernatural power he obviously possessed, the Philistines must have felt that they had learned their lesson. They refused to fall into the same trap with Isaac. So Isaac was perfectly safe, at the same time perpetuating the misconception about the character of God.

Vs.8 shows us two things:

1- how short our memory is when we lie. We have to remember our lies quite well, otherwise we are caught in inconsistencies.

2- how unwise it is to show affection in public. The king of Philistia caught Isaac caressing Rebekah. The KJV translates it with a term that would be rather funny in modern English: "Isaac was sporting with Rebekah his wife." One wonders what it was to be a sportsman in the olden days!

So Isaac is summoned to the royal palace. This time there was no divine revelation the king received in a dream, and the misconception about supernatural powers, which we presumed was present in Abraham's days, may have faded. But Isaac is made to understand that the Philistines are not falling into his trap, if there was any. A royal decree is issued making adultery with Rebekah a capital crime.

What starts the rumor about Isaac's hot-line with heaven are his agricultural exploits. Now we should remember two things; first that there had been a famine, or maybe there still was one, and secondly that Isaac was new at this. He had been a cattle farmer, a nomadic shepherd his whole life. Here he tries his luck on wheat, which evidently was normally sown in Philistea, and his harvest exceeds any normal results. It makes the Philistines jealous and afraid.

The Philistines first try harassment. They make the old wells that Abraham had dug, unusable. When that does not seem to have any effect to the point where it limits Isaac's growth in wealth, they expel him openly. We can read - "Move away from us; you have become too powerful for us," or as the KJV puts it: "thou art much mightier than we," as "your magic is too strong for us!"

The fact remains though, that the Lord blessed Isaac materially. He must have started out rich, by inheriting the bulk of his father's possessions. So what he acquired in the land of the Philistines was added to a wealth that was already considerable. In modern terms he became a multi-millionaire. God evidently wanted Isaac to know that He meant business when He promised him the possession of the land of Canaan.

As we mentioned before, this episode in Isaac's life in which the Philistines contested the rights to the water supply of the country is the most eventful one in his biography. When the question is asked "What did Isaac accomplish in his life?" The answer is: "He gave in when opposed, and moved somewhere else." His relationship with the Philistines was not a good and pleasant one. Even after the expulsion from the country, they continue to make life miserable for Isaac. There had been an agreement between Abraham and Abimelech before in which the right to several wells in the country had been guaranteed. This agreement is annulled here. We may presume that the Abimelech who lived in Abraham's time was not the same one who confronted Isaac. Both Abimelech and Phicol were probably titles rather than personal names.

It is impossible to determine whether the Philistines were aware of God's promise to Abraham and Isaac that they would possess the land. This would certainly explain their show of hostility. Obviously, Satan knew about the promise, which had been given to the patriarchs in an audible way. There is no doubt about it; he inspired opposition, whether the people understood the issue or not.

Isaac did have the problem that space was limited, and he was simply too rich. His inventory was too large for his storage space. But the fact that the Philistines fuss about the digging up of wells which they themselves had filled in, made no sense. Their harassment was clearly an effort to limit Isaac's spiritual powers. In how far Isaac has been able to analyze the situation correctly, we do not know. His attitude is admirable though. He does not fight evil with evil. Whenever a well his father dug, and to which he obviously had a right according to the treaty Abraham had made with the previous Abimelech, was filled in by the Philistines, he move away to the next place. "Esek" and "Sitnah" are testimonies to this attitude of non-violence.

Finally, his patience and endurance are rewarded when he arrives at "Rehoboth," where he recognizes the hand of the Lord, who has given him the space he needed. By the sound of it this was more a spiritual victory than a physical one. It is true that the harassment stops here, but although Isaac calls the place "Rehoboth," he does not stay there. Rehoboth is the place of discovery of God's faithfulness. From there he moves to Beersheba, the place where Abraham had secured the well by treaty with Abimelech some eighty

years earlier. At this point the Lord appears to him for the second time. We do not know how much time has elapsed between the two appearances that are mentioned in this chapter. It could be several years.

The topic of God's revelation to Isaac is Abraham's faith, not the faith of Isaac himself. God says to him: "I am the God of your father Abraham. Do not be afraid, for I am with you; I will bless you and will increase the number of your descendants for the sake of my servant Abraham." It is true that later God will call Himself "The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob"; but at this point it seems that Isaac has not distinguished himself by any acts of faith. But there is a deeper lesson to be learned than the fact that Isaac had not yet earned his wings. He is being blessed because of someone else. As Christian, we find ourselves in the same position. God blesses us in Jesus Christ, not because of what we are or what we have done, but because of Him. As Paul says: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ."²⁵⁶

As a response to this revelation Isaac does three things: He builds an altar, he pitches his tent and he digs a well. The sequence is important. This is the first time we read that Isaac builds an altar. It seems as if all of a sudden he realizes the richness of his heritage and enters into a personal relationship with God. So far religion had been for Isaac a thing that his father practiced. He had been dedicated to the Lord by his father, which had been a very impressive experience for him. He had been comforted by God after the death of his mother, in that the Lord gave him Rebekah. He had heard and heeded God's warning not to go to Egypt, and he had been blessed financially; but he had never built an altar to the Lord.

The building of an altar meant a recognition of his true condition. A man who builds an altar knows that he is a sinner and that his life has to be atoned for. He knows that his relationship with God is built upon the blood that was shed on the altar. He lives by the grace of God.

The fact that God tells him: "Do not be afraid for I am with you," indicates that fear had been an important factor in Isaac's life. His moving away from well to well was motivated by fear for the harassment of the Philistines. God's presence had not been real enough for him to overcome his fears. We will see a little later how his attitude changes after he has built the altar and called upon the Name of the Lord.

Wherever Isaac had gone, he had pitched his tent, of course. How else would he have been able to live in it? But here the fact is mentioned as a deliberate act, executed in the presence of God. He does not live here because he had been chased away from his place of previous residence, but because he chooses to live where he has met God. And where God is there is water, more and better and longer lasting than at Rehoboth.

Somewhere at this point there is another meeting between Isaac and the Philistine dignitaries. It seems a repetition of the treaty Abraham made at the same place with Abimelech and Phicol in Ch. 21:22-34. But that meeting took place almost a century earlier. We can hardly presume that the longevity of the Philistines would have exceeded that of the patriarchs. So Abimelech must have been the Philistine title for the king of the country, Phicol for the commander-in-chief of the army and Ahuzzath for the prime minister.

I believe, though, that the same misunderstandings and superstitions that governed the first treaty were at the basis of this second one also. Isaac was feared because of his spiritual power. The Philistines were afraid that Isaac would make YHWY turn against them at one point or another. The treaty is meant to prevent this. But compared to the first treaty the atmosphere is quite different. Abraham seems to have been much more in control of the situation than Isaac. Isaac is also treated with less respect than his father was. There are reproaches and to some extent lies. For the Philistines to say that they always treated Isaac well is an overstatement.

Isaac reproaches that the Philistines were hostile to him. The KJV says: "Ye hate me." The harassment he experienced surely supports this statement. The answer seems typical for the spiritual world in which the Philistines lived. They want a treaty guaranteeing that Isaac will do them no harm. It is very doubtful that they anticipated a military attack by Isaac. Their fear was spiritual. It is true that Abraham accomplished a military feat of no mean significance in the victory over the Babylonian kings in Ch. 14. The memory of this will have lived on for centuries. But it could hardly be anticipated that Isaac would do a thing like that without help of his neighbors and without a strong provocation. No, the harm they talk about, must be the spiritual power he could exercise over them in the Name of YHWH.

According to vs.30 Isaac treats them royally. There is a state banquet to celebrate the reconciliation. It could very well be that Isaac misunderstood the intentions of the Philistines as completely as they did his. He may have taken their approach as a genuine desire to separate as friends

²⁵⁶ Eph. 1:3

without any basis of fear. Usually only evil people see evil intent in others. And Isaac may have been fearful, but he was not evil.

So the next morning the contract is signed in the form of an oral oath. This probably meant that the Name of YHWH was invoked, which for the Philistines must have been a real assurance that they would no longer have anything to fear from the side of Isaac.

That same day another well is dug. It could very well be that this was the same well that Abraham had dug before, but that had been covered over. In that case it could also be the famous place where Hagar had met the Lord, when she was sent away, shortly after Isaac's birth. We read in Ch. 21:19 "Then God opened her [Hagar's] eyes and she saw a well of water. So she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink." And later in the meeting of which Isaac's treaty with the Philistine delegation seems to be a replay, we read in vs.30 and 31 - "[Abraham] replied, 'Accept these seven lambs from my hand as a witness that I dug this well.'" "So that place was called Beersheba, because the two men swore an oath there." The fact that the same place would be baptized with the same name twice, or that two different places would be given the same name, sounds strange to our Western ears; but it is probably less amazing if we understand the ease with which Hebrews gave names to places on the basis of experiences that had had there. So we find two places called Massa and Meriba in the desert where the people of Israel spent forty years of wandering.

The chapter ends with a report on Esau's marriages. He marries two wives, both from the land of Canaan. Judith, the daughter of Beeri and Basemath, the daughter of Elon. Within the context of the local culture these were probably good marriages. The fact that the names of the fathers are mentioned must be an indication that they were reckoned among the good families in the country. But in doing this, Esau places himself outside the promise God had given to Abraham. He must have been aware of the circumstances of his father's marriage and why Abraham had sent his servant to get a wife for his father from the family in Haran. But Esau gives no indication that he understands the spiritual implications of his marriages, or if he does, he does not care.

We do not know exactly what was so terrible in the behavior of the girls, but we read in vs. 35 - "They were a source of grief to Isaac and Rebekah." In marrying these girls Esau may have taken the idolatrous customs of the country into his home. At the end of the next chapter the problem with the girls becomes a nice pretext for Rebekah to send away her favorite son Jacob, before he gets killed by Esau. We have very little to go by to pronounce a judgement upon Esau, but it is obvious that he knew nothing of a personal relationship with God as his father and grandfather had known. He must have known about their faith, but he did not care. This becomes even clearer in the next chapter where he comes out with a bad deal. Humanly speaking our sympathy must be with Esau, however much of a humanist he may have been. Christians are not always nice and lovable people!

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

This chapter tells us a strange story of deceit, human intrigue, greed, indulgence, hatred and a complete lack of faith in God. Yet the topic is the promise and blessing that God had given to Abraham and that was passed on to Isaac and was supposed to be given to Jacob according to what God had told Rebekah.

The Word of God that is the subject of human manipulation. What is done with it is unbelievable. Under a guise of piety, human beings pursue their own interest as if they were identical with God's interest; and yet God is nowhere to be found in this. That God comes out victorious is one of those miracles that is beyond our comprehension. It is clear, however, that God is not behind this intrigue or that He approved of any part of it. What is being done is sinful, and God hates sin.

In the light of this chapter it seems difficult to reconcile these events with the statement of Hebrews: "By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau in regard to their future."²⁵⁷ We have to look very closely to see where this faith of Isaac becomes evident. It seems more that Isaac demonstrates a complete lack of faith. We shall see later that probably Isaac's words at the end in vs.33 where we read that when Isaac discovered what he has done, he starts to tremble violently, but he confirms: "I blessed him; and indeed he will be blessed!" are a demonstration of dormant faith.

²⁵⁷ Heb.11:20

Isaac is getting old. The commentators disagree on the actual age. *The Pulpit Commentary* says about this: "And it came to pass, that when Isaac was old.- According to the generally-accepted calculation, in his one hundred and thirty-seventh year. Joseph, having been introduced to Pharaoh in his thirtieth year (ch.41:46), and having been thirty-nine years of age (ch.45:6) when his father, aged one hundred and thirty (ch. 47:9), came down to Egypt, must have been born before Jacob was ninety-one; consequently, as his birth occurred in the fourteenth year of Jacob's sojourn in Mesopotamia (cf. ch.30:25 with 29:13,21,27) Jacob's flight must have taken place when he was seventy-seven. But Jacob was born in Isaac's sixtieth year (ch.25:26); hence Isaac was now one hundred and thirty-seven. There are, however, difficulties connected with this reckoning which lay it open to suspicion. For one thing, it postpones Jacob's marriage to an extremely late period. Then it takes for granted that the term of Jacob's service in Padan-aram was only twenty years (ch. 31:41), whereas it is not certain whether it was not forty, made up, according to the computation of Kennicott, of fourteen years' service, twenty years' assistance as a neighbour, and six years of work for wages. And lastly, it necessitates the birth of Jacob's eleven children in the short space of six years, a thing which appears to some, if not impossible, at least highly improbable. Adopting the larger number as the term of Jacob's sojourn in Mesopotamia, Isaac would at this point be only one hundred and seventeen."

However interesting the above calculations, we will leave it at that. The point is that Isaac felt he was nearing death because of his blindness. So he decides that preparations must be made for what we would in modern times call, a will. The difference, however, is that the blessing he was going to pronounce in the Name of YHWH would be irrevocable. It would not be like a human testament that could be changed. If it is true that Isaac was 137 years old when this story starts, he still had 43 years ahead of him, because according to ch. 35:28 he passed away at the age of 180. Evidently his blindness and consequent isolation created and enforced a death wish, but his general physical condition must still have been good. It seems, however, that Isaac at this point had given up on life. He was confined to bed because he confined himself to it. It seems to me that this is a trap old people should avoid. It must be miserable to spend forty years of one's life wishing to die. Yet I know people who live lives like that.

But the death wish Isaac nurtured did not spoil his appetite. He thoroughly enjoyed gourmet cooking, and he somehow links God's blessing to such a kind of meal. It sounds like identifying Christmas with a Christmas dinner. It is true that if we are not fully alive while we still live, we need some compensation, and good food may often serve the purpose. I realize, as I am growing older myself, how important it is to look constantly at yourself in the light of the Lord and ask Him to keep our testimony pure. There is nothing against good food. But if it becomes the focus of our enjoyment, something in our fellowship with the Lord has been lost.

Then there is Isaac's disobedience to the revealed will of God, regarding who should receive the blessing as the oldest son. There can be no doubt about it that Isaac was aware of what God had said to Rebekah. He may not have heard it personally, but he had no reason to doubt, since the revelation was given even before the children were born. Yet Isaac is attracted to his son Esau to the point where he blatantly shows favoritism. Isaac's attitude shows how little he was a priest in his home. He was the recipient of God's richest promise; his life had been completely dedicated to the Lord, and yet he had done nothing with these spiritual possessions. In Ephesians we read: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ."²⁵⁸ The question we have to ask ourselves is what we do with "every spiritual blessing in Christ." Our obedience and testimony begin at home! It would profit us little if the whole world would see Christ in us, but our children don't.

Not only was something wrong in the relationship between Isaac and his children; there was also no communication between husband and wife. Rebekah learns of Isaac's plan to bestow the blessing upon Esau by eavesdropping. Isaac had not talked his plan over with his wife. There may be situations in which a husband should overrule his wife's objections in certain matters, but the general principle should be that there is agreement, especially in spiritual things. The whole atmosphere in Isaac's household was one of broken relationships, mutual secrets and outright deceit.

Rebekah is just as much to blame as Isaac. She should have gone to her husband and talked to him. After all she had heard the Word of God herself. She should have reminded Isaac of the prophecy. There is no indication she even tried. We get the impression that Jacob inherited the ability to scheme from his

²⁵⁸ Eph. 1:3

mother. She is a mistress of deception. If there ever had been any love between Isaac and Rebekah it had evidently died long before this point. Love cannot deceive.

Esau makes no attempt to tell his father that he sold his birthright to Jacob. Either he had never taken the deal seriously or he was embarrassed about it or he had conveniently forgotten it. Jacob probably never forgot things like that. But he does not counter his mother's plan by claiming his right, since he paid for it with a bowl of soup. There was most likely some embarrassment on his side also. That may be the only positive part in this chapter. He offers no moral objections to his mother's plan to deceive his father. The only reservation he has is the fear of discovery. In verse 12 he makes the understatement of all understatements: "What if my father touches me? I would appear to be tricking him and would bring down a curse on myself rather than a blessing," or as the KJV puts it: "I shall seem to him as a deceiver." What did he consider himself to be?

His mother says that the curse would fall upon her. She does not seem to take her husband's curses too seriously. One wonders in that case what she thinks of his blessings! If this chapter wasn't dealing with the issue of God's promise, of His revelation and ultimately the Incarnation, the Word becoming flesh, this story would be a comedy of the first order. As it is, it makes a mockery of God. Nobody takes the Word of God seriously. Nobody thinks that God is able to bring about what He had promised. Everybody deceives everybody else and ultimately himself or herself the most. The devil is behind all these schemes, and he laughs his head off. There is in this family nothing left of the faith of Abraham, which God imputed to him as righteousness.

Once again, how can the writer to the Hebrews say: "By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau in regard to their future?"²⁵⁹ What faith? Ironically, this is the only incident in Isaac's life that brought him into the hall of fame of the Hebrew epistle. That is where the relationship between faith and grace comes in. Isaac, Jacob and Esau all had to receive forgiveness. Isaac was the first one to confirm that the blessing he accidentally pronounced on the wrong person would stand as an act of God. He implied in this that God had overruled his foolishness. For Jacob it took years before he faced God at Peniel, where he wrestled with God and asked for forgiveness. Hosea's comment, as we read it in "He struggled with the angel and overcame him; he wept and begged for his favor,"²⁶⁰ [actually says in Hebrew "he wept and asked for his forgiveness"] shows that he did receive cleansing.

And in ch. 33:4 we see that a change had taken place in Esau. "But Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. And they wept." The only one whose repentance is not mentioned is Rebekah.

So the plan to deceive Isaac is actually Rebekah's. She does not seem to have too much trouble to talk Jacob into it. He has no moral objections. It never dawns on anybody that a spiritual blessing cannot be obtained by deceit. The mere supposition throws a shadow on the character of God. Maybe the most awful feature of this story is that God does not intervene in this diabolic plot. God is often most merciful when he punishes sin on the spot. Man is put in a dangerous position when God permits sin to accumulate.

The plan is also a sin against the person of Isaac. It is true that Isaac did wrong in going against the prophetic Word of God regarding Jacob's birthright. Although the law in Leviticus, which says: "Do not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block in front of the blind, but fear your God. I am the LORD,"²⁶¹ was written much later, the principle must have been known in Isaac's day. Rebekah and Jacob must have had no fear of God when they conceived this plan and put it in practice.

Nobody ever asked the question why God did not let Jacob come out of his mother's womb first, if he was to receive the blessing of the first born? It never occurred to anybody that God might have a special plan in this reversal. God put these people to the test and they all failed.

The Bible does not explain specifically why God chose Jacob over Esau. The Apostle Paul gets close to the mystery when he says: "Not only that, but Rebekah's children had one and the same father, our father Isaac. Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad; in order that God's purpose in election might stand: Not by works but by him who calls; she was told, 'The older will serve the younger.' Just as it is written: 'Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.' God's purpose in election might stand ... not by works but by Him Who calls."²⁶² God is sovereign. A birthright is no right in the strictest sense of the word. No

²⁵⁹Heb. 11:20

²⁶⁰ Hosea 12:4

²⁶¹ Lev. 19:14

²⁶² Rom. 9:10-13

one is born by his own choice, so why should we lay claim on any privilege? The beginning and the end of our lives as well as what is in between is in God's hand. This is an established fact; it should be an accepted fact also.

One wonders what went on inside Jacob as he deceived his father. Isaac has doubts from the very beginning. The first question he asks is "Who is it?" Jacob succeeds to pull the wool over his father's eyes on every point, except his voice. Twice Jacob says that he is Esau, and once he invokes the Name of the Lord in saying that the LORD gave him success. What finally convinces Isaac is the smell. A man can fake almost every facet of his life and show himself different from what he is inside. But a smell can not be faked. I am not talking about the physical phenomena, which can be overruled or changed by cosmetics. Our character spreads an odor that is beyond our control. That is why Paul can say "For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life."²⁶³ In the natural we all are odious, and spiritually even more so before God. Jacob's wearing of Esau's clothing is an illustration in the negative of our being clothed with the righteousness of Jesus Christ. The only way we can be an aroma of Christ among men is if God smells Jesus Christ in us. May be the worst part of Jacob and Rebekah's deception was that Jacob was wearing Esau's clothes.

Isaac catches the smell of Esau when Jacob kisses him. Nowhere else, but in Judas' betrayal of Jesus, is there a larger distance between affection and a kiss than in Jacob's act here. Jacob had probably not intended to fall that deeply. But once we start falling we are out of control. One cannot just sin a little bit. The devil will drag us down till we hit the ground and be crushed. The wages of sin is death.

It is easy, of course, to pronounce our condemnation upon Jacob. But we miss the point if we do not look at his sin that is spread out so openly before us here and not compare ourselves with it.

Then Isaac pronounces the blessing, which later he makes irrevocable: (vs.27-29) "Ah, the smell of my son is like the smell of a field that the LORD has blessed. May God give you of heaven's dew and of earth's richness; an abundance of grain and new wine. May nations serve you and peoples bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may the sons of your mother bow down to you. May those who curse you be cursed and those who bless you be blessed." There are no echo's of the blessing God bestowed upon Abraham in these words, are there? It sounds rather earthly. If this is a deterioration or a deviation, we cannot tell. Abraham never blessed Isaac, as far as we know. This is the first incident in which a father blesses his son. But it is apparently not the passing on of a divine mandate. Yet this is what the writer to the Hebrews claims it to be. Hebrews says: "By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau in regard to their future."²⁶⁴ It boils down to a confirmation of God's prophecy to Rebekah. "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger."²⁶⁵

The only link with God's blessing to Abraham is in the words "May those who curse you be cursed and those who bless you be blessed." In ch. 12:3 God had said to Abraham: "I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." It seems that in omitting the last part of the blessing, Isaac shows he had lost the vision of the coming of the Messiah. Or maybe his doubts as to whom he was blessing had not been completely alleviated.

We may presume that Jacob left in a hurry after he had received what he came for. One wonders how much satisfaction he received. How blessed did he feel? He clears the place just in time because immediately afterward Esau enters. Isaac has no doubt about Esau's identity. This time he knows his son. The shock of the discovery is almost too much for the old man. We read: "Isaac trembled violently and said, 'Who was it, then, that hunted game and brought it to me? I ate it just before you came and I blessed him; and indeed he will be blessed!'"²⁶⁶ The only part of the deception that does not penetrate immediately is that he had a meal of goat meat instead of game. His body betrays what his heart had not wanted to admit over the years. He had obstructed God's purpose with his insistence to bless Esau over Jacob. He breaks down to the point where he loses control of his limbs. Isaac's reaction must have been a pitiful sight, but there is nobody present to pity him. Esau is too much involved in his own loss to pity his father. However pitiful Isaac may have been at this point, it is here that faith is rekindled in his heart. His trembling signifies

²⁶³II Cor.2:15,16

²⁶⁴ Heb.11: 20

²⁶⁵Gen. 25:23

²⁶⁶Vs.27

surrender to God's ways and a giving up of his own. That is why the author of Hebrews can say, "By faith Isaac blessed..."

Esau's reaction is "a loud and bitter cry." This strong specimen of masculinity melts down like wax and cries like a child. The child has probably always been there, hidden by the rough exterior. The only words he can utter are: "Me too... me too!" They may have been the first he learned to say. They must have been his early defense against his feeling of being inferior to his brother Jacob. Here everything comes to a head. Esau behaves more like a wounded animal than a human being. He cries like the animals he used to shoot himself.

The author of the Hebrew Epistle sums it up for us by saying: "See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son. Afterward, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. He could bring about no change of mind, though he sought the blessing with tears."²⁶⁷ He calls Esau "godless" and he implies that Esau's tears were not tears of repentance.*

The question is how can one receive a blessing without a personal relationship with God? The fact that Esau is called "godless" implies that he did not know God; neither did he care. The same question can be asked in regard to Jacob also. How godly was he? The fact that the essence of the blessing was the lineage of the Messiah is completely lost in this tragic-comedy of deceit. Not even Isaac mentions this. Everybody is only interested in himself and wants to get out of God as much as he can without strings attached.

Isaac sees through the deceit now. He realizes that the one with Jacob's voice was Jacob. We never read that Isaac called Jacob and scolded him on account of his deceit. It seems that the father had played little or no role in the growing up of his boys. If he occupied himself at all with his sons, it must have been mainly with Esau and that on account of Esau's ability to hunt the kind of animals Isaac like to eat, as we read in Ch. 25:27.

Esau catches the essence of Jacob's character by saying: "Is not he rightly named Jacob?" Jacob means "he grabs the heel," as the footnote of the NIV says both here and in chapter 25:26. The idea developed into "he trips people up." A modern nickname for Jacob would be "Jack the tripper."

Esau makes a distinction between his birthright and the blessing. It seems to me that the two should not be separated, but evidently they were. In the above quoted verse from Heb.12 they are treated as one. The birthright guaranteed the largest portion of the father's earthly possessions, but the blessing was the divine touch that gave value and content to these possessions. It is on this last point that the people involved in the events of this chapter lost all sense of reality. A. B. Simpson wrote the song: "First it was the blessing, now it is the Lord." This development is absent here. The Lord is not in this at all. There is a strong odor of superstition in this whole story.

It is amazing to see how the living faith and personal relationship with God that Abraham possessed, has deteriorated to a pious veneer that covered an animistic worldview. Syncretism is almost as old as man is.

In blessing Esau, Isaac predicts Jacob's dominion over him. But there is also a promise of release as the result of a great effort on the part of Esau. The phrase rendered in the NIV with "But when you grow restless, you will throw his yoke from off your neck," is open for various translations. The KJV says: "and it shall come to pass when thou shalt have the dominion, that thou shalt break his yoke from off thy neck." And the RSV translates it as: "but when you break loose you shall break his yoke from your neck." The Hebrew appears to be obscure. The probable intent is that eventually Edom would be able to shake off Israel's yoke in a revolt. History bears this out.

Another example of conflicting translations is found in the beginning of the blessing. The KJV translates verse 39 as: "Behold, thy dwelling shall be the fatness of the earth, and of the dew of heaven from above," while the NIV says: "Your dwelling will be away from the earth's richness, away from the dew of heaven above." The RSV agrees with the latter. According to *The Pulpit Commentary*, the Hebrew grammar allows for both translations. It seems, however, that the negative sense, the one that withholds earth's richness and heaven's dew from Edom, fits more in the context. It is true that Mal.1:3 describes the country of Edom as a wasteland, but this may not have been the original condition of the place. (Mal 1:3 "But Esau I have hated, and I have turned his mountains into a wasteland and left his inheritance to the desert jackals.")

Obviously, Esau is very unhappy with the blessing he receives. The NIV says: "Esau held a grudge against Jacob because of the blessing his father had given him. He said to himself, "The days of mourning

²⁶⁷ Heb.12: 16,17

for my father are near; then I will kill my brother Jacob.” (vs.41). The KJV puts it much stronger and is probably closer to the real feelings Esau had toward his brother. We read: “And Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing wherewith his father blessed him: and Esau said in his heart, The days of mourning for my father are at hand; then will I slay my brother Jacob.”

There is little doubt as to whether Esau was serious or not. His hatred for Jacob was so intense that he would have committed murder. It would probably have meant his own death as well as Rebekah clearly understood. In verse 45 she says: “Why should I lose both of you in one day?” But Esau was not the person to think things through. He was not a Jacob, a plotter.

Actually we have come to the end of Isaac’s story at this point. His death is mentioned in chapter 35:28, 34 years later. Between here and then he fades out of the picture. The last time we see him is when he sends Jacob away to Rebekah’s family in Haran. The rest of the story is Jacob’s.

How do we sum up Isaac’s life? We gave it the title “The sacrificed life” and we hold on to that. But we do get the impression that over the years Isaac had taken several pieces of the sacrifice off the altar. He certainly did not live consistently with the Lord. We believe that his trembling at the discovery of the mistake he had made in blessing Jacob meant a return to spiritual reality. Heb.11:20 seems to confirm this. God identifies with Isaac by revealing Himself as the God of Abraham and Isaac. But Isaac did not have the living, heroic faith of his father. Nowhere is he called “a friend of God.” It is evidently possible to put yourself on God’s altar and yet achieve very little of a testimony. Maybe the sacrifice of his life was more his father’s sacrifice than his own. He put himself on the altar as a young man. Growing up and growing old is hard. We have to do it very carefully and walk with God as we do it.

JACOB, THE TRIPPER

Chapter 28:1 - 37:1.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Of course, the story of Jacob does not begin here. It is partly intertwined with Isaac's story. It was hard to say before whether a part was Abraham's life or Isaac's life. We have seen already that Jacob was born after Esau, as the second of a set of twins. We studied how he tricked his brother in giving up his birthright and how later he stole the blessing from his father Isaac, as if he was the oldest son. But at the beginning of chapter 28 Jacob becomes independent. He leaves his father's house. He will never see his mother again.

The reason for Jacob's being sent away was primarily that Esau wouldn't kill him. There is no indication that Isaac was aware of this kind of plot. Rebekah deceives her husband once more, by not telling him the truth of the matter. It could be that Isaac, who was heavily prejudiced toward Esau, would not have believed that his son would commit such a crime. Isaac may have been blind in more than one way. We read in chapter 27:46 "Then Rebekah said to Isaac, 'I'm disgusted with living because of these Hittite women. If Jacob takes a wife from among the women of this land, from Hittite women like these, my life will not be worth living.'" Rebekah uses all the leverage she has to persuade Isaac to officially send Jacob away. That way the impression that Jacob flees for his life is avoided and a double goal is achieved: Jacob's life is safe and the heir will marry within the family.

There is no doubt that in all this the will of God is worked out, but whether this is done in the Lord's way is questionable. The deception is not so gross as when Jacob was put up by his mother to steal the blessing of his birthright, but it remains a deception.

So Jacob receives his father's once again, this time while Isaac knows whom he is blessing. Also Jacob is commanded to leave. For the first time, as far as we know, Isaac uses his authority in his boy's life. Better late than never.

This time also the blessing Isaac pronounces is the passing on of the real blessing God had given to Abraham. In verse 4 Isaac says specifically: "May he (God) give you and your descendants the blessing given to Abraham, so that you may take possession of the land where you now live as an alien, the land God gave to Abraham." It seems to me that these words are a demonstration of the spiritual awakening that has taken place in Isaac's heart. The violent trembling of his body had shaken things loose in his soul. He realized anew what were the things that mattered and what God was planning to do through him and his family.

So Jacob is sent back to his roots. This time there is no caravan with camels, servants and bride prices. Jacob goes alone as a refugee. And when he finally does marry, he pays for it himself with years of heavy labor. It seems to me that God is making Jacob pay for the things he stole. Dishonesty, cheating to get a cheap deal is very expensive, especially for a child of God. As we said before, Jacob paid more for the soup he gave to Esau than Esau did.

We are tempted to speculate what would have happened if Jacob had behaved differently. The way things went for him was not God's way. The Lord made things turn out for good for him, but we may be sure that Jacob was not inspired by God's Spirit when he bargained with Esau about the birthright and when he deceived his father. We are not told what would have happened, but it seems likely that Jacob would have spared himself much suffering had he been honest and had he trusted God's promises.

In verse 6-9 our story is interrupted briefly to give us Esau's reaction to Jacob's flight. He seems genuinely desirous to please his father. Whether his marrying Mahalath, the daughter of Ishmael, achieved this goal, we are not told. The addition of another wife to the two he already had does not seem to solve the problems caused by the presence of the first two wives. As with his other deeds, Esau's act does not seem to be thought through. It could be that he considered that his father would be happier with the children Esau would get by Mahalath, than with his offspring from the Canaanite women. Mahalath is called Bashemath in chapter 36:3.

The night Jacob spends at Luz is told to us in detail. In vs.10 it is called "a certain place," but from vs.19 we learn that the place was called Luz and later it came to be known as Bethel, because Jacob named it so. According to *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* Luz was about 48 miles from Beersheba, so it is hardly likely that this was Jacob's first night on the trail. Why he decides to spend the night in the open field instead of going into the city, we are not told. It could be that darkness fell upon him before he got that far, as Adam Clarke suggests. It is also possible that the cities of Canaan had already acquired notoriety, like Sodom and

Gomorrah a century earlier and that Jacob was wise in avoiding such places. After all Esau's wives made life unbearable for Isaac and Rebekah and they came from places like this.

Jacob's bed was not the most comfortable. He foreshadowed "the Son of Man," who testified in Matt.8:20 - "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head." But this barren, most uncomfortable place became the first spiritual experience Jacob ever had. Here he made the first discovery that God was the living God. It must have shocked him deeply and yet it would take him another twenty years or more, before he finally underwent that inward change of heart that made him a man of God.

God's revelation comes to him in a dream. Dreams are part of the unsolved mystery of man's mind. Most of the time dreams are probably our soul's effort to sort out thoughts and impressions we receive throughout our life. Sometimes it seems more a scramble than a sorting out and most of our dreams look like mixed up fantasies that make little or no sense to us. But, because in our dreaming our sensory guards are down, we are more open to outside spiritual influences, either good or evil. Animists attach great value to dreams. They think that their spirit leaves the body during a dream and actually experiences the things it dreams. There can be no doubt about the spiritual reality of Jacob's dream. God spoke to him and repeated the promise of blessing that Abraham had received over one century earlier.

The Pulpit Commentary has an interesting comment on the terrain upon which Jacob laid down and had his dream. Quoting "Sinai and Palestine" by Standley, it says: "The track (of pilgrims) winds through an uneven valley, covered, as with gravestones, by large sheets of bare rock; some few here and there standing up like the cromlechs of Druidical monuments." On about the vision of the ladder it adds: "the rough stones of the mountain appearing to form themselves into a vast staircase." The last thing Jacob saw before he closed his eyes was this mountain staircase reaching toward heaven and so in a certain manner his dream was closely connected to the sensory impressions of the previous moments. I often dream about portions of the book I read just before falling asleep. Jacob's dream seems to have started out in a normal and natural way. But then the Spirit of the Lord takes over. We can hardly assume that Jacob, fleeing for his life, with the burden of his treachery still upon his heart, would have been in the frame of mind to have pious thoughts. The presence of the Lord was probably the farthest thing possible from his troubled mind.

In verse 12 and 13 we read: "He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. There above it stood the LORD, and he said: 'I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying.'"

One of the amazing features of the dream is first of all the movement of the angels. They do not come down the stairway first, but they are ascending before they descend. This implies that angels surrounded Jacob even before he closed his eyes. It is wonderful how much we can see when we close our eyes. Our eyes are perfect instruments for the observation of things in this world, but we make a mistake if we think that we get the picture of all or reality through them. The Apostle Paul states this well in II Cor.4:18 - "So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal."

In his dream Jacob hears God repeat the blessing that Isaac had given to him, just before he left home. He and his children would possess the land on which he was sleeping. There is also the promise of a multitude of people, who will be his offspring. But most of all there is the blessing, that is the essence of all blessing, "All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring." (Verse 14). That is the promise of the Messiah, who would restore fellowship with God for man and pour out the Holy Spirit upon those who would believe. In Gal 3:14 Paul says about this blessing: "He (God) redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit."

There is no doubt about it, but that Jacob did not understand the full extend of what God promised him. He may have gotten the point that he was an important link in God's plan. That is was a plan of redemption would probably not have penetrated to him. Man in general, even God's chosen people, have very little understanding of their own importance. When we think we are important, we usually build our presumption upon false premises. We are not all links in God's plan like Jacob was. If Jacob would have died prematurely, the Messiah would not have come and no man would be saved. But for most of us our importance to God goes far beyond our own comprehension.

If Jacob had understood anything of what God would do through him, he would never have tried to obtain that privilege by buying it off Esau with a bowl of soup. As he grew older and drew closer to God, he must have felt more and more ashamed of this part of his earlier life.

Verse 15 probably made the deepest impact upon him. This was the short-range kind of promise that he could understand. God says "I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." From further events in his life we see that this was borne out to the letter, but Jacob never trusted himself completely to the promise until the very end. It took years before he kicked the habit of trying to work things out for himself, usually in an unethical way. He kept on tripping up people, grabbing their heels, so he could keep standing straight. Had he taken God seriously, he would have understood that there was no need for this. We have the same great promise for our lives, as Hebr.13:5,6 states it: "Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.' So we say with confidence, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?'" We read Jacob's reaction in verse 16 "When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, 'Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it.'" I prefer the RSV here: "Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, 'Surely the LORD is in this place; and I did not know it.'" Jacob was still a long way from knowing the Lord. Actually he never entered into the deep spiritual relationship his grandfather Abraham had known. But here at Bethel he becomes aware of the fact that God is there, that He is alive and that He speaks to people. This awareness will later develop into a crisis experience of forgiveness and regeneration. The presence of God causes him to fear. In verse 17 he says: "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven."

Before we continue with Jacob's reaction, we have to go to the Gospel of John where Jesus makes a reference to Jacob's experience. In John 1:51 Jesus says to Nathanael: "I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man." This reference is rather cryptic. Some of the great Bible commentators, such as Luther and Calvin, see in Jesus' words an identification of the Lord with the ladder, the bridge between heaven and earth. *The Pulpit Commentary* suggests that Jesus identifies Himself with Jacob. This does not seem to me to be a logical explanation. Jesus says in John 10:7 "I am the gate," or as the RSV and KJV put it: "I am the door." Here He seems to say: "I am the stairway."

So Jacob sees heaven opened and he is afraid. He calls it "awesome" and he builds a monument. It is a wise thing to put a stone or plant a stick at the place where we meet the Lord. Our weak memory needs points of fixation like that. It helps us to remember when the devil attacks and tries to make us doubt.

It has been suggested that Jacob followed a local heathen tradition by pouring oil on a stone, but there is no proof that this was done. What he does looks more like the putting down of the first stone for a building to be erected. Probably this is what he had in mind when he announced that the place would be in fact "God's house." As a matter of fact, what Jacob does is rather impressive. It seems he had very little with him as he was travelling alone. Pouring out the oil, he gives all he has. For a man of Jacob's character that was an indication of a radical change. The discovery of God being alive and the actual encounter with Him has affected him deeply.

Yet the old Jacob is still very much alive. The vow he makes in verse 20-22 sounds like a shameless bargain. He makes the fact whether God will be his God or not dependent on the way God will keep His promise toward Jacob. I remember a sermon preached by a fellow student in the Brussels Bible Institute about these verses. The gist was that God is not the kind of Person one can bargain with. We should anticipate to be turned down by God if we approach Him the way Jacob did. But the amazing feature of grace is that God accepts Jacob's proposal and actually does much more for him than he asks for. Years later at Peniel he says to God: "I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant. I had only my staff when I crossed this Jordan, but now I have become two groups." (Ch. 32:10) But listen to him here: "If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear so that I return safely to my father's house, then the LORD will be my God." (verse 20,21). Jacob had met God, but he still did not know whom he was talking to. He did not trust God, like his grandfather had done when he took God at his word and received God's righteousness as a gift imputed to him. (See Ch. 15:6).

God is so much more humble than we are. As sinful human beings we are worth nothing compared to the eternal glorious God. But God bows down before us and serves us. We have the assurances of the Bible, like in Jesus' words in Matt 20:28 "Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." In Phil 2:6-8 "Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, But made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled

Himself and became obedient to death; even death on a cross!” And the most amazing verse in the Bible, John 12:26 “Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.”

On the other hand there are Bible commentators who interpret these last verses in a completely opposite way. They believe that Jacob simply confirms the promise of God. It is hard to decide who is right. The literal sense of Jacob’s words seems to be that he wants to test the veracity of God’s promise. This attitude seems to be more in accordance with Jacob’s character and with human nature in general.

Finally, Jacob makes three pledges: The LORD will be his God, the stone he has erected will be a shrine and he will tithe his income.

“The LORD will be my God” is literally “YHWH will be my Elohim.” The proponents of “Higher Criticism” must have a hard time cataloguing this verse under the Yahwist or Elohist sources. But we won’t make that our problem. In using these terms Jacob sees himself as the other party in the covenant God, the Creator, makes with man. It is a recognition that the promise God had given to Abraham was real. Jacob realized that he would be a link in God’s chain of revelation. But, as we saw above, he feels that he still has to try God out.

It seems a little harder to know what Jacob intended the stone to be. I do not think he meant more than to keep the memory of the moment alive. He is not planning to build a temple at this spot. But he does return to Bethel later in his life. God reminds him of Bethel while he is still in Haran, as we read in Gen 31:13 - “I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and where you made a vow to me. Now leave this land at once and go back to your native land.” And in Ch. 35:1-7 we read that Jacob goes back and builds an altar at that place.

Thirdly, Jacob promises to tithe. We know very little about the origin of tithing. From Ch. 14:20 we understand that the practice was known in Abraham’s days. When Melkisedik blesses Abraham, Abraham gives him a tenth of the spoil gained on the Babylonian kings. Jacob must have learned the custom at home. Tithing probably consisted in sacrificing every tenth animal and the tenth of a harvest.

The principle implied in tithing is the recognition that everything we have belongs to the Lord. We are in reality giving nothing to the Lord. He gives to us. Tithing is not a fee we pay, but an acknowledgement of the reality that we depend upon God for everything we need to live. We borrow our time from Him, our sustenance, our very breath.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

This chapter begins with Jacob’s arrival in Haran, the place where Bethuel moved, either when Terah did or at a later date. It is the place where his mother was born and where Abraham’s servant went to get a bride for Isaac. We are told nothing further about Jacob’s trip, which must have taken him several weeks. He covered a distance of more than 300 miles, according to *The Pulpit Commentary*. It must have been an eventful journey, but we only hear about the one night when he had his dream at Bethel.

When Jacob arrives within walking distance of the place where his family lives, he sees a group of shepherds close to a well, waiting for more people to gather to water their sheep. He learns that they have a set way of doing this, which evidently is different than what Jacob is used to. At least he makes a remark about the inefficiency of their system.

Jacob learns from the shepherds that he is close to Haran and that Laban still lives there. While he gathers information about his relatives, Rachel, his cousin, approaches with a flock of sheep. While she is approaching, the system of watering each flock is explained to Jacob. Whether the well wasn’t opened to avoid too much dirt blowing in, or whether the water supply was limited and it was necessary to wait in order to assure a fair distribution, we are not told.

As soon as Jacob sees his cousin, he is overwhelmed with emotions. We have to remember that Jacob came to Haran with the specific purpose of marrying his cousin, so we do not have to ask ourselves the question what went on inside him. He does two things: he rolls away the stone of the well which, we are told, was very heavy. Either the shepherds were a bunch of lazy weaklings, or Jacob was a very strong man. Maybe the surge of adrenaline he felt when he saw Rachel made him perform over and above his natural strength. It looks like Jacob experienced love at first sight.

Secondly, Jacob kisses Rachel and he breaks down in tears. Obviously he must have told Rachel who he was. She would not have allowed a perfect stranger to kiss her in public, we hope. Jacob’s reaction gives us a glance into his character and into the tensions he must have experienced during the trip. After all, he had no indication as to what he would find upon arrival. The uncertainty of the outcome of his trip must have

preoccupied him constantly as he walked week after week. Whoever sets out over such a distance to marry a cousin he has never seen? Here he arrives and the first person he bumps in to is his cousin. Jacob had asked God to watch over him on his journey and God had granted his request beyond his wildest imagination.

Rachel runs home and tells her father Laban, who in turn hurries to the well and gives Jacob a very warm welcome. A comparison between this incident and a similar one that took place about sixty or more years earlier forces itself upon us. Then Abraham's servant stood at a similar place and was greeted warmly by Laban, who had seen the proofs of riches of his uncle Abraham in the nose and on the arms of his sister Rebekah. Here he only meets a poor single traveler, who has nothing to offer. It is to Laban's credit that he welcomes Jacob with the same warmth and takes him in.

In verse 13 we read: "As soon as Laban heard the news about Jacob, his sister's son, he hurried to meet him. He embraced him and kissed him and brought him to his home, and there Jacob told him all these things." It would be interesting to know what the content was of the story Jacob told his uncle. We are told "Jacob told him all these things." Did this include his deceit of his father, which his mother had plotted for him? Did he reveal that he had to flee for his life, because Esau planned to kill him? Did he tell that he came to marry one of his cousins? It could be that under the impact of the highly emotional experience Jacob just had he said more than he intended to. It is doubtful that Jacob specifically mentioned his intentions to marry Rachel, because in the following verses the topic is brought up as a new subject, not as something that had been mentioned before. Of course, Laban was not born yesterday. He would have divined that a single fellow would not cover a distance of about 450 miles just to say "hello" to his uncle. But although this was understood it was not said.

How much could Jacob hide and still be honest? The question can be put more general: how much do we have to tell others to be open with them? Since the fall it is impossible for persons to be completely honest, either with each other or with themselves. We are even prone to deceive God. Jer.17:9 tells us: "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" The cover God gave to Adam and Eve to clothe their nakedness was meant to cover their souls even more than their bodies. Our heart is still deceitful beyond cure and our only openness is under the cover of the blood of Jesus Christ.

We are told that Jacob stayed with Laban one month without any obligation on either side. Obviously, Jacob was not lazy and he must have started right away to help his uncle with the herd. Laban's eye was keen enough to see that he had found himself a first class worker and he decides to take full advantage of this. His talk sounds smooth, but evidently his intentions are less lofty. He offers to pay Jacob. The way he puts his proposal is very clever. We read in verse 15: "Laban said to him, 'Just because you are a relative of mine, should you work for me for nothing? Tell me what your wages should be.' " In other words: "Since you are my relative, I am under no obligation to pay you for your work, which should be considered payment for room and board. But since I am generous, I am offering you a salary."

Laban must also have been aware of Jacob's love for Rachel, so he sets the trap for his cousin. People in love are easy to catch. Jacob, rather generously, offers himself as a slave to his uncle. The period of seven years of service would later be incorporated into the Mosaic law. (Ex.21:2). It is quite likely that what God decreed to Moses was a continuation of the existing custom. We should notice that Laban does not offer Jacob any credit, at least at this point. After the deceit of Jacob's wedding night he is issued a credit card, but not now. It seems to me that Jacob paid his uncle well. Seven years of industrious labor constitutes a lot of money. But as far as Jacob is concerned the time flew by. We read in verse 20: "So Jacob served seven years to get Rachel, but they seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her."

When Jacob proposes to his uncle to marry Rachel, Laban acts as if he never thought of this possibility and that although he could do much better marrying her to someone else in the area, someone of influence, he does not mind sacrificing his daughter for the sake of family ties. Knowing the rest of the story, we can see the slyness of this man being outlined already at this point. Rachel was a beautiful girl, as Jacob's mother was, but Lea was rather plain. *The Pulpit Commentary* gives as meanings for the name Lea "Wearied," "Dull," "Stupid," "Pining," or "Yearning." The poor girl! To have to go around with a name like that! We are told that "Lea had weak eyes." The KJV says "tender eyes," but the meaning of the word tender must have changed over the centuries. It sounds like Laban might have had a hard time marrying off his oldest daughter. It is quite likely that the plan to push Lea on Jacob was formed already at this moment.

So Jacob performs his slave labor of seven years. At the end of this period Laban does not give any indication to have counted too closely, so Jacob has to remind him of the deal that was made and a wedding, according to the custom of the country is organized. Calvin comments upon Jacob's words "I want to lie with her," that this was a proof that Rachel's virginity had been kept. Jacob had not touched her. Whether

this is an indication of Jacob's restraint, we do not know. It would probably have been considered a capital offense had Jacob tried to touch his bride to be during this period.

The wedding feast lasted seven days, but at the end of the first day Jacob is given his bride, whom he presumes to be Rachel. Divine justice paid back Jacob for his own deceit at this point. We cannot but feel a mixture of pity and satisfaction for this man, who was in the habit of tripping up others. Here he pays for the soup he sold to his brother and the blessing he stole from his father. But on the other hand it must be terrible to discover the morning after that the joys of the wedding night were spent on the wrong person. Jacob expressed his love to the person he did not love. How utterly foolish and ridiculed he must have felt! Jacob had been in the habit of tripping people, by grabbing their heel; here his uncle had pulled his leg! He had found his match.

It is clear that if the custom of the land was to marry the oldest daughter before the younger, Jacob should have been told when he asked for Rachel's hand. To tell this to a bridegroom after the wedding is utterly mean. Laban shows his true colors by booking Jacob immediately for another seven years. He is given Rachel immediately upon finishing the first week of the wedding with Leah. Laban has Jacob over a barrel and he takes full advantage of him.

We could dismiss this with the thought that what we are reading here is just the story of what one crook does to another. In a certain way this is true. But Jacob had shown signs of a genuine change of heart after his encounter with God at Bethel. He seems to have become more open and straightforward. We have seen already that what happens to him is a meeting out of divine justice. God shows him "a severe mercy," to use C.S. Lewis's phrase. Jacob is made to feel by the hand of God, what it means to be cheated. Jacob's experience is part of the process by which the Holy Spirit is making him a man: a man of God. The Lord uses sinful people to change and chisel and polish us. More important than what happened to Jacob is how Jacob reacted to what happened to him. Jacob's reaction seems quite mild. He asks the question indignantly, but he does not fly into a rage. Yet he had been humiliated to the core.

With the two wives come two slave girls, who eventually become Jacob's wives also. Zilpah was Laban's gift to Leah and Bilhah to Rachel. These girls had probably served the daughters from the very beginning, or they were slave girls they grew up with. I suppose the names are mentioned specifically because of Jacob's future relationship with them. They would become mothers in Israel. And Jacob thought he was just marrying Rachel!

Chapter 29:31 through 30:24 give us one of those sad stories of family jealousy and friction that abound in this world. Partly this was Jacob's fault. He loved Rachel and he showed it, which made Leah suffer immensely. As Westerners we have very little understanding of the tragedies among polygamous families. I have seen the quarrels between wives of the same husband among the Ekagi tribe in Irian Jaya and I am afraid I have only thought it was funny. The screaming and, sometimes, physical abuse looked amusing, but I had very little understanding of the deep hurt that lay at the bottom of this. Impartiality by the husband in such a situation is an impossibility. Men generally are insensitive to the hurts of women; they are amused.

Jacob was used to favoritism. His mother had adopted him; his father had chosen Esau. Jacob's deceit of his brother and his father was probably his way of getting back at both of them for this kind of rejection. He may not have done this consciously. Now he practices what he learned at home and he makes Leah suffer immensely. What we say is no plea for polygamy. In a certain way Jacob was a victim, but so was Leah.

The Lord understood. We read in vs.31 - "When the LORD saw that Leah was not loved, he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren." God loved Leah! How terrible it is to live as husband and wife without love. Sex without love is a diabolic invention. For Leah it was misery to be married to Jacob. For Rachel it was too, because she turns out to be barren, like her mother was.

Leah calls her son Reuben - "Behold a Son!" She thinks that the birth of Reuben will change Jacob's attitude toward her, but it doesn't. The joy and mystery of birth should have affected Jacob, but his loveless relationship with his first wife must have dulled his ability for affection. So Leah continues to suffer. The KJV and RSV use the word "hated" instead of "not loved." It could be that Jacob used Leah to revenge himself for the humiliation he had undergone that first night. We are not told what went on in the secrecy of their bedroom, but it sounds like the sanctity of marriage was violated. Jacob may have gotten Leah pregnant by taking it out on her. We can only guess the depth of her suffering. However, in her pain she turns to the Lord. The names she gives to the four sons she bears Jacob express her growing fellowship with the Lord.

After Reuben, Simeon is born. The name means "hearing." Evidently Leah had prayed and Simeon was the answer to her prayers. When the third boy is born, she calls him Levi, which means, "joined." She thinks that this third child will be the cement in Jacob's relationship with her. Her naming the son Levi was

prophetic in the sense that Levi did become the tribe out of which the priests would be called, who would be the bridge between God and the people.

The birth of Judah, however, brings Lea to praise the Lord. She must have realized that fulfillment was not going to come from her relationship with Jacob, or in any other human relationships, but only in fellowship with God. Only when we love the Lord with all our heart, soul and mind will we experience the peace and fulfillment that we long for. If human love is based on God's love, it will fill our being. But if we tried to fill ourselves with human love, as a substitute for God's love, we dry out.

In naming her fourth son Lea exercises again her gift of prophecy. It is through him that the Messiah would come into this world, that the Word would become flesh. A greater reason to praise God cannot be thought of.

Lea's experience may not have been completely pure, because at a later date we see her starting to manipulate the situation, as if God had done nothing for her. As long as we are in this world there will not be any perfect relationships, not even with God. Lea learned to praise God at a certain point, because of her motherhood, but she did not learn to rest in Him for the remainder of her life. That does not diminish the riches of what we learn of these verses.

CHAPTER THIRTY

In chapter 30 the jealousy between Rachel and Lea reaches a peak. Since by this time Lea has four children, Jacob must have been married at least four or five years. Suspicion arises that Rachel may be barren. Now it turns out that Jacob's love for her is not enough to satisfy her. She realizes that she needs motherhood in order to be completely fulfilled. God made her that way and I believe that God makes most women that way, if not all. For a man, fatherhood brings great joy, but it is not of vital importance to his wholeness as it is for a woman. I wonder what kind of tensions a woman goes through in a marriage where the couple has decided not to have children. It is obvious that God intends people to get married for the purpose of having children. In cases where this turns out to be impossible, it usually creates tensions and hurt. Adoption is a solution, but it certainly does not dissolve all the problems. Sometimes it creates even more.

It sounds like Rachel blames her childlessness on Jacob; which is unreasonable, since he has given proof that he is not infertile. She makes Jacob angry with her cry: "Give me children, or I die." Jacob bounces the ball back to her. He tells her that God kept her from having children, implying that He may have had His reason for doing so.

Rachel had some things in common with her aunt Rebekah, who did not have children until her twentieth year of marriage. But at least Isaac and Rebekah turned to the Lord with their problem. Rachel does not give any indication of knowing the Lord at all. The idea that life would not be worth living unless certain conditions were met seems to have run in the family also. At least at one point, maybe two, Rebekah makes remarks like that. In Ch. 27:46 she says: "I'm disgusted with living because of these Hittite women." And in Ch. 25:22 "Why is this happening to me?" may have this meaning. The RSV translates her words with: "If it is thus, why do I live?" Whether Rachel made threats to Jacob that she would end her life, or whether she even seriously considered this, we do not know. It could be that she made threats in order to pressure Jacob into her scheme of using Bilhah as a substitute mother. Since Jacob's grandmother, Sarah, had done this before, we could conclude that this kind of procedure, to use slaves as substitutes, was not uncommon at that time. The body of the slave was considered to belong to the owner, to be used in whatever way was deemed necessary.

The main purpose for Rachel's act seems to have been to get even with her sister. She was more bent on the satisfaction of revenge than on fulfillment for her own life. Adam Clarke quotes Prov 14:30 "Envy the rottenness of the bones." (KJV) And he says also "Jealousy is cruel as the grave," a quote I have been unable to find in the Bible.

Jacob seems to be the willing victim in Rachel's scheme, much as he had been in the deception of his father at his mother's instigation. One wonders whether his conscience bothered him at all. He had intended to marry Rachel and now he finds himself with his third wife. Calvin remarks in connection with Jacob's attitude: "Whence we gather that there is no end of sin where once the Divine institution of marriage is neglected."

It seems to me that the first mistake Jacob made was to fall in love with Rebekah at first sight. His whole behavior was governed by his being in love. He evidently never bothered to ask the Lord if Rebekah was the girl he was to marry. In retrospect we know that Lea bore him Judah, the son through whom the

Messiah was eventually born. So God probably intended him to marry Lea. But he never asked as far as we know. He must have presumed that it could never be God's plan for him to marry the girl with ugly eyes and reject a beauty such as Rachel. But evidently it was. How different Jacob's life would have been had he rejected Laban's proposal to marry Rachel the week after he married Lea! The fact that God makes all things work together for good does not make bad things good to start with.

Bilhah gets pregnant with Jacob and Rachel, accepting the child as her own, calls him Dan, which means "judge." Both the KJV and the RSV translate verse 6 as "God hath judged me, and hath also heard my voice, and hath given me a son: therefore called she his name Dan." The NIV says: "God has vindicated me; he has listened to my plea and given me a son." Because of this she named him Dan." There is no doubt in my mind but that Rachel uses the Name of the Lord in vain in this instance. She ascribes the success of her plot to God, whereas in reality God had nothing to do with it. How could God bless the ugly vindication of a jealous woman over her sister? Rachel must have had very little idea Who she was talking about.

It also becomes clear that the vindication was not sufficient. We get the impression that it was because of Rachel's prodding that Jacob kept on sleeping with Bilhah. Bilhah's second pregnancy becomes a wrestling match between Rachel and her sister. It would be funny if it were not so tragic!

Verse 9 tells us that Lea does not accept defeat that easily. She fights back and pressures Jacob into taking Zilpah as his fourth wife. The situation has completely gotten out of hand now. Jacob could have found an excuse to accept Bilhah from Rachel, but there is none for his taking Zilpah. He must have known that he was the tool of his wives' jealousy, but evidently he does not care. Through Zilpah Gad and Asher are added to the family.

Lea seems to have given up on God now. While she praised the Lord at the birth of Judah, she does not ascribe the birth of Gad to divine intervention. The name Gad means "change" or "good luck." Maybe she is more honest than her sister at this point, by leaving God out of it all together. She may have felt some conviction of sin for letting Jacob marry Zilpah. After all she had four sons of her own already and Jacob's relationship with Zilpah moved him one step further away from her.

When Asher is born the only thing that seems to matter is public opinion; what other women will say about Lea. Evidently she has given up on her husband's affection.

In verse 14 the plot thickens. Reuben finds some mandrake plants and shows them or gives them to his mother. We do not know how old the boy is here.

Jacob had eight sons at this stage, but since they are not from the same women, there is no way of telling Reuben's age by calculation one year per birth. Reuben was problem to young to understand the importance of the plants for his mother or stepmother. He may have entered his puberty already. The mandrakes, however, become an important point of contention between Jacob's wives.

We do not know what mandrakes are. The Westminster Dictionary of the Bible says: "The rendering of the Heb. *duda'im*, by a popular etymology connected with Heb. *dod* (beloved, love). The plants were supposed to act as a love philter (Ch. 30:14-16; in R.V. marg., love apples). They are odoriferous (S. of Sol.7:13). The mandrake (*Mandragora officinarum*) is a handsome plant of the salanaceous (nightshade) order. It has wavy leaves and pale-violet, white, or deep-blue flowers. Its fruit is small and yellow. The forked root bears a

slight resemblance to the human body. It is found in the Jordan Valley and along the rivers running into it, in the plains of Moab and Gilead, and in Galilee."

Why Rachel would need mandrakes is a mystery. She was the only one to whom Jacob had shown genuine affection. It could be that more was attributed to the plant than just the ability to work as a love potion. She probably believed that the plant could help to make her pregnant. Ironically, it seems to have had that effect upon her!

When Rachel asks Lea for the fruit she incurs the full wrath and venom of her sister. We read in verse 15: "But she said to her, 'Wasn't it enough that you took away my husband? Will you take my son's mandrakes too?' 'Very well,' Rachel said, 'he can sleep with you tonight in return for your son's mandrakes.'" From the deal the ladies make we conclude that Jacob's love for Rachel had not diminished. She was still the one he stayed with habitually. The deal itself seems like a ridiculous manipulation of a man who has no voice in the matter.

Verse 16 says: "So when Jacob came in from the fields that evening, Leah went out to meet him. 'You must sleep with me,' she said. 'I have hired you with my son's mandrakes.' So he slept with her that night." We get the impression that Jacob had fallen rather low at this point. He did not really care any longer. Lea becomes pregnant again. She must have prayed at this point, since we read in verse 17 "God listened to Leah, and she became pregnant and bore Jacob a fifth son." It is doubtful, though, whether Lea

interprets this correctly. She says in verse 18: “God has rewarded me for giving my maidservant to my husband.” I find it hard to accept that God would have blessed either Rachel’s plan or Lea’s to use their slave girls as substitute mothers. Lea had come to the point where she thought she could use God for her own purposes. She was not the only one who made this mistake. People who do this have lost sight of who God really is. The almighty God is not the kind of Person one can make deals with.

So she named him Issachar, which means, according to *The Pulpit Commentary*, “there is reward.” With her next pregnancy Zebulon is born. His name may be translated “Dwelling.” Her comment upon Zebulon’s birth is: “God has presented me with a precious gift. This time my husband will treat me with honor, because I have borne him six sons.” (Verse 20). The Hebrew word used here, according to Adam Clarke, is “Yizbeleni.” What is literally meant is “God has given me a dowry.” Hope has been rekindled in her that Jacob would forsake all his other marital relationships and live exclusively with Lea. Lea never came to the point where she accepted the situation, which she had helped create in the first place.

After her sixth son, Lea gives birth to a daughter Dinah, which is the female form of Dan. On the basis of Ch. 37:35, where Jacob’s sons and daughters are mentioned, *The Pulpit Commentary* believes that Jacob may have had more than one daughter. However, the term daughters may very well have indicated Jacob’s daughters-in-law.

It seems that at this point Rachel finally turns to the Lord, because we read in verse 22 “Then God remembered Rachel; he listened to her and opened her womb.” Rachel’s pregnancy could hardly be attributed to the mandrakes, since Lea had given birth to two sons in the meantime. We suppose that the story is told in chronological order. Rachel must have called upon God, because nothing else helped. It was good she did, but she should have done it earlier.

Rachel names her son Joseph, expressing the hope to have another son in due time. Her wish would be fulfilled in the birth of Benjamin, in chapter 35:18, which would end her own life. The name Joseph may either mean “he takes away,” or, “he shall add,” according to *The Pulpit Commentary*. The “he takes away” would refer to the removal of Rachel’s reproach among women for not having had any children of her own. So Rachel recognizes that it was in dependence upon Yahweh that she had conceived a son and not by her own manipulation.

Vs.25-43 tell the strange story of how Jacob acquired his wealth. There is a mixture of craftsmanship and craftiness, honesty and deceit.

The time factor has to be noted here. If Jacob comes to the conclusion that it is time to leave, because his contract of seven years of labor as a bride price for Rachel, is finished, it means that he had twelve children, eleven sons and one daughter, in the time span of seven years. Of course, the children were born of four different mothers, but still it shows that the succession of births went much more rapidly than the story would suggest. There is the possibility that Dinah, whose birth is mentioned in the context of this chapter, was actually born at a later date.

Jacob approaches Laban with the request for permission to leave. He had fulfilled his contract, thus paying for his two wives. As before, after the first seven years of service were concluded, it was Jacob who had to remind Laban of the agreement made. It seems doubtful that Laban had lost count. It is more likely that he was not ready to let his son-in-law go. He had in Jacob an irreplaceable help.

There is no reason why Jacob would have to ask Laban to give him his wives and children, as seems to be indicated in vs.26. They were rightfully his. But Laban seems not to have come to grips with this truth, because later, when Jacob actually does leave, Laban claims his daughters and grand children as his own. We read in chapter Gen 31:43 that Laban says to Jacob: “The women are my daughters, the children are my children, and the flocks are my flocks. All you see is mine. Yet what can I do today about these daughters of mine, or about the children they have borne?”

Laban is bent upon keeping Jacob. Things are going too well to let him go at this point. Laban sounds almost too humble in his approach to Jacob. Verse 27 tells us that Laban said: “If I have found favor in your eyes, please stay. I have learned by divination that the LORD has blessed me because of you.” “I have learned by divination” is the translation of the Hebrew word “Nichashti,” which, according to Adam Clarke, comes from “nachash,” “to view attentively, to observe, to pry into.” The KJV says: “I have learned by experience.” That translation may sound differently to our twentieth century ears than was originally intended. It may have meant, “I have learned by experiments.” The LB paraphrases it as “for a fortune-teller that I consulted told me...” It is difficult to decide whether Laban is talking about some supernatural information he has acquired or whether he speaks about his own common sense. It would seem that he would not have mixed his idols and Jehovah so easily in the same sentence.

Anyhow Jacob is entreated to stay and receive a salary. He accepts, but not without rubbing it in to Laban that he truly was the instrument through which God blessed Laban. Jacob seems to reject the offer of wages, but instead indicates that he wants to depend upon the blessing of the Lord. He wants to build his flock with the rejects of Laban's that is with the striped and spotted and dark colored sheep and goats.

It is not too clear what happens next. Adam Clarke writes the following about these verses: "It is extremely difficult to find out, from the thirty-second and thirty-fifth verses, in what the bargain of Jacob with his father-in-law properly consisted. The true meaning appears to be this: Jacob had agreed to take all the partly colored for his wages. As he was now only beginning to act upon this agreement, consequently none of the cattle as yet belonged to him; therefore Laban separated from the flock, v.35, all such cattle as Jacob might afterwards claim in consequence of his bargain; therefore Jacob commenced his service to Laban with a flock that did not contain a single animal of the description of those to which he might be entitled; and the others were sent away under the care of Laban's sons, three days' journey from those of which Jacob had the care. The bargain, therefore, seemed to be wholly in favor of Laban; and to turn it to his own advantage, Jacob made use of the stratagems afterwards mentioned. This mode in interpretation removes all the apparent contradiction between the thirty-second and thirty-fifth verses, with which commentators in general have been grievously perplexed."

It seems to me, though, that Laban may have broken the agreement as soon as it was made. Jacob clearly asks for all the speckled and spotted animals that are in the herd at that moment. Before he has a chance to gather those animals Laban takes them out and sends them away, thereby leaving a flock to Jacob with only white sheep and goats. That way it would be humanly impossible for Jacob to acquire the kind of herd he proposed. This interpretation seems to agree with what we read in Ch. 31:41 where Jacob tells Laban: "It was like this for the twenty years I was in your household. I worked for you fourteen years for your two daughters and six years for your flocks, and you changed my wages ten times." Laban had gone back on his word over and over again.

Again we see in Jacob's attitude the tendency to give a hand to God, so that it would not be so humanly impossible for the Lord to fulfill His promise. Jacob had told his father-in-law that he wanted to trust the Lord for his sustenance and that he was willing to start with a disadvantage, although not the disadvantage that Laban left him with. The Lord confirms to him at one point that He will bless him in the acquisition of his herd. In Gen 31:10-12 he tells his wives about a divine revelation he had received. We read: "In breeding season I once had a dream in which I looked up and saw that the male goats mating with the flock were streaked, speckled or spotted. The angel of God said to me in the dream, 'Jacob.' I answered, 'Here I am.' And he said, 'Look up and see that all the male goats mating with the flock are streaked, speckled or spotted, for I have seen all that Laban has been doing to you.'"

Yet, in spite of the divine revelation, or maybe prompted by it, Jacob devises a stratagem to make the animals of his herd have streaked, speckled and spotted offspring. It could very well be that Jacob started to use mechanical means with the conviction that it would benefit him, but that the Lord revealed to him at a later date that it was because of His intervention that his wealth increased. *The Pulpit Commentary* remarks here: "The fact is said to have been frequently observed, that particularly in the case of sheep, whatever fixed their attention in copulation is marked upon the young. That Jacob believed in the efficacy of the artifice he adopted is apparent; but the multiplication of partly-colored animals it will be safer to ascribe to Divine blessing than to human craft."

The disturbing part, of course, is the fact that Jacob used deceit. Whether the method worked or not is irrelevant. His ploy fits into the pattern of his life, by which he cheated Esau out of his birthright and stole his father's blessing. So he obtained by devious means what God would have given him anyhow. In Psalm 127:2 we read: "In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat; for he grants sleep to those he loves." Actually it says: "He grants it to those he loves, while they sleep." And Prov.10:22 says: "The blessing of the LORD brings wealth, and he adds no trouble to it." Although the psalms and proverbs had not been written yet at Jacob's time, he could have known these truths. What Jacob did was in line with Abraham's giving in to Sarah's prompting to marry Hagar, so it would be easier for God to give him the heir that was promised.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Jacob receives a divine revelation which tells him to return to Canaan, but he had already conceived this plan because of some outside pressure. Both Laban's sons and Laban himself have changed in their attitude toward Jacob. Jacob has picked up rumors. There is talk going around among Laban's

children on account of Jacob's wealth. They suspect foul play. Whether they were informed about the arrangement between Jacob and their father, we do not know. But if they are chips of the old block, the agreement would not have meant much to them. Their conclusion is simply that Jacob has taken over. The atmosphere has become threatening for Jacob.

We do not know anything about Laban's sons. This is the first time they are mentioned, besides the cryptic reference in chapter 30:35. We do not know how many they were and how old. They should have been involved in the marriage of their sisters, as Laban was when Rebekah was married off to Isaac. Laban must have been a very dominating character to keep everything in his own hands.

More threatening seems to be Laban's attitude. There probably was never too much love lost between Laban and Jacob. But since Jacob was a shepherd of the first rank Laban acted kindly toward him. Since Jacob was no longer working full time for Laban the incentive for kindness was gone. Laban's sons did probably most of the work in the herd. But most of all: Jacob was doing too well with Laban's cattle. Laban's multiple efforts to change the agreement turned out to be of no avail. I suppose it was true, what Jacob said, that Laban had changed the rules ten times.

Verse 2 says pointedly: "And Jacob noticed that Laban's attitude toward him was not what it had been."

Jacob was not a hero. He did not have the courage to face Laban. It could be that Laban was unscrupulous enough to use force in retaining Jacob, or in sending him back the way he came: alone with his cane. Jacob's precautions may have been a necessity. Finally he does leave because the Lord tells him to.

The fact that the Lord speaks to him about returning, could mean that Jacob had settled in Haran and put his roots so deeply, that it needed this divine reminder to make him go back home. It is easy, for us also, to come to a stage of spiritual inertia, where God has to wake us up to make us realize where we are and where we are going.

The promise of the Lord that He would be with him should have been enough for Jacob to face Laban squarely. But he seems to be so used to sly and devious behavior, that he automatically reverts to plotting. He waits for the moment when Laban is absent for an extended period to escape. He calls Rachel and Lea away from home to where he is with the flocks and tells them that he wants to leave for Canaan.

It is not clear why he has to tell them what they probably knew all along themselves. Most likely they knew what was going on better and sooner than Jacob did. The women had probably inside information through the house personnel. The recounting of the dream in which God speaks to him in vs.10-13 sets some of the rumors straight, which said that Jacob had acquired his flocks by devious means.

The question is this: if Jacob received a divine revelation regarding the role God played in the acquisition of his flocks and his return to Canaan, why does he have to be so careful to communicate this to his family? We get the impression that the worship of Yahweh was not practiced in a way that involved the whole family. Granted it is difficult to have a family altar in a family with four wives and two major competing factions. Jacob's religion must have been his private affair. Lea may have known the Lord, but she seems to have been the exception, rather than the rule.

Paul says in Rom.10:9 "That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." These words seem to imply that if your religion is so private that the members of your household do not know about it, you are not participating in "saving grace." Jacob probably confesses the things God told him to overrule any potential opposition.

Jacob mentions several reasons why he feels the family should leave. First of all Laban's attitude. This should have been the least important argument, but it is mentioned first. Evidently Jacob needed the affirmation by people around him and when that was no longer there, he felt lost. Laban did not smile upon Jacob any more, so he felt he should leave.

The fact that Laban had tried to cheat Jacob "ten times," as he says, should have been a far more important reason to move. In the preceding chapter we do not read any details about Laban's deception. There is no reason to believe that Jacob was lying though. The "ten times" may have been a figure of speech, but the truth remains that Laban did not keep his word. He changed his promises as it appeared to be in his favor. People for whom promises are worthless are hard to live with.

The most important reason for Jacob's return to Canaan, the one that should have been mentioned first, was the dream God gave him. We get the impression that Jacob had two dreams, which he combines in recounting them. The vision during the mating season may have been given to him at an early stage, shortly after the initial agreement was made with Laban, when Laban tried to cheat Jacob by taking

away all the partially colored animals. The second dream must have occurred shortly before Jacob called his wives to prepare for the flight. The recounting of the dream seems to have the double purpose of impressing upon Lea and Rachel that Jacob had not really been cheating their father and secondly that Jacob was bound by his vow at Bethel to return to Canaan. Whether this was the first time the ladies learned about God's revelation to Jacob at Bethel, we are not told.

It seems doubtful that Jacob had given any details to his wives about his intimate relationship with God and the various theophanies that had been imparted to him. This silence would have fit the pattern of his life, as we indicated above. It could be that Laban knew about Bethel, since we read in Ch. 29:13 that Jacob told Laban "all these things." Whether that included the divine revelations, we do not know. But even if Laban knew, that does not mean that Jacob had told his wives. Rachel may have heard, since Jacob seems to have been more intimate with her than with Lea, but as far as spiritual understanding is concerned, she seems to have been the dullest.

The ladies agree with Jacob to leave. They pledge their allegiance to Jacob for, what seems to be, rather materialistic reasons: there is no inheritance left for them at home. They also have no emotional ties with their father. They felt disgraced by the agreement Laban had made with Jacob about the bride price. It sounds like the arrangement went against the culture and customs of their days. They indicate that Laban should at least have shared some of the profit he had made of Jacob's services with them. So they tell Jacob to do whatever God told him to do.

Having received their consent Jacob prepares to leave. But the Scripture passes judgment on Jacob's departure. We read in vs.20 - "Moreover, Jacob deceived Laban the Aramean by not telling him he was running away." Since the Lord had told him to go and had promised him His protection, there would have been no reason to do things in an underhand way.

The worst part of the deception is of course the stealing of the teraphim by Rachel. We are told in vs.19 - "When Laban had gone to shear his sheep, Rachel stole her father's household gods." Obviously Jacob did not know about this, as becomes clear from his outburst to Laban in vs.32. Adam Clarke suggests that Rachel may have stolen the gods so her father would not be able to use divination to find out where they had gone. But more likely Rachel had never made a break with idolatry and she believed that she would be able to use the idols and their supernatural powers for her own benefit. The incident gives us a clear understanding about the strange mixture of beliefs that was present in the family. Syncretism is evidently almost as old as man himself. Ever since man fell into sin, he believes that he can manipulate supernatural powers, whether God's or Satan's. The man who thinks that he can use God for his own advancement, has no idea who he is dealing with. To think that we can make the devil do what we want, is like the fly that wants to manipulate the spider.

On the one hand we have Jacob, who always felt he had to help God to keep His promises, as if God's omnipotence would have failed Him. On the other hand we have Rachel, who thinks that God is O.K. as long as He is on her side. There is no evidence of real faith as we find it in Abraham, who, at the best moments of his life surrendered without any strings attached.

Jacob was able to put a good distance between himself and Laban by crossing the river Euphrates, before Laban even got word that Jacob had fled.

Vs.22 says that Laban heard on the third day that Jacob had fled. Supposedly this is three days after Jacob's departure. It must have taken Laban one day to get ready, since he does not catch up with Jacob until seven days later. That seems a long time if we suppose that Laban traveled faster than Jacob with his entire herd. Before Laban meets Jacob God speaks to him in a dream and tells him to let Jacob go. This is the first time we read that Laban had a divine revelation. He had probably been too deeply into idolatry to hear God's voice. But hear God shouts to him, so to speak, to protect Jacob. We can deduct from this that Laban's intentions toward Jacob were not too good. Whether Jacob's life would have been in danger we do not know; but it seems likely that Laban intended to take Jacob's family and his herd away from him.

The way vs.24 puts it sounds rather curious. God says to Laban: "Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad." This may mean that God not want Laban to make any sweet sounding promises to Jacob with the idea to woo him back. According to *The Pulpit Commentary* "either good or bad" is a proverbial phrase for opposition or interference. As an example is given Ch. 24:50 - "Then Laban and Bethuel answered and said, The thing proceedeth from the LORD: we cannot speak unto thee bad or good." (KJV)

Laban has several things to say to Jacob when he catches up with him. He reproaches Jacob that he deceived him, by leaving without saying a word. He emphasizes that he is hurt in his affection toward his daughters and grand children. This sounds like a reasonable argument until we contrast it with the words

of the two daughters. In vs.14 and 15 they had said: “Do we still have any share in the inheritance of our father’s estate? Does he not regard us as foreigners? Not only has he sold us, but he has used up what was paid for us.” We lean more toward the girls’ side of the story. Laban does not give the impression of being a person who would be deeply wounded in his affections. In the chapters we study he comes rather through as a cunning materialist.

The suggestion that Laban would have thrown a farewell party for Jacob and his children with tambourine and harp music fails to make a genuine impression. Especially if we place it next to the following remark that even now Laban has the power to harm Jacob. We are made to understand that the only thing that restrains him from doing so is his affection toward Jacob and his family, but the fear that God would not let him get away with it.

Why would Laban fear Jehovah? He was an idol worshipper. One of the main reasons why Laban had followed Jacob was because his idols had disappeared. Laban must have seen the hand of JHWH in Jacob’s prosperity. Also the dream he had the night before must have made a profound impression on him. He realized that if he would use his superior force to kill Jacob and take back his daughters and Jacob’s herds, it would be his undoing. It does not seem that Laban would have had any moral restraints to use his power.

In verse 30 we come to the real reason for Laban’s pursuit of Jacob. Laban seems to have a real point when he says: “Now you have gone off because you longed to return to your father’s house. But why did you steal my gods?” Evidently Laban supposes that Jacob took the idols himself, or at least that he was informed about it.

The description of the following events in vs.30 through the end of the chapter equals some of the best theater plays or novel plots in world literature. Shakespeare or Dostojewsky would have nothing to be ashamed of, had they written this.

Laban says: “Now you have gone off because you longed to return to your father’s house. But why did you steal my gods?” Jacob knew nothing of the gods, as we read in vs.32. His answer “I was afraid, because I thought you would take your daughters away from me by force,” refers to Laban’s question about why Jacob did not inform him of his intentions to leave. As we mentioned above Jacob probably had every reason to believe that Laban would do so.

The word used for “gods” is “elohai,” but in vs.19 they are called “teraphim.” According to the Westminster Dictionary of the Bible the Hurrian law prescribed that the possession of the teraphim ensured the title to a property. So when Rachel stole her father’s teraphim she acquired the right to her father’s property for her husband. The teraphim seemed to have belonged to a gray area, at least during certain periods of history. It could be that in the days of the Judges JHWH was consulted through them. But in I Sam. 15:23 Samuel classifies them with witchcraft and rebellion.

Jacob promises a death sentence upon the person who stole the teraphim. The Bible seems to indicate that he would not have done so had he known that Rachel was the culprit. Adam Clarke says about the phrase “Let him not live” - “It appears that anciently theft was punished by death; and we know that the patriarchs had the power of life and death in their hands. But previously to the law the punishment of death was scarcely ever inflicted but for murder. The rabbies consider that this was an imprecation used by Jacob, as if he had said, Let God take away the life of the person who has stolen them! And that this was answered shortly after in the death of Rachel, chap. xxxv.”

Jacob calls the people Laban had brought with him, to whom we are not introduced, as a witness, not only to demonstrate that the accusation of the theft of the teraphim would be false, but also to prove that there was nothing whatsoever to be found that Laban could claim as his own. He was evidently convinced of the perfect honesty of every member of the household. Jacob’s attitude shows this strange mixture of opposing characteristics that is typical for human nature. He would never have stretched out his hand to take something that belonged to another person, but he had not scruples to cheat Esau out of his birthright or to deceive his blind father. We could call him an honest thief. The problem is that none of us is worthy to throw the first stone at him.

So Laban starts his search. After all the teraphim had not walked off by themselves, they were not that divine! The search in Jacob’s tent or in the tents of Lea, Bilhah and Zilpah did not bring any result. Rachel had taken recourse to extreme measures to hide the idols. She sat on them, pretending not to be able to get up because she had her monthly period. Whether this was true or not, we do not know. If what is written in the Mosaic law about a woman in her monthly period is an affirmation of earlier customs, then it would have been inconceivable in Laban’s mind that Rachel would sit on his idols and he would defile himself by touching either her or the saddle she sat on. We read in Lev 15:19,20 “When a woman has her

regular flow of blood, the impurity of her monthly period will last seven days, and anyone who touches her will be unclean till evening. Anything she lies on during her period will be unclean, and anything she sits on will be unclean." If the above is true, what Rachel did was sacrilegious in the highest degree. We would conclude from this that she would have stolen the gods, not for her own use in worship, but to assure the title to Jacob's possessions.

It would also seem unlikely that she did in fact have her period at that time, because it seems doubtful that gods that had been defiled by menstrual blood would have been of any use in the protection of property. Most likely Rachel lied to her father.

When Laban's search does not turn up anything, Jacob flies off the handle. We can imagine the scene. The picture we get of Jacob in Genesis is that of a quiet person, probably on the shy side. But Jacob was not a man without emotions. They had built up over the years all of a sudden to come to a boiling point. Even Laban, who probably was a bully and a rough character is taken back momentarily. Both men know that Jacob is under divine protection. So Jacob can afford to blow up. Vs.36-42 are Jacob's testimony of twenty years of pent-up emotions. He has been cheated and used and treated as dirt.

Laban had been a hard taskmaster and Jacob a very conscientious servant. He had taken responsibility for any loss that had occurred, even if he could not be blamed. Any stolen animal was repaid. As in his explanation to Rachel and Lea in vs.7, so here in vs.41, he reproaches Laban of changing his wages ten times. The hardest blow he gives his father-in-law is the reference to God's protection, which Laban had admitted himself. In verse 42 he says: "If the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac, had not been with me, you would surely have sent me away empty-handed. But God has seen my hardship and the toil of my hands, and last night he rebuked you."

Jacob refers to God as "the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac." The French modern translation, which is the equivalent of the Good News Bible, translates "the Fear of Isaac" with "the One Who made Isaac tremble." ("Celui qui fait trembler Isaac"). The reference is obviously to Gen 27:33 where we read: "Isaac trembled violently..." upon learning that he blessed the wrong son. Jacob was not present when Isaac trembled, but evidently the word had gotten out. It seems of great significance to me that Isaac received his place in God's hall of fame as a hero of faith because God made him tremble. Also, the fact that Jacob uses this name for God in relation to his father indicates how deep an impression it has made on him. He recognizes that God can make a person tremble. Even Laban had trembled to some extent the night before he met Jacob, otherwise he would not have acted so meekly toward his son-in-law.

If God makes people tremble who have surrendered their lives to Him, how much more will they tremble who have resisted him all their lives. At the end of time we will see happen what John predicts in Rev 6:15-17 "Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?'" Our intimate relationship with God as Christians is always a combination of deep love and trembling.

The Apostle John says some very profound things about this subject in 1 John 4:17-18 "In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love." The confidence John speaks about has nothing to do with arrogance. It is the fruit of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Jacob tells Laban that God has rebuked him in his dream and evidently Laban agrees, although he does not admit this in so many words. Yet, in spite of the fact that Laban had sold his daughters to Jacob, evidently contrary to the custom of his days, he still claims them as his own. He tells Jacob in verse 43 - "The women are my daughters, the children are my children, and the flocks are my flocks. All you see is mine. Yet what can I do today about these daughters of mine, or about the children they have borne?" So he agrees to leave things as they are, admitting that there is nothing he can do about it and the status quo is sealed with a covenant.

As often with events that have little or no historical significance, they are accompanied by much pomp and rhetoric. Few places in the Bible have been given so many names as the place where Jacob and Laban agreed that they would never attack one another. The likelihood of an attack on either side was nil, from the side of Laban but even more so from Jacob's direction.

The place where a monument is built is given three names: Laban calls it "Jegar Sahadutha" meaning "the heap or round heap of witness" in Chaldee, according to Adam Clarke, and Jacob "Galeed" meaning the same in Hebrew, and "Mizpah," meaning "watchtower." The interesting feature of this verse is

that it brings out the difference in languages used between Jacob and Laban. There may have been an initial language barrier between the two.

The heap of stones takes the place of a written document. Monuments are less precise in the rendering of the terms, but written documents were probably scarce and we may presume that people were mostly illiterate at that time. This would mean that their memory was keener than ours. The amount of reading we do daily has a tendency to clutter our mind. It makes us forget more easily. We do not have to remember what is written down, as long as we know where we can find it. Literacy is a mixed blessing. For Jacob and Laban it was enough to see the heap of stones to remember. Yet each one gives his own interpretation to the meaning of the monument. But diplomats do this in modern times also with the documents.

We get the impression that Laban was the kind of person who made the center of gravity tilt toward the place was he was staying. We read in vs. 45 that Jacob took up a stone and made it into a monument. Vs.46 could indicate that Laban took over at this point. We read: "He said to his relatives, 'Gather some stones.' So they took stones and piled them in a heap, and they ate there by the heap." Earlier Laban's group is indicated with the word "relatives," so that is probably the designation here also.

Laban warns Jacob not to mistreat his wives or to marry other wives. There is no indication that Jacob every mistreated Lea or Rachel or physically abused them. The harm he did to them was emotional, but it seems doubtful that Laban would have been concerned about that. If Jacob would marry other wives he would rob his sons of their heritage, or at least diminish their share. Since Laban was the one who pushed Jacob into plural marriage to start with the thrust of this advice was probably not a moral one. Most of what Laban says seems to be based on the fact that he still considers Jacob's family and his herds to be his by right. The suggestion that Jacob would pass the monument into Laban's direction with the purpose of attacking his father-in-law sounds preposterous. The remark is probably made to give some counter balance to the promise that Laban will not cross it in Jacob's direction with evil intent. Most of Laban's pronouncements sound rhetorical.

Both Laban and Jacob call upon the Name of God as an affirmation of their non-aggression pact. Laban calls Him "the God of Abraham and the God of Nahor, the God of their father," which would have been Terah. This appeal shows something of the shallowness of Laban's faith. He recognized the existence of YHWH, because his family used to believe in Him. The reference to Abraham is not necessarily an allusion to God's call upon his life; otherwise Laban would not have put him together with Terah and Nahor. When So Jacob takes "an oath in the name of the Fear of his father Isaac," he refers to Isaac's faith and the way he was personally implicated in stealing his father's blessing.

There is something awesome in the realization the God uses our dirty dealings for His own glory. Jacob can hardly have mentioned Isaac's trembling before the Lord without trembling himself. If our eyes are opened for the reality of God's dealing with us, we get goose bumps. Jacob was not that far from the Jabbok where he would meet the Lord in a life changing fashion, where he would humble himself. In chapter 32:10 he will say: "I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant. I had only my staff when I crossed this Jordan, but now I have become two groups." Some of this reality has started to dawn upon him already here.

The context suggests that it is Jacob he made the sacrifice and invites Laban to eat of the animal, after certain parts were burnt upon the altar. The animal must have been taken from the herd, of which Laban had said that they were all his. We should appreciate the irony of the situation. In taking an animal and sacrificing it to the Lord, Jacob makes the statement to Laban that the herd is his. You can't very well take someone else's animal and give it away; not when the owner is present.

There is something very moving for me, who has been saying good bye's all my life, in Laban's kissing of his grand children and daughters. He knew he would never see them again. Blessing them may have been the most sincere thing he ever did in his life.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

"Jacob also went on his way, and the angels of God met him." (vs.1) The NIV adds "also" to the text, which the KJV and RSV do not. This contrasts Jacob's departure from Mizpah with Laban's. When Jacob leaves God's angels meet him, which they do not with Laban. The angels are messengers of God. Both the Greek word "angelos" and the Hebrew "malach" mean messenger. Adam Clarke quotes St. Augustine, who said: "It is a name, not of nature, but of office." The same word is used in the third verse, where "Jacob sent messengers ahead of him to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom."

However, if the angels convey any message to Jacob, we do not hear what it is. Jacob sees them, but does not hear them, as far as we know. The message was probably in the seeing. "The medium was the message," as McLuhan would say. Jacob enters the land that was promised to him and a divine welcoming committee receives him to make him understand that he is home.

Of all the patriarchs Jacob has seen the most angels. Abraham has had divine encounters. Isaac's life was curiously devoid of revelations. We can discern only one or two, but we can count at least four or five meetings with supernatural beings in Jacob's life. We can almost say that God pampered him. Yet there are very few incidents in his life that we can describe as outstanding feats of faith. In the gallery in Hebrews 11 Jacob is only mentioned once, when he blesses his sons. Heb. 11:21 says: "By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph's sons, and worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff."

What counts in our lives is not the supernatural revelations, but obedience to the Word God has revealed to us. This seems to be the message Jesus gives in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. Abraham says to the rich man who suffers in hell: "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them..... "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." (Luke 16:29,31).

Actually the appearance of the angels was not a divine intervention in Jacob's life, it was the revelation of his true condition. The angels had been there for twenty years, ever since Jacob had seen them the first time at Bethel. God had promised Jacob to be with him and to bring him back. Jacob could not see his bodyguard with the naked eye, but that did not mean that they were not there. What God does to him, in all these instances of divine revelation, is lift Jacob up above himself and show him the reality in which he lives. In Psalm 34:7 David states clearly: "The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them." If our eyes would be more tuned in to reality, we would see more. Elisha prayed for his servant that he would see what the prophet himself saw. We read in II Kings 6:17 "And Elisha prayed, 'O LORD, open his eyes so he may see.' Then the LORD opened the servant's eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha." A lot of our dejection and despair is on account of our poor eyesight.

Jacob called the place where he saw the angels "Mahanaim," which means "two armies." The NIV states that Jacob says: "This is the camp of God!" The KJV translates it with: "This is God's host!" and the RSV says: "This is God's army!" The latter translation seems the most appropriate in the context. Commentators have discussed the intent of the giving of the name Mahanaim. Why is Jacob talking about two armies? Did he see two hosts of angels, or was he talking about his own camp and the camp of God? Jacob must have realized that the angels were there for the protection of his family and himself. His reaction is quite different from the first time, when he saw the angels at Bethel and heard the voice of God from heaven. That time it was a first experience. He encountered the God with whom he had never had anything to do. But at Mahanaim he recognizes the angels. The vision brings back to him what he knew already, although its reality of the first dream may have faded over the years.

We tend to forget. Even if our meeting with God may have had a life changing effect upon us, there comes a time when even the sharpness of that picture fades. We have to be reminded over and over again that the ultimate reality is invisible to us and that what we see is not the real thing. Even the apostles, who were filled with the Holy Spirit at the day of Pentecost, had to be filled again at a later date, so that their confidence in giving testimony of Christ's resurrection would not diminish. In Acts 4:29 and 31 we read: "'Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness.' After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly."

In vs. 3-23 we read of the preparations Jacob makes to meet with his brother Esau. The rest of the chapter, from vs. 24-32 pictures his encounter with God at Peniel.

It is an act of courage that Jacob takes the initiative in meeting Esau. He sends messengers to his brother in a clear effort to bring about reconciliation. We read in vs. 3 - "Jacob sent messengers ahead of him to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom." The word for messengers here is the same as the word angels in the previous verses. *The Pulpit Commentary* sees this use of the same word as a means to indicate the contrast between the two armies. Adam Clarke suggests that Jacob sent these messengers before he had the vision of the angels, since they returned to him at the Jabbok. Seir was at the South of the Dead Sea, which was a good distance from the place where Jacob was entering Canaan at the North. I do not think, though, that the chronology of this chapter is necessarily reversed. There is no inconsistency between Jacob's meeting of the angels and the sending of his messengers. And Jacob could very well have spent considerable time at the Jabbok, realizing how crucial the next few weeks would be.

Jacob instructs his messengers to call him Esau's servant, indicating that he does not claim his right as first-born son, bestowed upon him by Isaac's blessing. He also tells them to give an account of Jacob's wealth, so that Esau may understand that Jacob does not need any of his father's possessions. And finally he clearly asks for Esau's favor, that is for reconciliation between him and his brother.

The answer he receives scares him out of his wits. Gen 32:6 says: "When the messengers returned to Jacob, they said, 'We went to your brother Esau, and now he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him.'" Jacob interprets this as hostile. He believes that Esau comes to get his revenge and to kill Jacob and wipe out his family. He cannot imagine that Esau would come with four hundred men to embrace his brother. Evidently Jacob never knew his brother's character. Esau was impetuous. It would have been impossible for him to keep a grudge for twenty years. The cunning Jacob could, but not Esau. Jacob's cunning comes to his rescue at this point. Not that he needed to be cunning under the protection of God's angels, but Jacob evidently did not rely too heavily upon this divine protection. He acts strategically, by dividing his family and herd in two groups, so that one would be attacked and destroyed, the other would have a chance to escape.

Then Jacob prays. His prayer is recorded in the verses 9 - 12. "O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac, O LORD, who said to me, 'Go back to your country and your relatives, and I will make you prosper,' I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant. I had only my staff when I crossed this Jordan, but now I have become two groups. Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid he will come and attack me, and also the mothers with their children. But you have said, 'I will surely make you prosper and will make your descendants like the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted.'" "

In the face of death Jacob grapples with God's promises and tries to reconcile them with the circumstances in which he finds himself and with his fears. Jacob is afraid to die and he fears what will happen to his family. Thus far God had sought Jacob. Here, for the first time, Jacob seeks God. This is tremendous progress.

His prayer is sincere and his humility is genuine. He realizes what God has done for him. When he crossed the Jordan the first time he only had his staff, now, crossing it again, he has a large family and a huge herd of cattle. He had divided the whole in two groups. Evidently the groups are large enough that Esau might take one of them as the whole. Jacob's conclusion is "I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant." Yet, Jacob is not at the point where he can look at himself and see his life and character as God sees it. That he will do a few hours later, when the night falls and darkness closes in around him. He prays that God will save him from the hand of Esau, but he has to be saved from himself first.

Jacob admits that he goes back because God had told him to. That fact should have been enough for him to put his faith in God's protection. But evidently it isn't. Again, he believes that he has to help the Lord to mellow Esau's heart and he decides to send a large gift of cattle ahead to meet his brother. The gift consists of goats, sheep, cows, camels and donkeys, all divided in three groups. The shepherds are given specific instructions as to what to say when they meet Esau and present him with the animals.

We get the impression that Jacob had retired for the night, but then got up and decided upon the gift. After that he tries to sleep again, but gets up again and sends his wife and children across the Jabbok. When he tries to go to sleep for the third time he enters upon the decisive battle, that will change his life and make him a new creature.

Ch. 32:24-32 is one of the great portions of the Bible. Jacob must have crossed the Jabbok again, because verse 24 tells us that he was alone. Alone that is, as far as other human beings is concerned; he is alone with God. He was used to being in a crowd. Four wives and twelve children provided enough noise that he could easily drown himself in company. Now, as death stares him in the face, he realizes that he has to come to terms with himself and with God.

Although death is God's enemy and ours, it can also be our friend. There is nothing that makes us more easily realistic people than the presence of death. That is why Ecclesiastes says: "It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of every man; the living should take this to heart. Sorrow is better than laughter, because a sad face is good for the heart. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure." (Ecc. 7:2-4). We will not be able to live as we should until we have come to grips with death.

"So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak." (vs. 24). We are not told directly who this man was. In these verses he is consistently called "the man." Yet, he is not anonymous. Jacob recognizes Him as God Himself, as Elohim. Hosea calls him "an angel" in Hosea 12:4 - "He

struggled with the angel and overcame him; he wept and begged for his favor.” This commentary by Hosea also gives us an interesting insight into the nature of the wrestling and of Jacob’s victory.

It is obvious that, what is pictured as a physical wrestling match, is primarily a spiritual battle. In a certain sense is the man Jacob wrestles with Jacob himself. So is the victory Jacob gains a victory over himself. We read in Prov. 16:32 - “Better a patient man than a warrior, a man who controls his temper than one who takes a city.” Self-control is the fruit of victory over self. Yet, there is a physical element in the struggle, for Jacob suffers damage to his hip in the experience. Verse 25 says: “When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob’s hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man.” And the end of the chapter confirms that “he (Jacob) was limping because of his hip.” The Israelites turned this spiritual experience into a ritual, as we read in verse 32, “Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the tendon attached to the socket of the hip, because the socket of Jacob’s hip was touched near the tendon.” This observance both preserved Jacob’s crisis and it robbed it of its meaning.

We are told that the angel could not overpower Jacob. Obviously this does not mean that Jacob was physically stronger than the angel. The slight touch upon Jacob’s hip cripples him for life. So it would have been no problem at all for this heavenly being to crush his opponent. The idea that angels would be weaker than humans is preposterous. The question as to how Jacob could gain a spiritual victory seems to be answered in the quote from Hosea, which we mentioned before. Hosea 12:4 states: “He wept and begged for his favor.” The word “favor” means “grace,” which is forgiveness or pardon. In plain language, Jacob gained spiritual immunity because he said: “I am sorry!”

Dr. Culbertson, who was at that time president of Moody Bible Institute, first drew my attention to Hosea’s verse. He preached a sermon about this verse in Brussels, while I was at the Brussels Bible Institute. I had to interpret for him.

Jacob prevailed with God because he asked forgiveness for his sins. We do not read a detailed confession but we are probably much more aware of Jacob’s sins than Jacob ever was himself. It is a common problem that the sinner himself is least conscious of his problem. Once he is, the battle is won. Jacob had tripped people all his life. He had grabbed Esau’s heel at birth and he had gone for people’s heels ever since. Here the angel grabs Jacob’s heel and dislocates his hip. Jacob’s lameness became for him a life long reminder of what he had done to others. As far as we know he never did it again from this point on.

In verse 25 we read: “When the man saw that he could not overpower him” This probably means that the angel concedes, declaring Jacob the victor. God imputes faith to man as righteousness and confession of sin as victory. That is the essence of grace. Jacob is declared the winner because of his plea for forgiveness. This was the turning point in his life. From the human point of view it seems that when we declare that we were wrong, we would be considered to be the loser. We tend to think that when we lose everything is lost. The devil wants us to believe that when we go to God and say: “I am wrong, I am sorry,” that God will tell us to go away, because He can’t stand losers. Anyone who ever came to God confessing his sin, has found out that the opposite is true. In John 6:37 Jesus says: “All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away.”

The turning point in Job’s life was when he confessed his sin. When Job says: “Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes,” (Job 42:6) his suffering ends. When Peter says to Jesus in Luke 5:8 “Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!” Jesus makes him a fisher of men. We acquire knowledge of salvation in the forgiveness of our sins. This term was coined by Zacharias in Luke 1:77 “To give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins.”

One of the most startling verses in this chapter, if not in the whole Bible, is verse 26 - “Then the man said, ‘Let me go, for it is daybreak.’ But Jacob replied, ‘I will not let you go unless you bless me.’” Here is God talking to one of His creatures. He says: “Let me go!” and the creature answers “No!” How God must have loved this! He had wanted to bless Jacob all his life, but Jacob never paid any attention. God did not want to go because of daybreak. He created the sun with all its splendor of dawn and dusk. God was drawing Jacob out and Jacob let himself be drawn. We should pause here and let the beauty of this penetrate in our souls. God wants us to hold on to him until He blesses us.

Jacob had received the blessing of his blind father by deceiving him, posing as Esau. Now he wants the real thing and God gives it to him. Jacob’s deception of Isaac was probably his greatest guilt. In God’s grace this darkest spot becomes the brightest. He receives the blessing, he who had tripped people all

his life, by being tripped by the angel. Jacob, who will limp the rest of his life, is blessed. It would have been impossible for Jacob to ask for a blessing if he had not realized that God had forgiven him.

I remember the testimony of Jacob Schreuder at the Hezenberg in Holland. Mr. Schreuder was the director of a high school for girls in Amsterdam. I hear him speak at one of the first Youth Retreats I attended. He went to Mottlingen as a typical Dutch churchgoer, who did not know the Lord. When he arrived, one of the brothers asked him his name. He said: "Jacob." The brother answered: "Do not let Him go until He blesses you." That word changed his life.

It is hard for us, Westerners, to grasp the importance of the change of a name. Names do not have the significance in our culture that they had in Biblical times. For us names have lost their meaning. They are better sounding than numbers, but that is about all. For Jacob, the name he received when he was born did not only describe the unusual circumstance of his grasping his brother's leg at birth but it stuck to him as the description of a man who tripped people up. A change of name meant a change of character; it meant a new birth. Jacob's experience at the Jabbok was the equivalent of the New Testament experience of "being born again."

Obviously the angel knew Jacob's name. His question "What is your name?" was put for Jacob's benefit, not for the benefit of the omniscient God. Then his name is changed to Israel, which has become the name of the nation we still know now. Adam Clarke says about the meaning of this name: "Yisrael, from sar, 'a prince,' or sarah, 'he ruled as a prince,' and el, 'God'; or rather from ish, 'a man,' and raah, 'he saw,' el, 'God'."

Although *The Pulpit Commentary* arrives at the same conclusion, it gets there by a different way. "Israel, from to be chief, to fight, though, after the example of Ismael, God hears, it might be rendered 'God governs,' yet seems in this place to signify either Prince of El, or wrestler with God, rather than warrior of God, if indeed both ideas may not be combined in the name as the princely wrestler with God, an interpretation adopted by the A.V." The KJV reads indeed: "Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel: for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed."

When Jacob asked for forgiveness God raised him to the rank of nobility. It seems that the name Israel has more to do with status than with action. We read in verse 24 that the angel wrestled with Jacob, not that Jacob wrestled with the angel. Jacob's struggle seemed more an act of resistance than of aggression. The victory consisted in Jacob's surrender. When Jacob said: "I give up," God said: "You won!" The essence of grace is what the French call: "Qui perd gagne." (The one who loses wins.)

That is why there is no such thing as boasting, as the Apostle Paul calls it. In I Cor. 1:31 he says: "Therefore, as it is written: 'Let him who boasts boast in the Lord.'" Christians are the only people who boast in the losses.

In that sense Israel has never lived up to its name. The general character of the believing Jew seems to be spiritual pride. Real Jews should be always chuckling about the irony of the fact that their ancestor, Jacob, got promoted to Israel because he lost. This is the loss Jesus speaks about in Matt. 16:25 - "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it." It is not just a matter of losing a battle, but of losing the war, losing life.

In verse 29 Jacob asks the angel's name. The context seems to say that the question was redundant. Jacob did not have to ask because he knew. Looking back he will have admitted that he knew all his life who would win. The question we should ask is, did God answer or did not He? God had told Jacob who he was and who He was. The name Israel implies the "El," which is God. But also God blesses Jacob, which means that God puts His Name upon Jacob. Blessing consists in the fact that we bear God's Name and His nature. Peter says that we become participants in the divine nature (II Peter 1:4) and the book of Revelation mentions several times that victory consists in that God will write His Name upon us. In Rev. 3:12 we read: "Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name." Rev. 14:1 says: "Then I looked, and there before me was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads." And one of the final promises of the Bible: "They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads." (Rev. 22:4)

Jacob calls the place Peniel, which means "face of God." Giving names to places seems to have been one of Jacob's strong points in life. We have Bethel, Mizpah, Mahanaim and now Peniel. The KJV and RSV give two different spellings for the same place within two verses, one Peniel and the other Penuel. According to *The Pulpit Commentary*, some expositors suppose that the original name of the

place was Penuel and that Jacob changed this by the changing one vowel, thus giving it a new meaning. The NIV says Peniel in both places.

Obviously, Jacob did not see the face of God in a physical sense. God ruled this out in Ex. 33:20 where He says to Moses: "You cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live." Mortal man can not endure the confrontation with God's glory; it would overwhelm him so much that it would cause death. That is why Paul calls God "invisible." In I Tim. 1:17 he says: "Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen." There were physical aspects in this encounter of Jacob with God; his body would bear the marks of it for the rest of his life, but the actual content of the experience was spiritual.

Jacob is amazed himself about the fact that he survived the experience physically. He says in verse 30 - "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared." Probably Jacob did not only marvel about the fact that he was still alive, but also that this experience happened to him, of all people. There must have been something of what John Newton calls: "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me!"

The sunrise at Peniel, as is mentioned in verse 31, is more than just the regular appearance of the sun above the horizon. Some sunrises and sunsets acquire a spiritual meaning. The Ecclesiastes complains about the monotony of the rising of the sun and other daily routines of nature. We read in Ecc. 1:5-9 - "The sun rises and the sun sets, and hurries back to where it rises. The wind blows to the south and turns to the north; round and round it goes, ever returning on its course. All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full. To the place the streams come from, there they return again. All things are wearisome, more than one can say. The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing. What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun." But for Jacob there was nothing wearisome in the rising of the sun that morning. It was because "God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our [his] heart(s) to give us [him] the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ." (II Cor. 4:6). For Jacob the earth was full of the glory of God that morning, because his heart was full of it.

This did not mean that he "jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God," like the lame man who was healed at the temple by Peter and John. For Jacob, praising God because he had seen Him face to face meant that he could not longer walk normally and jump; he limped. The angel had grabbed his heel and pulled his leg right out of the socket, worse than Jacob himself had ever pulled other people's leg and tripped them. The amazing thing is that Jacob's limp became his glory, just as for us the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Jews recognize the glory of Jacob's handicap. Verse 32 tells us: "Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the tendon attached to the socket of the hip, because the socket of Jacob's hip was touched near the tendon." As we said before, this reduced Jacob's encounter with God to part of the religious liturgy, thereby robbing it of its vibrant content. On the other hand in observing the ritual of not eating the tendon on the hip of an animal, the Israelites express the understanding that when a person brings an animal as a sacrifice, he identifies with the sacrifice. When the animal dies, he dies. In a certain way Jacob died at Penuel. He rose again when the sun rose; a new day, a new life.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

"Jacob looked up and there was Esau, coming with his four hundred men." (verse 1). At this point, however, the battle is won. Evidently, Esau is still at a distance when Jacob sees him. He has time to divide up his family in the reversed order of importance, at least according to his evaluation. This division seems to be a change of the one made the day before, when men and beast were made into two groups. We read in the previous chapter, verses 7, 8 - "In great fear and distress Jacob divided the people who were with him into two groups, and the flocks and herds and camels as well. He thought, 'If Esau comes and attacks one group, the group that is left may escape.'" Jacob's confidence that Esau will not destroy any of the two groups is obviously the result of his encounter with God at Peniel. We should, therefore, not conclude that Jacob considered the children of his concubines more dispensable than the others, but evidently he wanted Esau to meet the best ones of his wives and children last, that is Rachel and Joseph.

The fear of man and the fear of God are incompatible. Jacob's encounter with God had put things in the right perspective for him. He realized the limits of what one mortal can do to another.

Jesus' warning in Matt.10:28 is very pertinent here: "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell." We can only appreciate these words if we have looked beyond physical death. For people for whom death is the end these words make no sense. Our relationships on a human level are always influenced by our relationship with God.

The fact that Jacob puts himself up front indicates that he would be ready to die first, or die for the others if Esau would indeed have belligerent intentions. This attitude too is a result of seeing God's face at Peniel. Sin makes us cowards, grace makes us heroes.

Jacob greets his older brother as a ruling monarch. He bows down seven times on his way to meet him. It is as if he wants to express in this action that Esau is in fact the oldest son and that he has the right to receive the honors that are connected to this rank. We could see Jacob's attitude as a demonstration of willingness to take the second place.

"But Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. And they wept." (vs. 4). Esau has not changed! He is still the same impulsive, hot-blooded extrovert he was twenty years ago. It must have been a moving scene; the two brothers embracing after these years of separation. We do not know if Esau had set out with evil intentions. The four hundred men accompanying him could indicate this. If this was the case, he obviously had a change of heart, maybe even at the last minute. It seems more likely though that Esau wanted to make an impression upon his brother. He did make an impression. Jacob struggled for his life all night long. If ever Esau heard this story he probably laughed long and loud.

The brothers both cry. There were a lot of pent-up emotions to be released at this meeting. God wants brothers (and sisters) to grow up in love with one another. There must not have much of this in Isaac's household. The family had been divided into two camps, with jealousy, strife and deceit determining the relationship. When Esau and Jacob meet again as grown ups these defects are washed away in their tears. Tears are good medicine. Tears will be the first medicine God will give to us when we enter heaven. Most of us will experience a rich flow of tears when all our emotions and tensions are released upon the sight of the One who has loved us with an eternal love. And then God will wipe dry our eyes and our salvation will be complete.

Rev. 7:17 - "For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." Rev. 21:4 - "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

Esau seems amazed at the size of Jacob's family. In chapter 36 we find a list of Esau's children. Only five sons from his four wives are recorded there. The family presents itself to Esau in the groups in which Jacob had divided them: Bilhah and Zilpah with their children first, then Lea with her children and finally Rachel with Joseph. Esau must have been impressed.

His next question is about the meaning of the herds he met on the way. Jacob explains that they are meant as a present. It is interesting to see that Jacob keeps on calling Esau "lord," whilst Esau calls Jacob "brother." It seems that in spite of the spiritual victory Jacob had won and even after the emotional embrace Jacob still has his doubts. We get the impression that he does not trust Esau's even after his presents have been accepted. The reasons he turns down the escort are reasonable, but as far as we know Jacob never kept his promise to go and visit Esau at Seir. One wonders if he ever intended to do so.

The acceptance of the presents was evidently an important cultural phenomenon. It was an indication that real peace existed. If a present was refused, even with polite and kind words, this was regarded as a token of ill will. So Jacob's doubts, if he had any, should really have put at rest when Esau consents to take Jacob's gifts.

There are obvious many things that were said during this encounter between the brothers that are left unsaid in the story. Jacob must have heard that Isaac was still alive, but that Rebekah had died. We suppose that circumstances prevented him from going to see his father. It would not have been safe to leave the family and herd alone in an unfamiliar place. So Jacob could not have gone alone to Bersheba. To travel to Bersheba with family and herd would have been impossible. Isaac's wealth covered the whole area and there would have been nothing for Jacob's animals to eat. So Jacob settles at a place which is called Succoth.

At Succoth Jacob settles in a semi permanent way. The NIV says "he built a place for himself." The KJV and RSV render it with "he built him(self) a house." This would indicate that he disregarded the tents in which his father and grandfather had lived and in which he was born. He also put up booths for the

animals and later we read that he buys land. Jacob was evidently out for security. In this he differed in a fundamental way from Abraham's vision of being a stranger in the Promised Land.

This lapse of vision was evidently temporary; Jacob was forced out of this kind of security by the violent behavior of his sons toward the inhabitants of Sichem. That is why the writer of the book of Hebrews could put Jacob together with Abraham and Isaac as one of those who were waiting for the city that God would give them. "By faith he (Abraham) made his home in the Promised Land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. (Heb. 11:9,10).

Also the purchase of land we read about in verse 19 is a deviation from the policy of his ancestors. The only time Abraham bought land was when Sarah had died and he needed a burial place. The field at Shechem which Jacob bought is mentioned by Stephen in Acts 7:16 - "Their bodies were brought back to Shechem and placed in the tomb that Abraham had bought from the sons of Hamor at Shechem for a certain sum of money."

There seems to be confusion about the two fields in Stephen's account, which Adam Clarke ascribes to a corruption of the Greek text. We quote from *The Adam Clarke's Commentary*: "It is said, Ch. L. 13, that Jacob was buried in the cave of the field of Machpelah before Mamre. And in xxiv. 32 and Exod. XIII. 19, it is said that the bones of Joseph were carried out of Egypt by the Israelites, and buried in Shechem, which Jacob bought from the sons of Hamor, the father of Sechem. As for the eleven brethren of Joseph, we are told by Josephus, Ant., L. II, c. 8, s. 2, that they were buried in Hebron, where their father had been buried. But, since the books of the Old Testament say nothing about this, the authority of Stephen (or of Luke here) for their being buried in Sychem is at least as good as that of Josephus for their being buried in Hebron." - Bishop Pearce. We have the uniform consent of the Jewish writers that all the patriarchs were brought out of Egypt and buried in Canaan, but none, except Stephen, mentions their being buried in Sychem. As Sychem belonged to the Samaritans, probably the Jews thought it too great an honor for that people to possess the bones of the patriarchs, and therefore have carefully avoided making any mention of it. That Abraham bought for a sum of money. The purchase made by Abraham of the cave and field of Ephron, which was in the field of Machpelah; this purchase was made from the children of Heth, Ch. XXIII 3, 10, 17 (2) The purchase made by Jacob, from the sons of Hamor or Emmor, of a sepulchre in which the bones of Joseph were laid; this was in Sychem or Shechem. Ch. xxxiii. 19; Josh. xxiv. 32. The word Abraham, therefor, in this place is certainly a mistake; and the word Jacob, which some have supplied, is doubtless more proper. Bishop Pearce supposes that Luke originally wrote, "which he bought for a sum of money"; i.e., which Jacob bought, who is the last person of the singular number spoken of in the preceding verse. Those who saw that the word bought had no nominative case joined to it, and did not know where to find the proper one, seem to have inserted Abraham in the text for that purpose, without sufficiently attending to the different circumstances of his purchase from that of Jacob's."

The land deal turned out to be less permanent than Jacob anticipated. After the massacre of the people in the city, described in the next chapter, Jacob feels that he should leave the area, and so the possession benefited him less than he intended.

The importance of the place is the fact that the first altar was built there for the God of Israel. We read in vs. 20 - "There he set up an altar and called it El Elohe Israel." "El Elohe Israel" means "God, the God of Israel." *The Pulpit Commentary* disagrees with the LXX and the Vulgate, which say that he invoked upon it the God of Israel. The commentary insists that Jacob called the altar "the God of Israel." It seems, though, that the interpretation of the LXX and Vulgate are more logical. This building of an altar by Jacob is an indication of the important change that took place in his life at Peniel.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

This chapter is another deep point in the book of Genesis. It is one of the dark pages in the history of Israel. Outwardly, what happened resembles the action in the book of Joshua, but there was no divine sanction for the acts of Simeon and Levi.

Commentators have wondered about Dinah's age. Obviously she must have been in her early teens, otherwise Sechem would not have been interested in her at all. The reason given for Dinah's visit to the place is unknown. Josephus suggests a festival. This is quite plausible, but Josephus wrote two millennia

after the event took place. Evidently women were not restricted in their movements then as they are now in the Middle East. It could also be that Dinah was used to freedom, whereas women in Canaan were not free to go as they pleased. This fact would have caught Shechem's attention.

Dinah is raped by Shechem and kept in his house. Shechem was the son of Hamor, the chief of the area. He comes through as a spoiled brat who gets whatever he wants. He would probably have used Dinah and then thrown her away if it weren't for the fact that he fell in love with her.

The way the story is written shows what a great psychologist Moses must have been. The rape is not condoned, but the romantic feelings of Shechem are described in detail. Somehow this part of the story must have been preserved in Israel's tradition until it was written down. The natural tendency would have been to describe Shechem and his family as enemies and deny them any kind of tender feelings. Shechem is painted as a passionate rascal, but also as a human being with warm feelings. If we think of it there is a lot of romance in the book of Genesis. There was no place for romance in the hearts of Simeon and Levi though.

Jacob's reaction is muted. He is afraid of the people in the area. This feeling comes through strongly at the end of the chapter. We read in verse 30 - "Then Jacob said to Simeon and Levi, 'You have brought trouble on me by making me a stench to the Canaanites and Perizzites, the people living in this land. We are few in number, and if they join forces against me and attack me, I and my household will be destroyed.'" Yet, as a father, Jacob must have been indignant when he heard what had happened to his daughter. Some righteous indignation toward Shechem and Hamor would have been more appropriate than his prudent waiting till his sons came back.

The reaction of Jacob's sons seems certainly more understandable. The NIV says that they were "filled with grief and fury"; the RSV renders it with "indignant and very angry." *The Pulpit Commentary* says: "Literally, grieved themselves, or became pained with anger" and "and they were very wroth"; "literally, it burned to them greatly." This feeling seems to have been shared by all the brothers, although the rest of the story mainly portrays the acts of Simeon and Levi. Why Zebulun and Issachar did not act is not clear. They may have had moral restraints. Or maybe they were too young to act in this.

Hamor presents the matter in a larger context. He proposes that not only his son, Shechem marry Dinah, but also that intermarriage take place between both parties. Dinah is kept at Shechem's house. There seems to have been no intention to return her and it is quite probable that if the brothers would have refused to make this marriage official, their sister would have stayed with Shechem without their blessing. Hamor talks smoothly, but he has Jacob and his sons over a barrel. This does not justify Simeon's and Levi's action, but we can understand how infuriated they were.

Shechem seems to have been present when Hamor went over to Jacob's camp for the proposal. It could be, of course, that there was more than one conference between the two parties.

There is no excuse for the deceit by Jacob's sons. The demand for circumcision of the bridegroom sounds reasonable. The additional demand that all the males of the clan would be circumcised gives the impression to Hamor and Shechem that in principle the brothers do not oppose the proposal of becoming one people with these Canaanites. There is no indication that Jacob was involved in all this. He would probably have objected. Simeon himself married a Canaanite woman, according to Ex. 6:15. The genealogy of Jacob's sons says there: "The sons of Simeon were Jemuel, Jamin, Ohad, Jakin, Zohar and Shaul the son of a Canaanite woman. These were the clans of Simeon." Whether that marriage had taken place at this point, we do not know.

If it is true that taking Dinah back from Shechem's house was an option, the brothers should have done so immediately. But maybe there words in verse 17 "But if you will not agree to be circumcised, we'll take our sister and go," were an empty threat.

Shechem loses no time in getting himself circumcised. The conference with the other clan members must have taken place promptly, otherwise the whole city would not have been so defenseless three days later. The argument that convinces everyone is the economical gain that would result from having these rich shepherds live in their area. So everybody submits. Three days later the city is raided, all the males are killed and the brothers take off with the loot.

As we said before, this is a dark page in the history of Israel. The offense against them was a serious one, but the medicine used to deal with the sickness was worse than the ailment itself. Israel's sin shall weigh heavier in the day of judgement than the sin of Shechem. Jacob refers to this incident and to his sons' guilt when he is on his deathbed. He says: "Simeon and Levi are brothers; their swords are weapons of violence. Let me not enter their council, let me not join their assembly, for they have killed men in their anger and hamstrung oxen as they pleased. Cursed be their anger, so fierce, and their fury, so cruel! I will

scatter them in Jacob and disperse them in Israel.” (Ch. 49:5-7). Those words would indicate that Simeon and Levi did not act out of righteous indignation only, but also because they were sadistic by nature.

Probably the worst part in the story is that the brothers used the sign of the covenant that God had made with Abraham to achieve their end. This demonstrates a complete absence of spiritual awareness. They did not value their own circumcision and they had no idea who God was. They were godless people. They had no scruples to kill their own brother, as we shall see later.

Although Jacob condemns the brothers’ act on his deathbed, he shows no moral indignation at the time it happens. His only concern is his own safety. We do not get the impression that Jacob had much authority in his own family. He did not set the moral standard for his children. It seems that what God said about Abraham in Ch. 18:19 - “For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him,” does not apply to Jacob. At least Jacob does not seem to have made an effort to “direct his children to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

There are some surprises in this chapter. The first one is the mention of the idols that were kept by the family. The fact that Jacob, who evidently knew that they were there, had tolerated them all this time could explain why atrocities, such as the wiping out of the city of Shechem took place. Idols open the door for demonic activity and the massacre carried out by Simeon and Levi would show the presence of demons. This does not excuse the behavior of the boys, but it makes it more plausible.

The idols would have been mainly the “teraphim” we read about in Ch. 31:19. There we learned “When Laban had gone to shear his sheep, Rachel stole her father’s household gods.” But it could be that other ones had been added afterwards. Several commentators suppose that the people who were captured at Shechem had brought their own deities with them.

Another surprise, although less surprising, is the fact that Jacob has to be reminded by God of the vow he made twenty years before. In Ch. 28:20-22 he had said: “If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear So that I return safely to my father’s house, then the LORD will be my God And this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God’s house, and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth.” Jacob had not been in a hurry to fulfil his pledge. If he had gone straight to Bethel instead of settling down in Shechem and building houses and stables there, the rape of Dinah and its consequences would have been prevented. We save ourselves a lot of problems by doing what we promise God.

There must have been some between Jacob’s worry about the consequences of his sons crime and his hearing of the voice of God. If everything would have gone well, Jacob might not have heard the voice of God speaking to him. His deep distress conditioned him to receive God’s communication. It is quite possible that we miss a lot of God’s Word to us, because we are not paying attention. God had to shake Jacob up out of his lethargy to make him listen. It could very well be that he would have spent the rest of his life at Shechem.

On the other hand, the atrocity committed by Simeon and Levi had made the place unsafe for further residence. But leaving the area and travelling through a country where the inhabitants had heard about the raid, was not appealing either. Jacob faced the dilemma that it was not safe to stay and it was not safe to go. We do not read that he turns to God, but God turns to him and He reminds him of his promise to go to Bethel. Then Jacob knew that he should have gone to Bethel. He must have realized that he knew all the time what to do. It is strange but true that when God reveals His will to us we often have to admit that we knew it already.

In our spiritual life it is a good principle to visit Bethel from time to time. We have to return to the place where it started in order to see how far we have come. A return to the place, to the time in our life where we first became aware of God’s presence and His dealing with us keeps the vision alive. It keeps us from becoming stagnant. It reminds us of our promises.

God tells Jacob to go to Bethel by reminding him of his promise. He quotes Jacob back to himself. Jacob has to admit: “It is true; I said this; I better go and do it!”

Jacob’s life, from the human viewpoint, seems to have existed in fleeing from someone or something. He fled from Esau to his uncle Laban, he fled from Laban to Shechem and now he flees from Shechem. Yet, in all these flights there is an element of divine revelation. Every time God appears to him to make him understand that he is following the Lord’s guidance. What is visible to the human eye looks

like a defeat. Nobody flees in victoriously. But seen from above Jacob follows the divine road. Most often God's victories are our defeats. Peniel was a defeat, so was Paul's escape from Damascus.

Jacob has enough insight in the spiritual significance of his journey to Bethel to realize that it has to be done in holiness. There can be no mixed allegiance. Everything that does not belong to God has to disappear. So the teraphim are handed over to him as well as all the other spiritualistic garbage, such as rings and earrings. We understand that those objects were not just ornaments, but charms that were probably decorated with astrological designs. Some idols may have come from the women who were captured at Shechem. Jacob buries them all, probably after destroying them first.

There seems to have been no remonstrance by any members of the family. Some of the fear for their safety, which Jacob felt, had probably spread over the whole group. They all feel they need divine protection.

Besides the throwing away of idols the family subjects to a ritual of purification. We do not know how often people in the Old Testament bathed and changed clothes. Probably less often than Westerners. There is a considerable difference in habits of cleanliness between Europeans and North Americans. We should not discuss that subject here, however tempting it may be. One gets the impression that people in the Old Testament were in the habit of wearing a habit till they got attached to it. As far as the priests serving in the tabernacle was concerned, there were elaborate laws regarding the garments they could wear and how many baths they should take. Human body odors are evidently offensive to the Lord, for Ezekiel 44:18 states about the priests "They are to wear linen turbans on their heads and linen undergarments around their waists. They must not wear anything that makes them perspire."

So the whole family of Israel took a bath and changed into new clothes. This was to express a inner condition in the same way as the baptism that was administered by John was an outward token of an inward confession of sins.

The result of the spiritual renewal is amazing. Everybody in the area the pass through realizes that these people are under a supernatural protection and that it would be very dangerous to put anything in their way. Verse 5 says: "Then they set out, and the terror of God fell upon the towns all around them so that no one pursued them."

That "the terror of God" kept the enemies at a distance, does not mean, of course, that God had approved of the criminal act of Simeon and Levi. He had evidently forgiven them for Jacob's sake. Unfortunately, this will not have been the message that was conveyed to the cities of Canaan. The people of the land must have thought that, if they attacked Israel and his family, they would be wiped out as Shechem was. In their eyes God protected a bunch of criminals. I do not know how such a fatal misunderstanding could have been cleared up. But, probably, none of the Canaanites would have been interested in understanding, or would have been longing for the salvation of his sins, such as Jacob had received. "The terror of the Lord" seems to fall mainly upon people who are unrepentant.

Finally Jacob arrives at Bethel, where he builds an altar to the Lord. By now it will have been twenty-five to thirty years that he had put down his head upon a stone there and had seen heaven open above him and heard the voice of God in his dream. As we said before, he would have saved himself a lot of suffering if he had made a beeline for this place instead of settling down in Shechem.

He calls the place El Bethel, meaning, according to Adam Clarke, "The strong God, the house of the strong God." *The Pulpit Commentary* simply translates it with "The God of Bethel." It remarks also: "It has been proposed, after the LXX, to avoid the seeming incongruity of assigning such a name to a place, to read, he invoked upon the place the El of Bethel." This seems to me a very logical conclusion and I have little doubt that this was Jacob's intention.

There is some confusion about the meaning of verse 8 - "Now Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, died and was buried under the oak below Bethel. So it was named Allon Bacuth." The impression one gets is that Deborah was a member of Jacob's extended family, travelling with him. She had left Paddan Haran about 150 years before, when Eliezer came to get Rebekah for Isaac. I believe the verse does not necessarily state that Deborah was in Jacob's company and that she died when Jacob visited Bethel for the second time. It could simply mean that she had died at an earlier time and was buried under the oak tree, close to where Jacob built his altar. Adam Clarke seems to agree with this interpretation. The verse may say that when Jacob visited Bethel, he was reminded of his mother, since he saw the grave of his mother's nurse there. Of Rebekah's death we know nothing. She faded out of the picture when Jacob left his parental home.

The presence of Deborah's grave and the memory of the first night with the dream at Bethel seem to determine the atmosphere at this place. Jacob is reminded of the transitory character of life and of its eternal character.

At this point God appears to Abraham again. It says in verse 9 "After Jacob returned from Paddan Aram, God appeared to him again and blessed him." Some commentators probably take this verse and the following verses to be a double of the preceding mention of a theophany. It seems to me that the verse is saying that Jacob had only really returned to Canaan when he arrived at Bethel. The time he spent at Shechem was lost time in God's agenda.

God's appearance to Jacob describes in verse 9 - 12 is different from the dream he had over twenty years earlier. This is not a dream. God comes down to him and speaks to him personally in the same way as He had done earlier to Abraham. God confirms to Jacob the victory at Peniel and He repeats the blessing that had been given about two centuries earlier to Abraham.

Evidently Jacob needed to be reminded of his new name. He bore the stigma of his victory in his body, since he was probably permanently maimed in the struggle with the angel. It could be that he had started to concentrate on his physical handicap instead of upon the spiritual experience that lay at the base of it. God had not given him his limp to drag him down, but to pull him up. His own unsteady feet should make him lean more heavily upon the Lord and not on his walking stick. So God reminds him that he is no longer Jacob, but Israel.

Jacob had earlier received the promise that he would possess the land. But here the Lord repeats in detail what He had said to Abraham. The promise of descendants, which had been such a test of faith both for Abraham and Isaac, was not hard to accept for Jacob. He had already twelve children and the thirteenth was probably on its way at this time. This is the third time that God mentions kings, which would be born from Jacob. At a later stage Jacob must have received more insight into this part of the promise, because in blessing Judah, he mentions "Shiloh," the King of kings. In Ch. 49:10 we read: "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come; and unto him shall the gathering of the people be." (KJV)

But the promise of God does not only pertain to the coming of the Messiah, it paints also in large strokes the history of Israel and the Kingdom of heaven. The "nation" obviously refers to the people of Israel itself, but the "community of nations" points to the heathen who will enter the Kingdom through the preaching of the Gospel. This promise runs parallel to the one God gave to Abraham, when He said: "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." (Ch. 12:3). The kings mentioned in this verse include, of course also

the name of David and Solomon, who are considered to be great potentates in the history of the world.

Finally, there is a reference to the fact that human authority over men is a reflection of God's own omnipotence. God reveals Himself as "El Shaddai," God Almighty. In examples of kings in world history, who considered themselves representatives of God's omnipotence on earth are few and far apart. In the Old Testament David was the only one who maintained his theocratic vision till the end. Solomon lost the vision later in life.

The audience ends with God's promise to give the land to Jacob. It is the same promise that was given to Abraham in Ch. 13:14-17 - "The LORD said to Abram after Lot had parted from him, 'Lift up your eyes from where you are and look north and south, east and west. All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted. Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you.'" And to Isaac in Ch. 26:3,4 - "Stay in this land for a while, and I will be with you and will bless you. For to you and your descendants I will give all these lands and will confirm the oath I swore to your father Abraham. I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and will give them all these lands, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed."

We turn again to Heb. 11:13-16, where the intent of the promise is made clear. "All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country; a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them."

The fact that verse 13 mentions specifically "Then God went up from him at the place where he had talked with him," indicates that Jacob did not have a dream or a vision as in the previous instances when God revealed Himself, but that this was a theophany of the type that Abraham experiences at the time of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorra.

As we saw earlier, Jacob had a strong sense of ceremony. He erects another monument at the place where God spoke to him. This time he will have made something less primitive than the stone he erected

years earlier, when he was on his way to Paddan Aram. He does not just turn up the stone he used as a pillow, but he makes a pillar upon which he pours oil and wine. This is the first time we read in the Bible that a libation was made as an offering. We have to remember that he had already built an altar and brought animal sacrifices. That was the reason why he had returned to Bethel. He does not change the name of the place, but simply reconfirms that this is the "House of God."

The oil and the wine acquired later the significance of symbols of the Holy Spirit and the covenant in blood. Although it would have been impossible for Jacob to know the full implication of the symbols, it is obviously that his act is symbolical and we may interpret it as such. God can only reveal Himself to man on the basis of His covenant, which is the eternal covenant sealed by the blood of Jesus. And in speaking to man God imparts His Spirit upon him.

We do not read anything about Jacob's reaction to God's speaking to him. The erection of the pillar and the poring out of the elements are done in silence, as far as we know. But it would have been impossible that God's revelation would not have touched Jacob deeply. One does not get used to divine revelations. Jacob may not have been shaken up like before, because he had dealt with his sins at Peniel. His encounters with God will have taken on the form of a fellowship, of a walking with Him, such as God intends man to do. Originally there was no place for sin in the relationship between God and man. And the atonement restores this relationship to its intended form. This does not take the awe away from it. Bethel has always been a place of awe. Ch. 28:17 says that when Jacob was at Bethel for the first time "he was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven." A person who enters the house of God without this sense of awe has no idea who God is.

Remains the fact that it wasn't Jacob who sought God, but God came down to Jacob. This miracle is the basis of all miracles. From the very beginning in paradise, it was God who came to the garden, both before Adam and Eve fell into sin and after. Finally the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. This miracle will become greater and more glorious to us in as much as we enter into God's presence. The more we understand of this, the more incomprehensible it will be to us that we never understood this before. As John says in his Gospel: "The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him." (John 1:9-11)

Verse 16-20 tell us about the birth of Benjamin and the death of Rachel in childbirth. Jacob had moved away from Bethel and found himself at Bethlehem when Rachel started labor. We are told that labor was hard, but no further details are given. It seems that Rachel passed away immediately after Benjamin was born. As we mentioned before in connection with chapter 31, some commentators interpret Rachel's death in the light of the curse Jacob pronounced, unknowingly, upon her. We read in Ch. 31:32 that Jacob tells Laban, who accuses him of stealing his teraphim: "But if you find anyone who has your gods, he shall not live. In the presence of our relatives, see for yourself whether there is anything of yours here with me; and if so, take it." Now Jacob did not know that Rachel had stolen the gods." Whether there is any link between this curse and Rachel's premature death, we do not know.

Rachel's last recorded word is the name she gives to her son, "Ben-Oni," meaning "son of suffering." Jacob changes this into "Benjamin." Jacob never kept it a secret that Rachel was his favorite wife and that Joseph and Benjamin were his favorite sons. This foolishness, this lack of parental wisdom, caused terrible suffering in the family. Even Jacob's multiple encounters with God did not change this situation.

The words of the Rachel's midwife, "Do not be afraid for you have another son," are typical for the tragedy of Rachel's life. In a world where fecundity was considered the greatest virtue for a woman, Rachel occupied the lowest place. As we have seen in chapter 30 jealousy between the two sisters, that is Jacob's two wives, poisoned the atmosphere in the family. So the birth of Benjamin was considered a major victory for Rachel. But at what expense it was obtained. The poison kept working even after Rachel's death. The children who were raised had been infected and demonstrated the same spirit among each other as the parents had breathed upon them.

There is still a place, close to Bethlehem, which is called Rachel's tomb. It is supposed to be the monument Jacob erected. The death of Rachel, probably at a rather young age, must have meant a deep felt loss for Jacob. She had been the only one he really loved in the family. After her death he transferred this love to her two sons, Joseph and Benjamin, much to the chagrin of his other sons.

After moving on and arriving at Migdal Eder, another tragic incident takes place. Reuben commits incest with his father's concubine Bilhah. He must have been in his late teens or early twenties, or maybe older. He may have been married already. From the incident at Shechem we get the impression that several

of Jacob's sons were married and had their own families. Bilhah had been Rachel's slave girl. It could be that Reuben's act was more an act of revenge than a giving in to sexual desire. He may have wanted to get back at his father for showing strong preference to Rachel and her children to the neglect of the rest of the family. The fact that Jacob hears it but does not react could mean that he got the message. It wasn't until Jacob was on his deathbed that he mentions the fact. In Ch. 49:3-4 we hear him say: "Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might, the first sign of my strength, excelling in honor, excelling in power. Turbulent as the waters, you will no longer excel, for you went up onto your father's bed, onto my couch and defiled it."

What Reuben did was a terrible sin. It is strongly condemned in the Mosaic law. In Leviticus, we read: "Do not have sexual relations with your father's wife; that would dishonor your father."²⁶⁸ In connection with this kind of sin, the Lord says that the land of Canaan had been defiled. Besides showing guilt, Jacob's lack of action also shows that he was not the spiritual guide in the family that he should have been. He should have disciplined his children. But neither in the case of the massacre that Simeon and Levi carried out, nor in this case of Reuben's sin was there any indication that Jacob acted. Yet, he was the only one who knew God face to face. Had Jacob's personal behavior as husband of one wife and father of the family been an example to follow, he would have had more ground to stand on. It is hard to discipline if you are not an example. The model is more important than the word.

At this point, from verse 23 through 25, the author interrupts his narration to give us the names of Jacob's family members. Only the names of the sons and their mother's are mentioned, Dinah is left out. And Benjamin, who was actually born in Canaan, is grouped with the other sons who were all born in Paddan Aram. The obvious intent of Moses was to indicate the first arrival in Canaan of Israel as a nation in a nutshell. This was a historic moment in the history of the people. It was the first time that the twelve tribes set foot on the Promised Land.

Then we read in Ch. 35:27 "Jacob came home to his father Isaac in Mamre, near Kiriath Arba (that is, Hebron), where Abraham and Isaac had stayed." Probably more than thirty years after he had fled to Paddan Haran Jacob returns. When he left he expected to never see his old father again. But he hoped to find his mother. When Jacob left, Isaac had already given up on life, but he lived in the darkness of his blindness till Jacob returned with his large family. Although Jacob was not Isaac's favorite son, his return must have been a comfort and encouragement for him. How long Isaac lived after Jacob's return we do not know. We are only told that Jacob and Esau met again for the occasion of their father's funeral.

There is a problem in the configuration of Jacob's age at this point. If Isaac was sixty when Jacob and Esau were born, the sons must have been 120 when their father died. We read in Ch. 25:26 "Isaac was sixty years old when Rebekah gave birth to them." But when Jacob meets Pharaoh in Ch. 47, we are only ten years further. Gen 47:9 tell us: "And Jacob said to Pharaoh, 'The years of my pilgrimage are a hundred and thirty. My years have been few and difficult, and they do not equal the years of the pilgrimage of my fathers.'" We have to conclude that much of the following record in Genesis should be inserted in between the verses of our present chapter.

The story of Jacob virtually ends here. In the next chapter we read the genealogy of Esau and from chapter 37 on Joseph is the main character.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX.

The thirty-sixth chapter is difficult to interpret. It is wrought with problems, probable repetition and seeming contradictions. Jerome said about some of the verses that there are as many interpretations as there are interpreters.

The chapter may be divided into the following sections:

1. Vs. 1-5 a list of Esau's wives and their children.
 2. Vs. 5-8 Esau's move away from Jacob in Canaan to Seir.
 3. Vs. 9-19 a list of Esau's children and grand children.
 4. Vs. 20-30 the genealogy of Seir, the Horite.
 5. Vs. 21-34 a list of the kings who reigned in Edom.
-
1. Vs. 1-5 a list of Esau's wives and their children.

²⁶⁸ Lev. 18:8

The Pulpit Commentary links this chapter to the opening verse of the next one, where we read: "Jacob lived in the land where his father had stayed, the land of Canaan."

The obvious reason for the inclusion of this chapter in the Genesis account is not only that Esau was Jacob's brother, but also to indicate the origin of Israel's enemies. Edom was a thorn in Israel's flesh during the whole period that the two nations lived in each others vicinity. And Amelek became Israel's archenemy.

Adam Clark remarks about this chapter: "The generations of Esau are particularly marked, to show how exactly God fulfilled the promises He made to him, chapter xxv and xxvii, and those of Seir the Horite are added, because his family became in some measure blended with that of Esau."

About the first section of this chapter, *The Pulpit Commentary* says the following: "The difference between this account and that previously given (ch. xxvi. 34 ; xxviii. 9) will appear at a glance by setting the two lists of wives in parallel columns :-

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1. Juduth, daughter of Berreithe Hittite. | 1. Aholibamah, daughter of Anah, daughter of Zibeon the |
| 2. Bashemat, daughter of Elon the Hittite | 2. Adah, daughter of Hittite. |
| 3. Mahalath, daughter of Ishmael, sister
of Nebajoth. | 3. Bashemath, Ishmael's daughter, sister of Nebajoth. |

The two lists agree in saying (1) that Esau had three wives, (2) that one of them was the daughter of Elon the Hittite, (3) that another of them was Ishmael's daughter, the sister of Nabajoth, and (4) that the name of one of them was Bashemath. The discrepancy between the two is greatest in respect of the first wife, who appears with a different name and a different parentage in the two lists ; while with reference to the second and the third wives, it is only the difference of name that requires to be accounted for. Now since the two lists belong to the so-called Elohist document ..., the hypothesis must be discarded "that the Hebrew text, though containing several important coincidences, evidently embodies two accounts irreconcilably different" (Kalisch) - a conclusion which can only be maintained by ascribing to the author the most absolute literary incompetence. Equally the conjecture must be set aside that the two lists refer to different persons, the second three being names of wives which Esau took on the decease of the first. The solutions that appear most entitled to acceptance, though all are more or less conjectural, proceed upon the supposition that Esau had only three wives, or at most four. 1. On the hypothesis that Esau had not more than three wives, it is only needful to presume that each of them had two names, a not unusual circumstance in Oriental countries. ... - one of them, probably that contained in the present list, bestowed on the occasion of marriage; and that Anah, the father of Aholibamah, was the same person with Beeri, or the Well-Man, who received that cognomen from the incident related in ver. 24, viz., that he discovered certain hot springs while feeding his father's asses ... - the peculiarity that in one place (ch. xxvi. 20) a Horite, being explained by the conjecture that the first was the generic term for the race, the second the specific designation of the tribe, and the third the particular name for the inhabitants of the district to which he belonged. ... 2. Another solution gives to Esau four wives, by supposing Judith to have died without issue. ..., or, in consequence of being childless, though still living, to have been passed over in silence in the former genealogical register ..., and Aholibamah to have been the fourth partner whom Esau espoused. The Samaritan version reads Mahalath for Bashemath in the second list, which it regards as an error of transcription ...; while others think that Adah has been written by inadvertence for Bashemath ...; but such conjectures are as unnecessary as they are manifestly arbitrary."

Only five sons are mentioned as Esau's offspring. We read in vs. 4 and 5: "Adah bore Eliphaz to Esau, Basemath bore Reuel, and Oholibamah bore Jeush, Jalam and Korah. These were the sons of Esau, who were born to him in Canaan."

2. Vs. 5-8 Esau's move away from Jacob in Canaan to Seir.

These verses tell us that Esau moved away from Canaan to Seir, because the land of Canaan was not large enough to support both his flocks and those of Jacob. Obviously the move was made after Jacob's arrival in Canaan. We have to remember that although Canaan was a rich and fertile country, different tribes inhabited it. Esau and Jacob had to content themselves with the land that was not occupied by the original inhabitants.

Esau went to the mountains south of the Dead Sea. The Westminster Dictionary of the Bible tells us: "It is a mountainous and extremely rugged country, about 100 miles long, extending s. from Moab on both sides of the Arabah, or great depression connection the s. part of the Dead Sea with the Gulf of Akabah." This move put a distance of 60 to 70 miles between Esau and Jacob. This later becomes the country of Edom, which means "red." The name Edom is supposedly a reference to the red porridge Jacob

sold to Esau in exchange for the latter's birth right. It could be linked to the name Adam, which has the same meaning "red," in which case it might refer to the fact that the descendants of Esau regarded themselves as the real offspring of Adam, more human than the rest of humanity. A trace of this kind of inflated pride is still found among primitive tribes. Several of the mountain Papua's in Irian Jaya call themselves "The real people."

3. Vs. 9-14 a list of Esau's children and grand children.

This section paints in rough lines the development of the Edomite nation. It is, in a certain way, a repetition of the first five verses, but the idea in these verses is more than to trace a family tree. We see Esau and his sons grow into a people of might and influence, a force to be reckoned with by Israel when it enters Canaan four centuries later and inhabits the land. The emphasis is upon the importance of its leaders, the chiefs, or, as the KJV calls them "

THE LIFE OF JOSEPH

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Chapter 37-50.

Chapter 37 starts out by saying: "This is the account of Jacob." Most of what is written in this chapter and the following pertains to Joseph. A chapter about Judah briefly interrupts Joseph's story. The KJV renders the phrase with "These are the generations of Jacob" and the RSV says "This is the history of the family of Jacob." The latter rendering makes the most sense. In a sense is Joseph's story the story of the whole family, since he saved all from starvation.

Joseph's life and experiences may be taken as an image of Christ's salvation of the nation of Israel and ultimately of the whole world. Not only was Christ the beloved of the Father, but He was rejected by His own and even sold for thirty pieces of silver. We may presume that at His revelation as King, Israel will recognize Him as their Messiah and will be saved by Him. The prophecies of the Old Testament are too numerous to quote. Paul indicates in Rom. 11:25-27 the purpose and sequence of God's temporary rejection of Israel on the basis of their unbelief. We read: "I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: 'The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins.'"

The story of Joseph's life is one of the most moving and most beautiful parts of the whole Bible. In many other respects, besides the one mentioned above does Joseph portray our Lord Jesus Christ. Joseph must have been a brilliant man with a balanced character. He comes through as the only one of Jacob's sons who has a deep sense of righteousness and a living faith in God. Joseph's attitude in the midst of terrible suffering is a shining testimony. He was far superior to his father in rectitude, unselfishness and trust in God. His life has glorified God throughout the centuries.

It is difficult to determine where the story starts. We get the impression that Moses backtracks in the beginning of this chapter. In verse 10 Jacob says to Joseph: "What is this dream you had? Will your mother and I and your brothers actually come and bow down to the ground before you?" The mention of Rachel, Joseph's mother, would make no sense if these words were spoken after Rachel's death. So we take it that, at least the first eleven verse of this chapter, describe a situation prior to Rachel's death.

The story starts when Joseph is seventeen years old. Verse 2 tells us "This is the account of Jacob. Joseph, a young man of seventeen, was tending the flocks with his brothers, the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives, and he brought their father a bad report about them." The sons of Bilhah and Zilpah were Dan and Naphatali, Gad and Asher. We do not read what they did, but when we consider the acts of Lea's sons, Reuben, Simeon and Levi, we understand enough of the moral behavior of the boys in Jacob's family.

It has often been said that Joseph had no business telling on his brothers, but if what they did was as criminal as what Lea's boys had done, it would have been immoral of Joseph to keep things to himself. Even with Joseph's reports Jacob probably never knew half of what went on in his family. And, as we have seen before, even when he knew he did not do anything about it.

When Jacob checks the accounts in his prophetic utterances at the end of his life, he has not too much to say about his evil sons. Of the above mentioned boys the only one who receives anything that

may sound like a reproach is Dan. In Ch. 49:17 Jacob says: “Dan will be a serpent by the roadside, a viper along the path, that bites the horse’s heels so that its rider tumbles backward.”

The favoritism Jacob had shown to Rachel is carried over to her son Joseph and later to Benjamin. As we have seen before, this attitude laid the foundation for all the tensions and a jealousy in the family, but it was not an excuse for what the boys did. Yet Jacob’s love for Joseph may have been a strong stimulus for the moral rectitude and beauty of his life and of his faith in God, but it also stimulated sin in the lives of the other boys.

The outward demonstration of Jacob’s love for Joseph was the clothing his father gave him to wear. Evidently the Hebrew word that describes what Joseph was wearing is unclear. The NIV calls it “a richly ornamented robe.” The KJV says that it was “a coat of many colours” and the RSV describes it as “a long robe with sleeves.” Obviously it was a garment that surpassed what was ordinarily worn by the other members of the family. We can not

commend Jacob for his wisdom and psychological insight. Singling out one of his sons in this way was extremely thoughtless. Jacob was a man who let himself be governed by his emotions, without caring or thinking whether this was detrimental to others or not. His clearly shown preference for Rachel made Lea suffer and his favoritism toward Joseph upset the whole balance of family life. But Jacob does not have seemed to care.

Jesus, Who was portrayed by Joseph, did also receive preferential treatment by the Father. But the difference between the two is so immense that it is hardly necessary to point it out. On the one hand we see a sinful, selfish father and a nice, but mortal and imperfect human teenager; on the other hand is the Almighty God, the source of eternal love, Who sends What is dearest to Him to earth to demonstrate His love to a lost world. And the receiver of this love is the Son, the second Person of the Trinity, Who “is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being ...” (Heb. 1:3). We cannot accuse God of the same weakness as Jacob demonstrated. Jacob’s love for Joseph was egoistic. God’s love is also self centered, but the eternal difference is determined by the fact that God is the center of the universe and Jacob wasn’t.

The reaction of Joseph’s brothers to the love Jacob bestows upon them is hatred for Joseph. Joseph ultimately suffers more from his father’s love than he benefits from it. The attitude of the other sons indicates that they craved for love from their father, which they did not receive. There must have been an immense amount of strife and jealousy in the family. The tension between the two sisters carried over to their sons. Leah’s sons must have prided themselves on the fact that they were the sons of Jacob’s actual wife. Everybody must have looked down upon the boys of the slave girls. But the hatred toward Joseph surpasses every other feeling. It probably gave a sense of unity between them, as a common enemy usually does.

Joseph’s two dream aggravated the situation considerably. We cannot but think that Joseph must have been extremely naive to pass on these dreams. It could hardly be that he was not aware of his brothers’ feelings towards him. The dreams must have kept him from losing his self-esteem. It is hard on one’s ego to be hated, especially for a person who wants to please. And Joseph seems to have been such a person. It is true that he served the Lord in Potiphar’s house and in prison, but the very human tendency to want to please people was probably present also.

On the other hand Joseph used the dreams as a weapon of defense. He had to show his brothers that he was more important than they made him out to be. The dreams were a divine revelation, which played an important part in Joseph’s life when he was sold and enslaved and crushed. They pulled him through. His own dreams probably stimulated his gift of explaining other people’s dreams, which means that he hung on to his dreams in the darkness of his life.

But, most of all, the dreams were God’s revelation to Joseph. God knew what Joseph would have to go through and God showed him part of the glory ahead. In this respect also Joseph was like Jesus “the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Heb. 12:2). The dreams were a preparation for Joseph in view of the suffering that was ahead of him.

The dreams were given for our benefit also. God has a wonderful plan for our life, as Campus Crusade puts it. The problem is that we cannot see more than one step ahead of us. If we start looking to God for guidance, with an attitude of submission and obedience, God gives us pieces of the jigsaw puzzle, but not necessarily in the right order. He gives us enough so that we obtain a solid basis to trust Him.

The fact that God does have a wonderful plan for each of us does not mean that the plan looks so great to us from where we are. Imagine that someone would have shouted to Joseph, when he was thrown

in the empty well, with threats of being killed ringing in his ears, “God has a wonderful plan for your life!” At the moment the experiences did not make sense. Their significance could only be seen after all the pieces were in place. As always, it seems that God takes tremendous chances with His children.

For Joseph the dreams were the Word of God. The word dream is a dangerous word for us, because it evokes often images of a never-never land that is beyond our reach. We use dreams as narcotics to ease the pain. Joseph’s dreams were God’s promises to him. God promised glory to Joseph and to us. This glory is a harder reality than the reality in which we live at present. The heavenly grass in C. S. Lewis’s book “The Great Divorce” was hard as diamond and went straight through the feet of the people who did not share in heavenly glory. We will come to the point sooner or later where we realize that sin brings us to a never-never land of lies. God’s dreams are truth. For us the written Word fulfills the same function as the dreams did to Joseph. This does not exclude supernatural revelations, but for most of us Abraham’s words to the rich man in hell are valid: “They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them. If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.” (Luke 16:29,31)

The first dream is describes in verse 7, where Joseph tell his brothers: “We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered around mine and bowed down to it.” We read very little in the book of Genesis about Abraham’s descendants being engaged in agriculture. Although their main occupation was raising of animals, they must have sown and harvested also, otherwise this dream would be completely irrelevant. The mention of grain can also be seen as a reference to the famine that would come upon the Middle East several years later, when Joseph’s dream would be fulfilled. The boys do get the point; they understand that according to Joseph’s dream they will bow down before him, because of his superior position. Obviously they do not take the dream seriously. They disregard any supernatural element that might be in it. To them Joseph’s dreams are the products of his imagination, stimulated by the special treatment Jacob gives him. The result is an increased hatred.

The second dream contains more cosmic elements. Verse 37 tells us: “I had another dream, and this time the sun and moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me.” The problem here is that both the moon and eleven stars are mentioned. Jacob’s interpretation, given in verse 10, mentions his mother, as the moon and the brothers. As we said before, this would indicate that Rachel was still alive. If she was Benjamin had not been born yet. Consequently at that point Joseph would only have had ten brothers at that time. The eleventh star could be Dinah, but her name is not mentioned in this context.

In spite of the fact that Jacob rebukes Joseph, he does take the dreams seriously. Because verse 11 says: “His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.” However, after Joseph’s disappearance Jacob does not fall back on the dreams to ease his sorrow. He is convinced that Joseph is dead, implying that the dreams were not a divine revelation.

If we are correct in supposing that Rachel was still alive when Joseph was seventeen and had those dream there most have been a space of several years between verse 11 and 12; we do not know how many. From the events described in chapter 43 we get the impression that Joseph must have known Benjamin, although this is not clearly stated. Also the fact that he asked no questions about his mother, seems to indicate that he knew she was no longer alive.

Jacob appears to have been at Bersheba, the place where Isaac had lived most of his life. This seems to be the meaning of the first verse of this chapter. The phrase: “Jacob lived in the land where his father had stayed, the land of Canaan,” could also be taken in a more general sense. But when Jacob sends Joseph on his errand, we read that he leaves from the valley of Hebron. (See verse 14). The brothers had taken the flocks back to Shechem, the city they had annihilated when Dinah was raped. The fact that they took their animals back to graze there shows that they had no fear for retaliation. They considered themselves masters of the land, who exploited that fact that “the terror of the Lord” had fallen upon the towns of the area, as we read in chapter 35:5.

With verse 12 starts the great adventure of Joseph’s life. His father sends him on an errand to Sechem to see how his brothers are doing. Considering the fact stated in verse 2, it seems that Jacob was rather naive in doing this. Jacob’s sons must have believed that Jacob sent Joseph on a spying mission. It seems that Jacob had very little idea about what was going on in his family, or that he did not care.

Upon arrival at Shechem, Joseph learns from a man who sees him wandering around, that his brothers have moved the flocks farther away to Dothan. So he follows their trail and joins up with them. They see him from afar off. Verse 18-20 show us what kind of criminals Jacob’s sons actually were. We read: “But they saw him in the distance, and before he reached them, they plotted to kill him. ‘Here comes

that dreamer!' They said to each other. 'Come now, let's kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a ferocious animal devoured him. Then we'll see what comes of his dreams.'" They are a bunch of cold-blooded murderers. Reuben is the only one who stands out as, at least, half-decent. His word, as oldest brother, does not seem to carry any weight though. He has to plot Joseph's rescue. He has no doubt that his brothers are capable of committing the crime.

When Joseph arrives they strip him off his robe and throw him in a dry well. This does not mean that they have given up on the idea of murdering their brother, because Judah says in verse 26: "What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover up his blood?" After throwing Joseph in the cistern they sit down and have their meal, as verse 25 tells us. In doing so, they show how callous they are. Some of Joseph's agony must have registered though, because, years later the brothers recall the event when they stand before Joseph, who at that time is lord of Egypt. In Ch. 42:21 we read: "They said to one another, 'Surely we are being punished because of our brother. We saw how distressed he was when he pleaded with us for his life, but we would not listen; that's why this distress has come upon us.'" But at the time they are about to commit the crime they sit down and eat and probably crack a joke.

In Truman Capot's book "In Cold Blood" two men murder a family of four, husband and wife and two children. After committing the crime they get in their car and drive away. Then they stop, eat something and laugh. Sometimes sitting down and eating can be more criminal than killing someone.

While the brothers are eating and relaxing they see a caravan of merchants pass. They are described as Ishmaelites and Midianites coming from Gilead on their way to Egypt. These people were not slaves handlers. At least, we are told that their merchandise consisted of spices, balm and myrrh. It is Judah who conceives the idea that to sell Joseph would even be better than killing him. Selling him they make at least some money. Selling Joseph is the lesser of two evils, but it is evil. Whether Judah had some qualms or not, we cannot tell. His conscience does not bother him as it does Reuben, but there may have been a tender spot that could lead to his salvation. We have to remember that the brothers are more motivated by their hatred of their father than of Joseph. Ultimately what they do is an effort to get back at Jacob as we shall see later.

So Joseph is pulled out of the cistern and sold for twenty shekels of silver. This transaction foreshadows the betrayal of Christ. Zechariah, the prophet foretells this in Zech. 11:12 - "I told them, 'If you think it best, give me my pay; but if not, keep it.' So they paid me thirty pieces of silver." And in Matt. 26:15 Judas goes to the Jewish leaders and asks, "What are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you?" So they counted out for him thirty silver coins." A fifty percent inflation over a period of about twenty centuries! We do not read what the brothers did with the money. We know that for Judas it meant despair to the point where he committed suicide.

Reuben was not present when the deal was made. When he returns he becomes desperate because Joseph has disappeared. His first impression is probably that the brothers have killed him. His despair credits him, but he does not have enough moral courage to stand up to his brothers. He becomes part of the plot, because of his silence, when they dip Joseph's robe in goat blood to deceive Jacob into thinking that a wild animal had killed Joseph.

Their deception of Jacob is almost as cruel as what they did to Joseph. How they must have hated their father to do such a thing to him. It would have been more merciful had they killed him. We read nowhere in Genesis that Jacob ever found out what actually happened. We do not get the impression that, when Jacob went to Egypt and stayed with Joseph, his son ever told him the secret. From Ch. 50:15-17 we could conclude that Jacob knew. We read: "When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, 'What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?' So they sent word to Joseph, saying, 'Your father left these instructions before he died: "This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.'" Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father.' When their message came to him, Joseph wept." It could very well be though that they lied and that the quotation of Jacob's words was their own invention. Had Jacob known, he would no doubt have mentioned the fact in his last words to his sons. How terrible it must have been to have such a skeleton in the family closet!

When the sons bring Joseph's coat to Jacob they are careful not to tell an outright lie. They just show the blood stained robe to Jacob to let him draw his own conclusion. It is Jacob's verdict that Joseph was devoured by a ferocious animal, not theirs. They see their father collapse under the weight of his grief; they stand by and fake sadness and sympathy. But, knowing them, I suppose they were not kept awake at night with feelings of guilt.

These were the founding fathers of the nation of Israel, God's chosen people. These were the men God had in mind when He said to Abraham in Ch. 18:19 - "I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him." All this seems a complete victory for Satan. But the seed of God's grace and forgiveness was planted in the heart of Joseph and in him it would grow to full maturity.

Jacob's mourning was probably a combination of deep grief and ritual. The efforts by his children to comfort him were most likely directed at the ritual part. Jacob decided to keep on performing the ceremony of mourning till the end of his life. Some of these mourning rituals are preserved among the tribes of Irian Jaya. The custom is probably widespread all over Asia. The Danis of the Irian Jaya Highlands will set aside a day of crying over a deceased relative. Much of these rituals are tied up with spirit appeasement. The Papua's along the North coast of Irian Jaya incorporated this custom in their Christianity in a syncretistic way. They will hold memorial services forty days and one hundred days after the death of a relative. Jacob's mourning may have been tied in with customs that had little or no connection with the religion of YHWH. There seems to be an element of denial of eternal life and resurrection on Jacob's behavior. All this does not mean that emotional hurt was not deep.

I have always believed that it is harder to lose a grown up child than a young one. I praise the Lord that I have no personal experience of either loss. We should not downplay Jacob's loss, or supposed loss, because, of course, Joseph was not dead. Jacob himself was deceived more than anybody he ever deceived in his life. He paid more than double for what he had done to Esau, Isaac, Laban and others. If we enter into fellowship with God sinning becomes very expensive. It seems that in his grief Jacob never sought the Lord, or fell back on the experiences of divine revelation he had received throughout his life. This killed the emotional nerves in his soul almost completely. We see this from his reaction when his sons tell him in Ch. 45:26 that Joseph is still alive. "They told him, 'Joseph is still alive! In fact, he is ruler of all Egypt.' Jacob was stunned; he did not believe them." The KJV says: "And Jacob's heart fainted, for he believed them not." The Dutch translates it with "his heart remained cold." Odilon Vansteenbergh, one of the directors of the Belgian Gospel Mission, once said about this verse that it was the saddest in the whole Bible. If a person can no longer believe in the resurrection and rejoice in it, he is not far from spiritual death.

We have to take our grief to God. He is the only One who can wipe away our tears. Psalm 68:20 says: "Our God is a God who saves; from the Sovereign LORD comes escape from death." This does not only mean that God can save us from dying, but also that He can and will protect us from the consequences of death in and around us. As Psalm 56:8 puts it: "Thou tellest my wanderings: put thou my tears into thy bottle: are they not in thy book?" (KJV). Joseph was not dead, but Jacob was, almost.

The chapter ends with the information that Joseph was sold in Egypt. Ch. 37:36 "Meanwhile, the Midianites sold Joseph in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard."

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT.

This thirty-eighth chapter seems to be an interruption in the story of Joseph. But there is more to it than meets the eye. We read in Ch. 37:2 “This is the history of the family of Jacob.” (RSV). So we should not be amazed to read an account of Judah and his descendants. In the context of the whole Bible, we understand that the purpose of this story is to show the birth of Perez, who became the ancestor of David and of our Lord Jesus Christ. And also to show why Tamar was included in Jesus’ genealogy. Matthew 1:3 tells us: “Judah the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar, Perez the father of Hezron, Hezron the father of Ram.” It is, of course, impossible that Moses would consciously have included this account for the above purpose. He could not even see as far as the birth of David. There was Jacob’s prophecy regarding Judah and the coming of “Shiloh.” In Ch. 49:10 we read: “The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his.” But even this prophecy does not say enough to warrant the inclusion of Judah’s affair with Tamar. Higher Criticism considers the story to be of the hand of an editor of a later period, or it is seen as proof that the “Yahwist file” came into being in David’s time. We reject this kind of interpretation. Moses may not have known what he wrote, but the Holy Spirit did.

The chapter opens with the statement: “At that time, Judah left his brothers and went down to stay with a man of Adullam named Hirah.” The crime of Joseph’s selling into slavery had taken place, because we read that Judah was present and even suggested the sale. It sounds as if the situation at home, where Jacob was mourning a dead son and where the atmosphere was loaded with an evil secret, was more than Judah could stand. He certainly was no angel himself, as the present chapter clearly shows, but he may have had a tender spot in his conscience, which put him one notch above his brothers.

Judah befriends a Canaanite from Adullam, named Hirah and he marries a Canaanite woman, named Shua. There is no indication that Judah had married before. In later genealogies only the sons of Shua and of Tamar are mentioned. Shua bears him three sons: Er, Onan and Shelah. When Er reaches manhood Judah gets him a wife, also a Canaanite, Tamar. Scripture gives a terse and brief testimony about this man. In verse 7 we read: “But Er, Judah’s firstborn, was wicked in the LORD’s sight; so the LORD put him to death.” We do not know what his crime was or how he died. His behavior must have been even worse than that of his uncles, since God considered that he was not fit to live. He probably demonstrated some of the sins of the Canaanites, which would later lead to the annihilation of all the inhabitants of the country. Judah was partly to be blamed. He married without consulting the Lord. Also he never felt the responsibility Abraham felt about Isaac’s marriage and Isaac and Rebekah felt about Jacob’s future spouse. Had Judah married a God fearing woman, he would have had a chance to have God fearing children. Obviously, Jacob had no input in Judah’s marriage either. If we marry outside the Lord’s will, we bear the consequences.

The Bible record is more specific about Onan’s son. We find in this chapter the first reference to the so-called “Levirate marriage.” The custom would later be incorporated in the Mosaic law, but evidently it existed long before that time. “If brothers are living together and one of them dies without a son, his widow must not marry outside the family. Her husband’s brother shall take her and marry her and fulfill the duty of a brother-in-law to her. The first son she bears shall carry on the name of the dead brother so that his name will not be blotted out from Israel.”²⁶⁹

We read in verse 8 that after the death of Er Judah orders his second son Onan “Lie with your brother’s wife and fulfill your duty to her as a brother-in-law to produce offspring for your brother.” The relationship between Onan and Er must not have been a good one. Onan must have hated his brother to the point where he did not want to produce offspring in his brother’s name. We are spared the details, but only given to understand that Onan faked as if he married Tamar. He attitude has earned Onan some dubious fame in world history. His name became connection to masturbation, although that is probably not what he did. Supposedly he interrupted the coitus while lying with Tamar in order to prevent conception. We read in verse 10: “What he did was wicked in the LORD’s sight; so he put him to death also.”

I am not convinced that Onan was punished because of what he did sexually. There seems to be some commands in the chapters of Deuteronomy, in the context of which we find the command about the levirate marriage, that are not specifically a command of the Lord. Jesus, for instance, says that the part about divorce, which we find in the chapter previous to the one mentioned above, was given “because your hearts

²⁶⁹ Deut. 25:5,6

were hard.” In Matt. 19:8 we read: “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning.” So it could be that this command, that a brother-in-law marry the widow, was also an accommodation to the custom of the times. Some of these commands receive a finer tuning in the Gospels. But Onan’s hatred of his brother was a spiritual sin that God did not want to be unpunished. How Onan died we are not told. Onan may have become notorious for the wrong reason.

After Onan’s death Judah promises his third son, Shelah, to Tamar. But Shelah is still too young to marry and Tamar is advised to go home for some years. There is an interesting feature in Judah’s character that is brought out in this story. Judah could not have known that in a sense he was the most important of Jacob’s sons, since he was going to be the ancestor of the Messiah. There is no record that Judah ever had a divine revelation, or that he even had any personal relationship with God. He is afraid that Shelah will die also if he marries Tamar and that consequently Judah’s name would be wiped off the list for lack of offspring. His fear that Shelah would die reeks of superstition. Judah never looked into the matter to find the root of the problem and he certainly did not seek the Lord about it. It is tragic that the man who was to be one of the important links in the history of salvation, after whom the nation of Israel was to be named, (the name Jew is derived from Judah), had no inkling about who he was. We only know who we are if we know Who God is.

The episode described in vs. 12-30 is one of the mysteries in the realm of biblical revelation. There is nothing supernatural in the events that happen. They are sinful and carnal and debasing. This is another black page in the history of God’s chosen people. But the outcome of all this human blundering and sinfulness is a monument of God’s amazing grace. If we do not read this story in the light of Jesus’ genealogy in Matt. 1:3, we have nothing but mud and filth. But we read: “Judah the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar, Perez the father of Hezron, Hezron the father of Ram.” It is through what Judah did at the lowest point in his life that he occupies a place in the genealogy of the Savior of the world, Jesus Christ. This is indeed hard to grasp.

It is obvious that what Judah did not was according to the will of God. We cannot say that God foreordained these events. Everything that happens here is more an attempt by the enemy to thwart God’s revelation than to stimulate it. On a certain level, in the private life of Judah, the enemy gained a victory. There are extenuating circumstances. Judah was prejudiced about the myth regarding the continuation of his name. He was superstitious, fearing the death of his youngest son. He was grieving over the death of his wife. He was a widower, who had no outlet for his sexual desires. All these are explanations of why Judah did what he did, but they are no justifications.

Shelah has grown up, but Judah does not give him to Tamar, as he promised he would do. So Tamar plots her own course. She acts shrewdly, capitalizing on what she knows is the weakness of her father-in-law. When she hears that Judah is passing by on his way to sheep shearing, she disguises herself as a prostitute. The NIV uses the expression “shrine prostitute.”(Vs. 21,22). The KJV and RSV use the word “harlot.” Probably all prostitution at that time was linked to idol worship. This does mean that Judah had to engage in some kind of idol worship in order to be able to have sex with the women. His religious convictions are not strong enough to see this part of the deal as a real obstacle. Yet he must have known better. Judah did not just commit a sexual sin, he indulged in idol worship, thus opening himself up for demonic influences.

Tamar acts very shrewdly. She seems to have expected that this one time intercourse would make her pregnant and she wants to be sure that when her pregnancy becomes know, everybody will know who the father is. If she would not become pregnant, she probably had a plan “B,” which she would have carried out with the objects Judah left in her care as a pledge. The plot works and she becomes pregnant.

Judah has strong convictions about prostitution. When he hears that his daughter-in-law is guilty he orders her to be executed. The fact that he uses double standards, one for her and one for himself, does not bother him. Evidently it is debasing for a women to let herself be used as a prostitute, but a man who uses her is above reproach. Yet Deuteronomy condemns both the man and the girl. “If a man happens to meet in a town a virgin pledged to be married and he sleeps with her, You shall take both of them to the gate of that town and stone them to death; the girl because she was in a town and did not scream for help, and the man because he violated another man’s wife. You must purge the evil from among you.”²⁷⁰ The attitude Judah exhibits has not changed over the ages.

²⁷⁰ Deut. 22:23,24

Tamar seems to have carefully planned the moment when she would be led away for her execution. This is her hour of triumph. Things happened exactly as she wanted. Vs. 25 tells us: "As she was being brought out, she sent a message to her father-in-law. 'I am pregnant by the man who owns these,' she said. And she added, 'See if you recognize whose seal and cord and staff these are.'"

Tamar's actions seem to be foremost an act of revenge. She wanted to get back at Judah. She must have embarrassed him to the core. Judah does not show and sense of shame. He says only: "She is more righteous than I, since I wouldn't give her to my son Shelah." (vs. 26). But we do not read either that he gives Shelah to Tamar as husband. The use of the word "righteous" in this context indicates a warped sense of what is right and wrong. What Tamar had done surely wasn't more righteous than what Judah did.

One thing that is hard to understand in this story is the fact that, although Tamar lived in her father's house, as we deduct from vs. 11, Judah could order her execution. Evidently the fact that she was pledged to be married to Shelah one day put her under Judah's jurisdiction. We would expect, though, that Tamar's father would have opposed the burning of his daughter. Maybe he had been informed of the plot, but this would have little bearing on the fact that Judah seems to think he could have her executed.

Verses 27-30 give the report of a rather unusual delivery. Tamar turns out to have twins, but the one who is about to be born first is pushed back out of the birth canal by his younger brother. This earns the little brat the name "Perez" or "Breakthrough." I do not think we should attach any spiritual significance to this. The point of the whole report is to show what God can do with sin. The chapter is full of hatred, strife, jealousy, immorality and revenge. God hates all of this. Nothing of what happens contains any divine revelation. But God glorifies Himself in the outcome. The yeast of sin is burnt away in the fire of God's grace and the result is the coming of Him, Who would be "the bread of life."

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Chapter thirty-nine picks up where chapter thirty-seven left off. We read in Ch. 37:36 "Meanwhile, the Midianites sold Joseph in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard." And here "Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt. Potiphar, an Egyptian who was one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had taken him there."

"The captain of the guard" supposedly means that Potiphar was Pharaoh's chief executioners. The Hebrew word for "official" is the same that is used for eunuch. Thomas Mann, in his book "Joseph in Egypt," makes an important issue of this fact, mainly in relation to the temptation that Potiphar's wife puts in Joseph's way. It makes a very fascinating story, whether it is historically correct, I do not know. *The Pulpit Commentary* says that literally the text reads "a man of Mitzraim" and that this would indicate that Potiphar was actually a foreigner. *The Jamieson, Faucet and Brown Commentary* adds to this: "This name, Potiphar, signifies one 'devoted to the sun,' the local deity of On or Heliopolis, a circumstance which fixes the place of his residence in the Delta, the district of Egypt bordering on Canaan."

The most striking feature in this chapter and the following is Joseph's attitude. He would have all kinds of reason to be upset about his circumstances. We would understand it if he would turn his back on God. Nobody had more reason to feel miserable than Joseph. In just a few days he became from his father's favorite a slave, a non-entity. His freedom and his human rights had been taken away from him. But Joseph does not show any sign of being dejected. The beauty of his character shines through the most miserable circumstances. His reaction to his suffering makes him one of the most beautiful characters of the whole Bible. We read in vs. 6 "Now Joseph was well-built and handsome." His inner condition matched his outward appearance. It is a combination rarely found. Joseph presents thus a good picture of the perfect human being: Jesus Christ.

God is very sympathetic with our difficult circumstances, but He is even more interested in our reaction toward our difficulties. God is closest to us when we suffer. He reaches out to us and He wants us to reach out to him. C. S. Lewis has said: "God whispers to us in our pleasures, He speaks to us in our circumstances, but He shouts to us in our pain." Joseph must have maintained a close fellowship with the Lord. As the pain increased he was drawn even closer to Him. He must have realized that the Lord's hand was in these painful experiences. He had not forgotten the two dreams and he felt that, somehow, this was the way to the fulfillment of the dreams. In all this Joseph foreshadowed Jesus, of Whom we read in Heb. 2:10 "In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering."

Joseph had taken Paul's advice in Col. 3:23 to heart - "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men." This must have been the motto of Joseph's life. He considered himself a slave of the Lord, not of Potiphar and later a prisoner of God not of man.

When Joseph arrives in Egypt he is at the bottom of the ladder, a slave, sold in captivity. But soon he starts to rise. We see several stages in Joseph's climb. The first one is that he is moved into Potiphar's house. He may have worked outside at first, but we do not know. The credit for Joseph's success is given to the Lord. Whether Potiphar recognized this or not is not said, but verse 3 implies that Joseph must have told him his secret. "When his master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD gave him success in everything he did"

Joseph's presence in Potiphar's house was a blessing and caused blessings. We do not know exactly what took place, but things started to run smoother as soon as Joseph put his hand on them. Not only was Joseph an intelligent administrator, but even matters that were beyond his control started flourishing. Joseph's positive attitude inspired the other servants, so that everybody worked harder and better. Joseph did it for the Lord, the others for Joseph. Potiphar's affairs were taken care off so efficiently and smoothly that Potiphar even stopped meddling in them. If Joseph had the gift of administration, Potiphar had the gift of delegation. Both gifts are equally valuable. Some people give the impression that they are the only ones who can do things right. To express confidence in fellow workers and be able to let go is a gift. It is the principle upon which the functioning of the body of Christ is based. It is a Christian virtue. Joseph not only had the spirit of Christ, he also inspired Christian virtues in others.

The drawback of the position Joseph acquired was that the attention of Potiphar's wife was drawn to this handsome young man. If it is true that Potiphar was a eunuch, we understand some of the frustration of Mrs. Potiphar, who had to live with a unconsummated marriage. If castration was the rule for all who worked at the palace of Pharaoh, Joseph must have been aware of the situation. In the earlier mentioned book by Thomas Mann, Joseph is portrayed as responding, at least in part, almost naively, to the courtship by this woman. The Scriptures give no bases for this supposition.

That Joseph as, a healthy youth, would be severely tempted on this point is beyond doubt. It would have been so easy for him to give in. Nobody would have to know, but God. That was the point of Joseph defense. "How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" The devil knows the weak points in everyone's life, whether man or woman, young or old. The only effective way to resist temptation is to appeal to God. Self-restraint on the basis of will power is no guarantee to sexual purity. But God is able to keep

us from stumbling. I am sure that if Joseph would have given in, he would never have married a princess a few years later. There was a rich reward for this shepherd boy.

Although Joseph was victorious, the devil did not admit defeat. Whether Satan had any inkling of God's plan with Joseph's life, we do not know. It is quite possible that Joseph would never have made it to Pharaoh's court if he had fallen into this sin. That would have meant disaster. Humanly speaking the line of God's revelation in this world would have been cut. So Joseph's determination to remain pure meets with severe opposition in the heavenly places. Evidently the temptation was a daily occurrence. But once the circumstances were such that Mrs. Potiphar could incriminate her husband's slave. They were alone in the house. Joseph flees, but he has to leave his cloak behind. This becomes evidence in the hands of this evil woman to take revenge upon the boy, who refused to stoop.

Augustine, who had lead an immoral life before his conversion, recounts that once he met one of his former girls. The temptation to go back into sin was almost irresistible to him, so he ran away from it. Sometimes the only defense we have is to run. Joseph did no doubt the right thing. He had argued with the mistress of the house before, but there comes a point where words become useless. However, the cloak gets him in even deeper trouble.

From the action Mrs. Potiphar takes at this point we understand that her sexual desire had nothing to do with love for Joseph. If ever there had been love it had turned to hatred. She trumps up charges against him and, of course, Joseph was defenseless on the basis of his position as a slave. First the servants of the house are told what happened and then Potiphar himself. Vs. 16 paints a vivid picture of this woman. We do not need much imagination to see the glee on her face as she sits there with Joseph's shirt in her hands, waiting for her husband to return. We read: "She kept his cloak beside her until his master came home." When he hears her version, we read: "He burned with anger." If it is true that Potiphar was in fact a eunuch his wife's accusation of Joseph must have added insult to injury to Potiphar. This rubbed it in to him how impotent he was. Probably his wife understood this and this must have added to her satisfaction.

We could be amazed to read in vs. 20 “Joseph’s master took him and put him in prison, the place where the king’s prisoners were confined.” Potiphar, being the king’s executioner, could easily have put Joseph to death. It is likely though, that he would have needed Pharaoh’s approval for this, which would have meant that he would have to serve a formal complaint, explaining the details and exposing his own condition. We understand why Potiphar shrunk from this embarrassment. It was easier to just imprison Joseph. The main reason why Joseph was not executed was, of course, because the Lord protected him. The prison was God’s way for Joseph the Pharaoh’s court.

The Pulpit Commentary says about vs. 20 - “This, which some regard as having been a mild punishment, ... since, according to Diodorus Siculus, the laws of the Egyptians were specially severe in their penalties for offences against women, is presented by a Hebrew psalmist (Ps. cv. 18) [which reads: “They bruised his feet with shackles, his neck was put in irons” {quote added}] as having been accompanied with bodily tortures, at least for a time; for his speedy elevation to a place of trust within prison almost gives countenance to the idea ... that Potiphar did not believe his wife’s story, and only incarcerated Joseph for the sake of appearances. That Joseph was not immediately punished with death is not improbably ..., but exceedingly natural, since Joseph was Potiphar’s favorite.”

So Joseph arrived from the “smoke into the smother,” from slavery into imprisonment. We do not read anything about Joseph’s despondency at this point. Being human, however, we may suppose that victory will not have come easily to him. He must have asked “Why God?” several times. His dreams probably came back to him, first to bother him and then to comfort. The question must have arisen how imprisonment could be the way to fulfillment of the prophecies God had given him. Slowly but surely the assurance got a hold of him that the promise of the dream still held, that the dreams had been given for the specific reason to see him through this time of his life. And so, as the darkness closed in around him, his light started to shine brighter.

Vs. 20 and 21 tell us: “But while Joseph was there in the prison, The LORD was with him; he showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden.” God is compassionate. Our suffering affects Him deeply. His tears are bigger than ours are. Of course, Joseph suffered in the dungeon. The idea that circumstances would not have affected him is ridiculous. The point is that emotional stability should not be based on favorable circumstances, but on the promises of God. We should fix our eye upon the light of God’s Word, as Joseph did, and not upon the darkness that surrounds us.

Joseph fellowship with God affected his attitude and behavior. If this had not been the case the prison warden would not have paid any special attention to him. Prison wardens are not known for their compassionate attitudes; I am not excluding some exceptions. But there must have been something very unusual about Joseph to draw the attention of the jailer. Christian should stand out in this world because of their attitude in suffering. I know many examples of Christians who led fellow patients to the Lord in the hospital, because of the way they took their sickness. Prisoners have given testimony to jailers and the songs of the martyrs, who were burned at the stake, brought more people to Christ than their sermons. The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. “In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.” (Matt. 5:16)

It runs as a refrain through Joseph’s life, that he was given responsibility to the point where those who put him in charge never bothered to check up on him. He inspired complete trust. First Potiphar, then the warden and finally Pharaoh trusted Joseph one hundred percent. Joseph gave the impression that he was good, but not too good to be true. The warden must have known what prisoners were like. Whether he knew why Joseph was put in prison, we do not know, but he knew that there must have been a reason. However, at some point the jailer must have come to the conclusion that whatever accusation had been made, it must have been false. If the warden had been convinced that Joseph had slipped seriously, he would never have trusted the responsibility for the prisoners to him. At that time too, jailers were probably accountable with their lives for the prisoners they held. In entrusting Joseph with the prisoners, the warden entrusted his own life to him. The chapter ends in vs. 23 with the words: “The warden paid no attention to anything under Joseph’s care, because the LORD was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did.” Here too it is obvious to a heathen man that behind this human being is the Lord, who is trustworthy. Whether the jailer knew it or not, in trusting Joseph he actually trusted God.

CHAPTER FORTY.

In this chapter Joseph takes a step closer to Pharaoh's court with more dreams. Joseph's brother had called him "that dreamer" in chapter 37:19. The expression used literally means "master of dreams." *The Pulpit Commentary* translates it with "Lord of dreams." The Dutch says "aartsdromer." It is amazing how right they were! Dreams played an all-important part in Joseph's ascent.

Joseph did not only dream himself, but he understood the meaning of dreams. He gave God the credit, but he knew what to do with them. As we have suggested earlier, the two dreams God gave him as a teenager must have carried him through his slavery and imprisonment. And so when he is confronted with the dreams of other people he turns to the Lord to gain understanding.

It is hard to determine how long Joseph spent in prison. This chapter starts out with the words "some time later." We read chapter 41:46 that Joseph was thirty years old when he entered into Pharaoh's service. Chapter 41:1 also tells us that Joseph spent two more years in prison after the events described in this chapter. He may have been in prison for ten years.

Two of Pharaoh's officials, his chief cupbearer and his chief baker, incurred the wrath of their Lord and were thrown in prison. We do not know what the accusation against them was. According to the Targum of Jonathan, they had attempted to poison their lord. It could be, of course, that Pharaoh had to blame somebody for his stomach flu. These two men were responsible for Pharaoh's diet. They probably did not do the actual cooking themselves, but they oversaw what was done and they had to taste the food and drink in Pharaoh's presence to prove that he would not die if he took it.

Something went wrong and the two arrived in Potiphar's prison where also Joseph was held. They were high dignitaries and the fact that Joseph was assigned to them as servant must have been considered an honor for Joseph. It also added to Joseph's liberty. We may presume that Joseph would have had the opportunity to run away, which would probably have cost the jailer his head. The jailer trusted Joseph with his life in giving him this kind of liberty.

Actually the one who assigned these men to Joseph's care may have been Potiphar himself. He is described as "the captain of the guard," which is the title used for Potiphar in chapter 39:1. If we are dealing with the same person it would indicate that Potiphar may indeed have taken his wife's accusation with a grain of salt and that Joseph's imprisonment was more an effort to smooth things over than to punish.

One morning Joseph finds them gloomy, more than even their circumstances in prison would call for. Nobody is supposed to enjoy imprisonment, but there are grades of gloom and theirs must have been unusually high. So Joseph asks for the reason. They could not have met a better person in their circumstances. The "master dreamer" listens to the dreams. We should wonder why they had come to the hasty conclusion that there would be nobody to interpret their dreams. How many visitors had they received that morning? Without asking any questions they took it for granted that there was no answer.

We read in vs. 8 "'We both had dreams,' they answered, 'but there is no one to interpret them.' Then Joseph said to them, 'Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell me your dreams.'" Joseph refers them to God, but he also presents himself as a mediator. The implication is that not only does God answer their questions, but He also reveals them to people who are in fellowship with Him.

We often do not receive answers because we ask no questions. Fellowship with God stimulates asking. God appreciates an inquisitive mind. We will not be able to understand all in our life on earth, but we may know more than we anticipate. Ps. 25:14 says: "The LORD confides in those who fear him; he makes his covenant known to them." Amos goes even farther by stating: "Surely the Sovereign LORD does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets." (Amos 3:7) So Joseph is quite confident that the Lord will answer their questions.

The cupbearer is the first to tell Joseph his dream. Vs. 9-11 tell the content of the dream, in vs. 12 and 13 Joseph explains it and in vs. 14 he adds his personal request for intercession by the cupbearer to Pharaoh in Joseph's behalf.

The cupbearer saw a vine with three branches, which grow, producing buds, blossoms and grapes, even as he was looking. He saw himself squeezing the grapes in Pharaoh's cup and handing the cup to the king. Adam Clarke draws the conclusion from this dream that only unfermented grape juice was drunk in Egypt. *The Pulpit Commentary* disagrees with this. If we would reconstruct the culture of the ancient world on the basis of someone's dreams, we would build a fantasy. There seems to be enough archaeological evidence that fermented wine was a common drink in Egypt of old. If we conclude from the dream that Pharaoh only drunk unfermented juice, we could as well believe that in ancient Egypt vines sprouted and ripened within the space of a few minutes.

It must not have taken too much supernatural insight on Joseph's part to understand the meaning of the dream. Believing that the dream originated with God, it must have seemed evident to him that the message conveyed was positive and favorable.

The fact that Joseph adds his personal plea for intercession proves that he was convinced of the correctness of his interpretation. We fully understand why Joseph asked the man to intercede for him, but we also have to state that Joseph's request was not an act of faith in God. For a moment Joseph believed that this man would get him out of prison. His leaning upon help from a human being added two years of suffering and frustration to his imprisonment. Ps. 146:3 warns us: "Do not put your trust in princes, in mortal men, who cannot save." Nobody, not even Joseph, trusts the Lord always, one hundred percent. As a matter of fact, as my personal experience shows, we will try all human avenues first before we turn to the Lord. But who would want to condemn or criticize Joseph for doing this? Let he who has no sin throw the first stone!

There is a note of self-pity in the words of vs. 15 - "For I was forcibly carried off from the land of the Hebrews, and even here I have done nothing to deserve being put in a dungeon." That blatant injustice had been done to Joseph is beyond doubt. But Joseph's words seem to show more than a desire for justice. Self-pity is a dangerous condition, which opens the door to demonic influences.

Some scholars have objected to the use of the phrase "the land of the Hebrews," believing that this was an insertion of a later date. The name Hebrew comes from Sem's son Heber. Jacob and his descendants were probably not the only Semites in that part of the world.

The chief baker may have had an inkling that the meaning of his dream was not that favorable. But when he hears how well the cupbearer fares, his optimism gets the better of him and he decides to try his luck also. Whether he really was the guilty party in the plot against Pharaoh, we do not know. The fact that he was executed does not prove guilt. Pharaoh may have used magic instead of proof that would stand up in a court of justice to determine guilt. Even if the baker had a guilty conscience he may have hoped to get off the hook. But he did not. There must be a play on words in the Hebrew between the "lift up your head" in vs. 13 and the "lift off your head" in vs. 19. If there is a pun, the humor of it was painful and it will probably have escaped the baker. The verdict was that the baker would be executed within three days, probably by decapitation. The hanging of the body to indicate the heinousness of the crime committed followed this. It seems unlikely that execution was carried out by hanging.

Three days later, at Pharaoh's birthday, Joseph's predictions come true. The cupbearer is rehabilitated and the baker is executed. The cupbearer celebrates his restoration by wiping the whole episode of his mind, including Joseph who had predicted his return to favor. This meant that Joseph would have to suffer two more years in prison. It wasn't until Pharaoh had his dream that Joseph understood why. If the cupbearer had remember Joseph earlier and if his intercession would have gained him his freedom from prison, it would probably have meant a return to slavery. His deliverance two years later meant his promotion to power in Egypt. God's timing was perfect. If only he would have known this.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Two years after the release of Pharaoh's cupbearer, Pharaoh has his two dreams which mark the turning point in Joseph's life. Up to this time Joseph had sunk to the deepest depth. Only in retrospect will Joseph have been able to see the marvel of God's guidance in his life. God had guided him by dreams. The epitaph "master dreamer" which his brothers had affixed to his person in a derogatory way, turned out to be God's batch of honor for him. As a young man, at the age of seventeen, he had two dreams; he explained two dreams to Pharaoh's imprisoned servants and finally he gave Pharaoh the meaning of his two dream. In his own dreams God showed him the plan for his life, the second set of dreams established his reputation and the third serious brought the fulfillment of God's plan for him.

Before we go into an investigation of the events we should try to take a peek behind the scene. The reason God led Joseph to Egypt was to save the nation of Israel from destruction. Joseph himself wraps it all up in his words to his brothers, who are afraid that Joseph might take revenge on them after the death of his father. He says in Ch. 50:20 "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives." The question remains why the famine was necessary. The omniscient God revealed to Abraham that Israel would spend centuries in Egypt. In Gen 15:13-16 we read: "Then the LORD said to him, 'Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions. You, however, will go to

your fathers in peace and be buried at a good old age. In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.’”

Joseph explains to Pharaoh that the coming famine is “an act of God.” In Ch. 41:32 he says: “The reason the dream was given to Pharaoh in two forms is that the matter has been firmly decided by God, and God will do it soon.” Does this mean that God is responsible for the seven-year drought that almost killed the whole Middle East? There must be some cosmic struggle between evil and good behind this all, of which we are kept in the dark. As in the struggle by Satan for the soul of Job, so the enemy must have appeared before God with the purpose to kill Jacob’s family and to take millions of others with him. God must have allowed him to carry out his scheme, but He prevented the ultimate disaster by the sending ahead of Joseph to Egypt. “God intended it for good.” He is not the murderer of men.

We have to realize that there was more in Pharaoh’s dreams than meets our Western eyes. The river Nile was the lifeline of the country of Egypt. Divine qualities were ascribed to it.

The Westminster Dictionary of the Bible says about the Nile: “The annual overflow is the famous feature of the Nile. Its occurrence in a rainless region was mysterious to the ancients (Herod. ii. 19-25). The region of Lake Victoria Nyanza is watered by rains which fall almost daily; the steady water supply gives the Nile its constant volume. The Blue Nile rises in the lofty highlands of Ethiopia and is a considerable mountain torrent. In the dry season this stream dwindles almost to nothing; in the rainy season it is a turbid mountain torrent, which rushes impetuously onward, laden with loose soil from the land which it drains. The Atbara is a freshet not unlike the Blue Nile. Egypt is flanked on each side by extensive barren deserts. If it were not for the annual overflow of the Nile, Egypt would be a part of this desert. It is the variation of the water supply from the Blue Nile and the Atbara which causes the overflow of the Nile. At the beginning of June the river begins slowly to swell; between the 15th and 20th of July the increase becomes very rapid. Toward the end of September the water ceases to rise and remains at the same height for 20 to 30 days. In October it rises again attaining its greatest height. It then decreases, and in January, February, and March the fields gradually dry off. In consequence of this inundation the soil is both softened and fertilized. During a good inundation the Nile reaches a height of 40 feet at the Assuan and of 23 to 27 at Cairo.

Occasionally inundation does not take place. A certain Amanemhet (Ameni) of Dyn. XII under Sesostris I says that he did not collect arrears of the fields due after short payments during unfruitful years. The inundation failed for 7 years in the time of Joseph (Ch. 41:54); and it failed likewise for 7 years in the reign of caliph el-Mustansir, the resulting famine reaching its height AD 1070. The ancient Egyptians kept records of the height of the inundation at different places in various years.”

The original text does not mention the name of the river. The KJV translates: “He stood by the river.” The Egyptian word “Yaro,” or “Yero,” meaning “Great River” is used exclusively in Scripture for the Nile, according to *The Pulpit Commentary*. It was the common name for the Nile. There was a sacred name, being “Hapi.”

So we can understand that Pharaoh’s dream about the Nile was wrought with more than common significance. The Nile was considered the country’s supernatural lifeline and divine features were attributed to it. Pharaoh, having divine blood in his veins, had a special relationship with the river. Consequently the dream meant that a message was communicated between one god and another. How embarrassing it was that one of the gods did not understand what was said!

Seen in this light Joseph’s introductory remark in vs. 16: “but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires,” takes on new significance.

There is difference of opinion among the learned men regarding the symbolic significance of the cows, coming up of the Nile. Adam Clarke thinks they are hippopotamus. Cows do not come out of a river, he says and the Nile is the habitat of the hippo. He may have a point, but not because of the impossibility of cows coming out of the river. Cows can do anything in dreams, even fly over the moon. *The Pulpit Commentary* says that, according to Plutarch and Clement of Alexandria, the ancient Egyptians regarded the heifer as a symbol of the earth, agriculture, and the nourishment derived therefrom. The problem with the opinions of Plutarch and Clement is that they were uttered about twenty five centuries after the period we study. How reliable their comments are is not clear.

The reason we question the significance of the cows is that there seems to have been an aversion against shepherding among the Egyptians of this period, according to the following verses: “They served him by himself, the brothers by themselves, and the Egyptians who ate with him by themselves, because Egyptians could not eat with Hebrews, for that is detestable to Egyptians,” (Ch. 43:32) and “You should answer, ‘Your servants have tended livestock from our boyhood on, just as our fathers did.’ Then

you will be allowed to settle in the region of Goshen, for all shepherds are detestable to the Egyptians.” (Ch. 46:34).

The period in which Joseph becomes viceroy of Egypt may have been the time when the Hyksos ruled Egypt. The Hyksos were Semites who had invaded Egypt and ruled the country for a period of about 175 years, according to the Westminster Bible Dictionary. They were called “the Shepherd Kings.” The above quoted verses would show the hatred the average Egyptian had for their foreign rulers. It would also explain why Joseph, who was a Hebrew, was elevated to such a high position in Egypt. If all this is true, cows must have been foreign elements in the Egyptian culture, symbols of a hated oppression. The words in Ex. 1:8 “Then a new king, who did not know about Joseph, came to power in Egypt,” would indicate the end of the Hyksos period in the country.

Pharaoh dreamed about fat cows that were eaten by skinny ones and healthy ears of wheat that swallowed up by other ears of wheat that were withered. In either case the fat ones did the skinny ones no good. Pharaoh woke up highly disturbed by his dream. Vs. 7 says: “Then Pharaoh woke up; it had been a dream.” In our philosophy this would mean that it had “only” been a dream; that is, we would have attached no importance to it. But for the king it meant that the Nile wanted to communicate something to him and he could not hear what this divine stream was saying. Nobody else could, for that matter. Not even the people whose job it was to hear and understand supernatural messages.

Then the cupbearer remembers Joseph. It must have been painful and humiliating for him to bring up the subject of his imprisonment, but without this background information the reference to Joseph would not have made any sense. We do not read that Joseph’s innocence was mentioned, but that could very well have been the case, because it would have been much more difficult to elevate a formal criminal to the position of ruler over Egypt, than a man who had suffered innocently. I am not trying to say that criminals do not make it to the top of governments. Far from me to make such a statement!

Joseph’s condition changes overnight. One night in prison the next in the palace. He had patiently suffered for probably seventeen years and all of a sudden God is in a hurry.

Pharaoh is not used to waiting for people. Monarchs usually are not. So as soon is the desire to see Joseph is expressed by his majesty, Joseph is fetched, shaved, bathed and changed into decent clothing and, probably within the hour, he stands before Pharaoh. The outside light must have hurt his eyes and the splendor of the royal palace probably even more. For people who have not experienced ten years of privation, as Joseph did, it is hard to imagine what the transition must have done for him. He must have felt dizzy, but he probably had not time to digest all the impressions.

This does not mean that Joseph loses his head. His behavior before Pharaoh is appropriate and very impressive. Joseph has the kind of stuff kings are made of. Apart from his natural abilities, most of Joseph’s behavior must be attributed to his fellowship with God. Centuries later the author of psalm 119 will say: “I will speak of your statutes before kings and will not be put to shame.” (Ps. 119:46) In the New Testament two illiterate fishermen show the same quality in standing before the Jewish Sanhedrin. In Acts 4:13 we read: “When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.” It takes intimacy with God to keep us from being overawed by worldly power. In his book “Born Again” Chuck Colson describes his change of attitude toward the Oval Office. Before his conversion the thrill and awe of entering the center of power would grip him. After having been with Jesus he realized the relativity of human power. After having been before the throne of God, Joseph is not intimidated before the throne of Pharaoh.

Now Pharaoh was considered more than a human monarch. But in spite of the fact that divine power was ascribed to him, he was at loss as far as the meaning of what the gods were trying to tell him.

The initial exchange between Pharaoh and Joseph is interesting. We read in vs. 15 and 16 - “Pharaoh said to Joseph, ‘I had a dream, and no one can interpret it. But I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it.’ ‘I cannot do it,’ Joseph replied to Pharaoh, ‘but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires.’” Pharaoh admits his inability and seemingly Joseph denies that he has the gift of interpretation. It is true that Joseph’s gift would have been worthless outside of his fellowship with God. But I believe that God had bestowed the gift upon him. There is, undoubtedly, a difference between the gifts of the Holy Spirit given to the believers in the New Testament and the gifts to Old Testament saints, but in both dispensations God gave gifts to certain people He chose, gifts which others did not receive. It could be that Joseph did not understand this himself. Anyhow, even if his “I cannot do it” amounts to a denial, he is safe in attributing the power of interpretation to God.

The point Joseph gets across to Pharaoh is that it was not the local deity, the Nile, who conveyed a message to the king, but Elohim, the God of heaven and earth, the One in Whose hands the Nile runs and to

Whom all local gods have to bow. Pharaoh realizes that the message comes from a source, far superior to the one he was familiar with.

Joseph tells Pharaoh that God will give him the answer he desires. This reply is a masterpiece of diplomacy. Literally Joseph says to Pharaoh: "Elohim shall answer the peace of Pharaoh." The Dutch translates it with "God shall announce Pharaoh's well-being." [God zal Pharaoh's welzijn verkondigen.] The LXX translates it with "God shall announce Pharaoh's salvation."

In vs. 17-24 Pharaoh retells basically the same dream that was already described to us in vs. 1-7. In vs. 19 Pharaoh gives his opinion on the scrawny cows, saying that Egypt really does have that kind of animal. He does not want to admit that such a recession would be possible in the country he rules. Also the fact that the eating of the fat cows by the scrawny ones did not really do them any good is added at this point. The second dream is retold without any comments or additions. The magicians, whose business it was to explain supernatural events, were at loss as to the meaning of the dreams. The reason for this is probably that the message does not come from the gods but from God. They are used to hear and interpret communications from their own source, but, not knowing Elohim, they cannot hear what He says.

The first point Joseph clarifies is that the message of both dreams is the same. God showed Pharaoh the same thing with two images. That is an important point. It adds emphasis to the message. There is no doubt about the reliability.

The second point is that a disaster is about to come upon Egypt and the whole Middle East: a devastating famine of seven years. But the famine is going to be preceded by a seven-year period of unusual abundance. Unless Pharaoh understands the purpose of the first seven years, the chances of surviving the famine would be very slim. That seems to be the essence of the message God sends Pharaoh.

Generally speaking people have little trouble accepting abundance. It is the meager years that bother us. Our philosophy of life is built upon the assumption that abundance is our due. Hardship in life means that we are dealt with unfairly. We have a right to a life of riches in which we have more than we can possibly consume. This is not only our philosophy of life it is part of our security. If we have more than we need it means that our future is secure and a secure future eliminates the need to put our trust in the Lord for what is ahead of us. Jesus blows away this reasoning in His parable of the rich fool in Luke 12:16-21. The man in the story said to himself: "'You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.' But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?'" And Jesus adds: "This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God." In times of need we tend to turn to God, but very rarely we know what to do with abundance. We may say that abundance is more harmful to us than shortage. The Scottish writer George MacDonald once said that he believed God could punish a person by making him rich!

Joseph shows an amazing spiritual insight in his interpretation of Pharaoh's dreams. He not only understands the meaning but also the purpose of the message.

In vs. 33-37 he adds a piece of personal advice. It seems somewhat preposterous for a slave, straight out of prison, to tell the government of the country what to do. I do not suppose that Joseph had enough time to connect Pharaoh's dreams with his own dreams when he was a boy of seventeen. It will have taken him a few days before the pieces fell in place. The fact that he is able, on the spur of the moment, to propose an excellent plan to save the country, shows the working of his brilliant mind. No wonder he rose to the top in every situation in which he was placed. We are not discounting divine inspiration, but God adds His wisdom to those who possess wisdom. It takes wisdom to realize we need it and to ask for it.

It is difficult to determine whether it was Joseph's interpretation of Pharaoh's dream, or his seven-year plan for the salvation of the country that propelled him to the top. It was probably the combination of the two, but the plan that laid out the budget for the economy for the next fourteen years must have played a major part in Pharaoh's decision to make Joseph his pri-minister.

I am trying to imagine how Joseph's proposal would have gone over in a democratic society. What would Joseph's chances have been if he had run on a ticket of a 20% tax? Even if the meager years would have come first, it would have been difficult. With the years of abundance coming first, it would have been impossible. There must have been more wisdom in Pharaoh's court than in our modern society.

Adam Clarke comments at this point: "As it is impossible that Joseph could have foreseen his own elevation, consequently he gave this advice without any reference to himself. The counsel, therefore, was either immediately inspired by God or was dictated by policy, prudence, and sound sense."

We do not know how much Pharaoh or any of the Egyptians at that time knew about Elohim. The name is used twice though in vs. 38 and 39. Pharaoh recognizes the Spirit of Elohim in Joseph. It does not

seem that it was merely Joseph's introduction of the name in vs. 16 that accounts for this. If it is true that this Pharaoh was one of the Hyksos, a Shemite, he may have known more about Elohim than the average Egyptian. But the name of God may have been more generally known in Egypt, although not intimately, then is generally assumed. *The Pulpit Commentary* says here: "The Ruach Elohim, as understood by Pharaoh, meant the sagacity and intelligence of a deity." I would like to take issue with this statement. The primitive tribes of New Guinea knew much more about God, the Creator, (Ugamate in Ekagi) than any Westerner would have thought possible, so why would people who lived centuries closer to Noah, have less of an understanding? However, knowing about Him and obeying Him is not the same. It is not now and it was not the case then.

The government of Egypt at that time was not a dictatorship. Pharaoh does not come through as an absolute monarch. Vs. 37 reads: "The plan seemed good to Pharaoh and to all his officials." The translation "servants" in the KJV and RSV instead of "officials" may give the wrong impression that Pharaoh was surrounded by slaves. Joseph's elevation is based on the consensus of Pharaoh and his cabinet. Joseph's elevation may have taken longer than it sounds. Reading vs. 39-44 we would get the impression that it only took a few minutes to transform Joseph from an imprisoned slave into the Prime Minister of the country. The decision was probably made instantly, but we may assume that there was an official ceremony that took time of preparation. Obviously Joseph was not returned to prison after his audience with the king.

Joseph's star rose fast. Not only did he inspire confidence, but also he subsequent actions must have confirmed Pharaoh's impression. In the same way he had impressed Potiphar and the jailer. It seem logical, though, that Pharaoh's giving of the signet ring, the public presentation in making Joseph ride through Egypt in the royal chariot and the elevation to "second in command" were gradual developments instead of instant decisions. Joseph had to prove himself worthy of the calling. If all this honor was bestowed upon him hastily in one day it would not speak well of the Egyptian court.

The Pulpit Commentary says about "Zaphenath-Paneah," the name Pharaoh gave to Joseph, that it is an Egyptian word [surprise] and that some of the most respected interpretations are: "the Salvation of the Word," "Rescuer of the World," "the Prince of the Life of the World," "the Food of Life," or "the Food of the Living." Here also we may presume that Pharaoh bestowed this name on Joseph when it became evident that his proposed scheme worked.

Then Joseph gets married to Asenath daughter of Potiphera, priest of On. The name Asenath supposedly means "She who is of Neith," that is the Minerva of the Egyptians, according to *The Pulpit Commentary*. The only thing we can say about this is that Joseph married into a family of high class. We know nothing about the knowledge of Elohim among the Egyptians of Joseph's time. The fact that Pharaoh used the Name suggests general knowledge. So it should not be a foregone conclusion that Joseph married an idolater.

It is good to think back of the moment when Joseph was tempted to have an affair with Potiphar's wife. He refused, claiming that he considered this to be a sin against the Lord. God honored his restraint in leading him into the best marriage he could envision; married into the best of families, arranged for by Pharaoh himself.

Pharaoh had said to Joseph: "I am Pharaoh, but without your word no one will lift hand or foot in all Egypt." (vs. 44.) That is quite a mandate. It meant that Joseph could do as he pleased. The mandate implies that he was accountable to Pharaoh, but everybody else was accountable to him. Although the mandate was probably confined to the matter of the economy of the country in view of the coming famine, Joseph would have had enough power to get back at the people who harmed him. He had risen above Potiphar. It would have been easy to set the matter straight regarding Potiphar's wife. We do not read that he did any of this. Even in the encounter with his brother, about which we will read in the rest of the story, there is no hint of revenge, just a prudent investigation into their character before revealing his identity to them.

Joseph was a very young man for the high position he occupied. How easy it would have been for him to be corrupted by the power he possessed. I just finished reading Salisbury's book *The New Emperors*, the biography of Mao and Deng. The book exemplifies the dictum "Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely." We see nothing of this in the life of Joseph. Evidently the recognition that man is accountable to God is a sufficient safe guard against this corruption. Only fellowship with God can keep us from living a delusion. And the corruption of power is nothing but a delusion.

Vs. 46-49 tell us that Joseph carried out his proposed plan for storing up reserves by travelling personally throughout Egypt. He must have discovered early in life that the only way to do a thing well is

to do it yourself. It would have been impossible, though, to carry out the plan without delegating authority to local people. He must have been able to convince the people that the seven years of abundance were not meant for their personal enrichment. Knowing human nature this must have taken a lot of convincing. But he succeeded in organizing centers of surplus storage of grain, which later could be turned into centers of distribution.

Another thing that proves Joseph's superior intelligence is the fact that he did away with statistics! The fact that I share his negative feelings toward statistics does not necessarily mean that I share his intelligence. I am not arguing against any kind of record keeping. We should keep ourselves informed about what we are doing. But there comes a point where the keeping of statistics is useless and contrary to the grain of God's economy. A British statesman (I believe it was Baldwin) once said that there were white lies, fat lies (he actually used an expletive I will not repeat as a Christian) and statistics!

During these seven years of feverish activity and abundance two sons were born in Joseph's family: Manasseh and Ephraim. The name Manasseh means "forgetting." The word comes from the Hebrew verb "Nashah" - to forget. We should not take this forgetting in the usual meaning of the word, as a slip of the mind. Forgetting here stands for a blessed function of the mind. The memory of his suffering, the longing for his father's house had been a haunting memory. For years Joseph had been homesick in the literal sense of the word. God healed him of this memory. Forgetting has nothing to do with not remembering; it means here that the memory no longer hurt.

A book could be written about the psychological significance of this sentence. Joseph had had a difficult and painful youth. There was the, more or less unhealthy, love his father bestowed upon him. He had been a victim of his father's favoritism. He had suffered the hatred and abuse of his brothers. Their rough handling of him and their intention to kill him were probably the least of his suffering. Their utter rejection of him must have hurt him more than anything else. Joseph had never known genuine love and acceptance by those who were important to him. His obvious effort to please people is an indication of this. Now he has become an adult. He is married and has a son. He had known all his life that God had accepted him, but that realization had not been enough to heal all his wounds. Now this healing comes in his life. It is the healing of maturity.

The second son is called Ephraim: "Double fruitfulness." Even if Joseph had remained single and childless we could hardly have said that his life was not fulfilling. But Ephraim becomes the quintessence of fulfillment for him in the land of his suffering. The abundance of Egypt is mirrored in the fruitfulness of Joseph's marriage. He is doubly blessed in Egypt, the land of his suffering. This epitaph of Egypt as "the land of my suffering" is another expression full of meaning. It makes Egypt an image of the world in which we live. We do not belong to this world anymore than Joseph belonged in Egypt. Jesus says in John 17:16 "They are not of the world, even as I am not of it." But God put us here for a purpose. He sent Jesus into this world to save it; He sent Joseph to Egypt to save people and He sends us into the world for the same purpose. But being in the world means suffering. The world recognizes us as foreign elements. If we identify with the Lord we will be ostracized and persecuted. Jesus says that this should be an encouragement for us. In Mat 5:10-12 He says: "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." And in John 16:33 "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

Studying these chapters we have to keep in mind that the famine Joseph prepared for is an image of the real famine. The most revealing words about the meaning of food come from Moses. In Deuteronomy, we read: "He [God] humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD."²⁷¹ Jesus quotes these words to Satan during the temptation He was subjected to in the desert. And He picks up the subject even more relevantly in John's Gospel, where He says: "Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. On him God the Father has placed his seal of approval. I tell you the truth, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. I am

²⁷¹ Deut. 8:3

the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty.”²⁷² The real hunger of man is in his soul. So is the real satisfaction.

Against this background we read: “There was famine in all the other lands, but in the whole land of Egypt there was food. (Vs. 54)

Egypt is a picture of this world. There are two kinds of famine in this world, of which a lack of food for the stomach is the least. When people are starving the giving of an abundance of food all at once can be fatal. The human stomach has forgotten how to digest and when it is called upon to function normally it refuses. The spiritual condition of man is worse. We are cut off from the source of living water and living bread from birth. We are born with a spirit that cannot function properly. We have to be reborn by the Spirit of God even to develop a normal appetite for spiritual food. Because of the immensity of this problem the need is generally not even recognized. Most people in first world countries are much worse off than those living in the third world. There is more hunger on the real level in North America than in Africa.

I am not saying, of course, that we should not attend to people physical needs. The Salvation Army’s approach of soup first and then the Gospel is probably the best. But we have to realize that when Jesus says: “What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?” (Mark 8:36) that this covers the whole realm of affluence. The eternal lostness of overweight people is not any less than of the starving ones.

So Joseph is an image of the One who is the Bread of Life, in that he was the only one who could keep people from dying.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

With this chapter we enter into one of the most moving accounts of human relations in the Bible; probably in the whole of world literature. I can never read this story without deep emotion.

As the story unfolds, we see, first of all, how Jacob sends his sons to Egypt to get food for the starving family. (vs. 1-4) The brothers arrive in Egypt; they are immediately recognized by Joseph but do not recognize him. Joseph accuses them of evil intent, obviously to put them to the test, and puts them in prison. (vs. 5-17) He sends them home with the order to come back with Benjamin, keeping Simeon hostage. (vs. 18-24) On the return trip one of the men discovers that his money was returned, which causes general alarm among all the brothers. (vs. 25-28) They return home, tell their story and Jacob reacts with despair. (vs. 29-38)

Vs. 1-4. Adam Clarke remarks that famines must have been frequent in Canaan. But if we go by the Biblical record we find that almost a century elapses between the one during Abraham’s time and Isaac’s and another century between that and the last one. The one around which this story runs must have been the worst one though. Even Egypt suffered hunger. The cause of the famine must have been a prolonged dry spell that affected most of East Africa and the Middle East.

From ch. 35:6 we understand that Jacob must have sent his sons during the second year of the draught. For two years in a row the fields had not been harvested and the grazing grounds for the cattle must have withered completely, greatly reducing the flocks.

Word about the availability of grain in Egypt probably reached Jacob via travelling salesmen, such as the Ishmaelites who had bought Joseph and sold him in Egypt. Jacob insists that his sons go to Egypt to buy food. There does not seem to have been any question about all of them moving to Egypt, as Abraham did when the famine struck in his time. The size of the family was probably a major factor. We do not know why the brothers hesitated so much to go. At least we get this impression from vs. 1. It could be that the name

Egypt appealed to their guilty conscience. After all it was to Egypt that they had sold their brother. This fact may not have stood vividly before their minds’ eyes, but unconscious drives and restrictions often govern us all. Egypt was a black hole, a place to stay away from.

Jacob does not permit Benjamin to travel with the others. Benjamin had evidently taken Joseph’s place in Jacob’s affection. We do not read that the brothers had developed the same hatred toward him as they had for Joseph. At the time Benjamin must have been at least in his early twenties. The family situation has not changed much over the years. For Jacob there had been only one wife, Rachel and his only sons

²⁷² John 6:27,32,35

where Rachel's sons: Joseph and Benjamin. The rest of the family still suffered neglect. I wonder if Jacob ever knew what he had done to his family.

Vs. 5-17. There is no account of the actual trip to Egypt. The next thing we know is that the ten brothers stand in Joseph's court. Their apprehension has not left them. They had no indication that Joseph would be dead and so they had to count with the possibility of bumping into him somewhere. In their minds eye such an encounter would only be possible in the slums of a city, if Joseph had escaped, or in a place where slaves were kept. The royal palace probably never had occurred to them. In retrospect we have to say that God has the greatest sense of humor of anyone in the universe. But none of Jacob's family would have said so until the last chapter of their lives was written.

So there are the brothers among a large crowd that gathered at Joseph's palace to buy grain. We can hardly suppose that Joseph personally oversaw every sale. It could be coincidence, to use a human concept, that Joseph was present when his brothers arrived; but more likely Joseph had a special place where foreigners would buy and he took personal charge of that phase of the project for security reasons.

Had the brothers mixed with the crowd it would be possible that Joseph would not have recognized them separately, at least not easily. But their own feeling of apprehension kept them together and made them stand out in the crowd. Their bowing down to Joseph was probably a routine, required of everybody who passed through the line. For Joseph it was the first fulfillment of his dream. He probably was not prepared for this and it must have come to him as a profound shock. It wasn't that the Lord had not warned him and told him. But in spite of his knowledge of the events that would come to pass, his brothers' appearance must have come to him as the Lord's return will to us: We know He is coming, we think we are ready for His return and we will be shocked out of our wits. John, who knew Jesus more intimately than anybody else, says: "When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead." (Rev. 1:17)

Our first impression of Joseph's attitude toward his brothers is that he wants to take revenge. But the moments of uncontrollable emotions and his testimony after Jacob's death speak against this. Ch. 50:19-21 wraps up his attitude: "But Joseph said to them, [his brothers] 'Do not be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, do not be afraid. I will provide for you and your children.' And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them." It would obviously have been impossible for Joseph to receive his brothers, who wanted to kill him when he saw them last, without putting them to the test. The fragile defenses of Egypt, which laid it open to any army for attack required a watchful attitude. It would have been very easy indeed for any spies to mix with the crowd of buyers of grain. That situation provided Joseph with a very natural cover for the tests he made his brothers pass through.

Vs. 7 states very clearly that Joseph pretends to accuse his brothers. He knew they were no spies, but he could not be sure that they were no longer murderers. Evidently his heart went out to them and he wanted to save them and their families. Vs. 18 and 19 testify to this desire. The underlying principle is that there can be no salvation without confession. Even as Joseph could not save his brothers from starvation in the condition in which they were, Jesus cannot save us unless we recognize that it was for our sins He died on the cross.

The brothers' denial by stating that they are all sons of the same family is also a natural reaction. Spies usually do not come as a family. But the confession that they "are the sons of one man" gives Joseph a handle on them. He pretends he needs proof of their claim, which could be given by producing their youngest brother, Benjamin. Before coming to this point, Joseph gives his brother a taste of what it means to fear for your life and to be thrown in prison. He lets them endure for only three days what he had to suffer for about thirteen years. The treatment proves to be very effective. Probably for the first time in their lives, they come under conviction of sin.

The punishment for spying was evidently death. It seems that the words of vs. 18 bear this out: "On the third day, Joseph said to them, 'Do this and you will live, for I fear God'" "So the brothers had all reason to believe that this could be the end for the ten of them. There is nothing so stimulating to make up the balance of our lives and see our sins for what they are as the possibility of death. Death can make crooks into honest men.

When the brothers give account of the composition of their family they say: "Your servants were twelve brothers, the sons of one man, who lives in the land of Canaan. The youngest is now with our father, and one is no more." (vs. 13) The expression "one is no more" must have struck Joseph particularly. The brothers did not want to say that Joseph was dead. They would have had no qualms about killing their brother, but they did not want to lie about it. We saw their "scruples" when they reported the fact of Joseph's disappearance to Jacob. They let Jacob draw the conclusion that Joseph was dead. It is

different when you try to keep the crime a secret from the victim. But they did not know they were talking to Joseph. Their attitude shows the essence of sin. Adam and Eve tried to hide from the omniscient God and people who sin have tried to do so ever since. Sin dulls our perception of reality.

Commentators have stumbled over Joseph's oath "As surely as Pharaoh lives," or as the KJV and RSV put it "By the life of Pharaoh." It is hard to determine from this distance if Joseph's words really constituted an oath. If Joseph considered Pharaoh to be a deity, the words would have a binding meaning. But we have no proof that Joseph ever abandoned his belief in God as the Supreme Being. It is unlikely that Joseph believed that Pharaoh would not die. The words may have been a common expression in Egypt, that would have aroused nobody's attention. It is also true that three days later Joseph reversed his decision based on his "oath" and let his brothers go home, with the exception of Simeon. Would Joseph have used the oath ironically? In Shakespeare's play "As you like it" the fool Touchstone talks about a knight who swore by his honor. What he said proved to be untrue, but according to Touchstone the knight was not "forsworn," because he had sworn by something he did not have!

Whether Joseph pretended that he wanted to keep all his brothers in prison, except one who was to fetch Benjamin, or whether he changed his mind three days later is not clear. He may have intended all the time to let them go back, but not without a taste of prison-life.

Vs. 18-20 say: "On the third day, Joseph said to them, 'Do this and you will live, for I fear God: If you are honest men, let one of your brothers stay here in prison, while the rest of you go and take grain back for your starving households. But you must bring your youngest brother to me, so that your words may be verified and that you may not die.' This they proceeded to do." It may be going too far to say that, in spending three days in prison, the brothers not only identified with Joseph in his suffering, but also with Christ. There could not be any possibility of the brothers seeing it that way, but they may have reflected upon this from glory. The Holy Spirit deals with us in strange ways.

The prison experience and Joseph's verdict bring about the first indication of conviction of sin in the lives of these men. We should not forget that Joseph's brothers were a bunch of criminals. They had murdered, fornicating, and committed incest. They had lied to their father and hated. They performed cruelty on animals. These were not kind and tenderhearted shepherds. They considered themselves kings, responsible to no one. They lived under God's heaven, but did not acknowledge God. This is the first time we read that there was any feeling of guilt. Soon they will start to recognize that God has something to do with this.

From their conversation we gather that they supposed Joseph to be dead. At least Reuben thinks so. He distances himself from the crime the others committed with the words: "Did not I tell you not to sin against the boy? But you wouldn't listen! Now we must give an accounting for his blood." (Vs. 22) Thinking they can talk freely, because nobody understands their language, they are open about their fears and guilt feelings. People who are multilingual should be careful about what they say in a language they think nobody understands. The thought probably never occurred to the brothers that Joseph's interpreter would understand. He may have been a slave, who was too low to be considered by them. The mistakes they made in talking freely indicate the tension they found themselves under. Their conscience started bothering them and so they forgot to take the customary precautions. Their masks slipped.

Vs. 24 tells us that Joseph was overcome by emotion at this point. He wept. Joseph's tears were an expression of his love for his brothers. This does not prevent him from maintaining his attitude of harshness toward them. He had no choice. Had Joseph at this point revealed his identity to his brothers there would have been no healing in their relationship. Joseph's dilemma is God's dilemma between His love and His righteousness. If forgiveness is not on the basis of righteousness then there is no healing. When on the third day Joseph said to his brothers "I fear God" he proved the truth of his confession by showing the principles that governed his behavior.

It was not too difficult to single out Simeon as hostage; he was responsible for the massacre at Shechem. There is no indication that Simeon was treated roughly. His being bound publicly was for his brother's benefit.

When the brothers leave to return home they have no idea that they are twice as rich as when they came. They may have received as much as a full year's supply for their whole family, a total of sixty-seven souls, according to Ch. 46:27. ("With the two sons who had been born to Joseph in Egypt, the members of Jacob's family, which went to Egypt, were seventy in all.") On top of this their money had been returned to them.

For some strange reason the discovery of the money hits them harder than their other experiences, including their fear of death. For the first time they suspect that God may have something to do with this. The return of the money was an act of kindness on Joseph's part. Acts of kindness and expression of love are usually more effective in opening people's hearts and in bringing about conviction of sin, than anything else. Some people repent of their sins because they do not want to go to hell, but more often people are drawn to the Lord because of the love demonstrated by Christians.

Up to this point the brothers may have thought, or hoped that their experiences in Egypt were a complex of coincidences, vaguely relating them to their guilt about the crime they committed with Joseph. But the return of the money makes them realize that "the Hound of Heaven" is on their heels. There is no logical explanation for the return of the money. They are sure, however, that in Egypt they will be accused of stealing it. It is one thing to be accused for crimes you have committed, like the killing of a brother, but to be accused of stealing money that you did not steal is worse. God is piling it up on them.

When they arrive home they tell the whole story to their father, without the part of their guilt feelings, that is. They report to Jacob that they did not have a nice reception by the Egyptian authorities. They were accused of spying, which would carry the death penalty. They want Jacob to realize that they barely escaped. They understand that it will be almost impossible to meet Joseph's demand that next time they bring Benjamin. Jacob would never let his youngest son go. In this supposition they were right. They explain to Jacob that, if ever he wants to see Simeon again, he will have to let Benjamin go with them.

Before we are told about Jacob's reaction, we see the brothers find their money when they open their sacks. Supposedly Jacob is present when this happens. Two words are used to describe the travel gear of the brothers. One is bags and the other sack. The bags were the receptacles containing the large quantity of grain they carried home and the sack was the luggage they used during the trip. We understand that only one of the brothers found his money during the home journey, because it was laying on top. The others did not discover it until they got home and emptied everything. The same eerie feeling of facing an inexplicable phenomena comes over all of them, Jacob included. This reeks of magic. They know they paid, so how does the money show up again?

The supernatural touch of the experience does not face Jacob. He categorically accuses his sons. It is all their fault. "You have deprived me of my children," he says, not knowing that there is more truths in his words than he would be able to account for. It is hardly likely that Jacob would have suspected his sons of doing away with Joseph. But he could not honestly accuse them of being guilty of Simeon's disappearance. There was no reason to suppose that Simeon had been executed.

Jacob's problem is his ego. He may have had a major spiritual experience at Peniel, but the world still turns around him. He loved Rachel to the neglect of everybody else, then he showered his affection upon Joseph to the detriment of the rest of his family. Now he has only one pet left: Benjamin. He is not going to give him up, not because of Benjamin, but for his own sake. Everything is against Jacob, the world and God and the family.

Reuben's offer in vs. 37 sounds strange to us. We read: "Then Reuben said to his father, 'You may put both of my sons to death if I do not bring him back to you. Entrust him to my care, and I will bring him back.'" We if take these words literally they make no sense. The picture of Jacob killing two of his own grand children to compensate for the loss of Benjamin is ridiculous. Obviously Reuben did not mean it this way. His words are meant to be an absolute guarantee for Benjamin's safety. Since it would have been impossible for Jacob to kill Reuben's children, it would have been impossible for Reuben not to return Benjamin to his father. Since his children were more precious to him than his own life, he offers himself to Jacob as Benjamin's surety.

But Jacob is not moved. There are not many issues on which Jacob put his foot down during his life, but his affection for Benjamin is one. We can't deny that Jacob suffered a lot during his life. Even if some of the suffering was of his own making, it was suffering. We can understand that Jacob's sons pitied their father. He was an old man, grieving the death of his son. But if the old man indicates that he wants to be pitied, then it is much harder to bestow pity upon him. And Jacob plays this game. He says: "Look at me, pity me. I am old and the protective cocoon I had woven around myself is peeled away from me!" There is no indication, at least not at this point, that Jacob puts all the factors on the scale; the survival of his sons and their family on the one side and his own feelings on the other. A few months later when hunger makes his stomach cramp, he changes his mind, but not now. It is not a very pretty picture.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

This chapter can be easily divided into two parts: vs. 1-14 where Jacob sends his sons again to Egypt and the discussion that is part of the preparation of the trip; vs. 15-34 where the brothers meet Joseph and are received at his personal residence.

Since the second trip took place during the second year of the famine, according to ch. 45:6, we may presume that the first trip took place some time during the first year of the famine; probably toward the end of it. How much time elapsed between the two trips is hard to determine. Vs. 2 says that all the grain brought from Egypt was finished. It would be reasonable to suppose that the brothers had tried to buy enough grain to last them till the next harvest.

Jacob tries to persuade his sons to go to Egypt without Benjamin, thus circumventing the problem. But his sons know better than to present themselves before the ruler of Egypt without him. They are convinced that this will be understood to be a confirmation of the accusation that they are spies. It could cost them their lives. Probably Jacob did not think that far. He would not have come to the place where he would sacrifice the lives of his ten sons in order to save Benjamin.

For us, who know the actual situation, it may be hard to put ourselves in the skin of those who were involved in the events and who did not know. It looked so terrible and it actually was so glorious. There is a compelling parallel between their situation and ours. Here we are going through life on earth, suffering, crying, fearing, despairing, most of the time without any notion that God is leading us to glory through Jesus Christ.

The brothers will never have given it a thought that the man on the throne could be Joseph. Their guilt would have prevented them from thinking this. What should have been a glorious discovery became their greatest embarrassment, because this was their brother they had been trying to kill. At the appearance of Jesus Christ, we read that the people on earth will have a similar reaction. The prophet Zacharia paints the picture for us, that is taken up by the Apostle John in the book of Revelation. "And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son." (Zach. 12:10) "Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen." (Rev. 1:7) If only we knew the facts life on earth would be different. But we can know them! The brothers could not, but we can and if guilt prevents us from hoping we may receive forgiveness and cleansing.

Finally, it is Judah who sways his father and convinces him that there is no alternative but to send Benjamin. Judah is less dramatic and overbearing than Reuben was, who offered the lives of his two sons. Judah gives himself as surety to his father. The fact that the family was literally starving also helped Jacob to decide. Jacob starts to fuss about some details of gifts that should be taken to mellow the authorities in Egypt, but the important thing is his act of surrender. He says he is ready to receive the final blow. We read in vs. 14 that he says: "And may God Almighty grant you mercy before the man so that he will let your other brother and Benjamin come back with you. As for me, if I am bereaved, I am bereaved." The blow never comes. It is when Jacob surrenders Benjamin, in the same way as Abraham surrendered Isaac, that he receives back not only Benjamin and Simeon, but Joseph too. The only way to keep our children is to surrender them to the Lord. The fast way to lose them is to want to keep them for ourselves.

Jacob kept some of his children as his pets. Those children were all he had. The difference between Jacob and Abraham was that Abraham had the Lord, so he could afford to give up everything. If we have everything, except the Lord, we are poor indeed. Jacob may have had several supernatural experiences and he confessed his sin in his wrestling with the angel at Peniel, but he did not walk intimately with God on a daily basis. If he had the world would not have turned about him the way we see it did. The fact that God calls us and that He executes His plan through our lives does not automatically make us friends of God. Only our surrender does.

In vs. 15-34 we find the brothers in Egypt with their money and "a little balm and a little honey, some spices and myrrh, some pistachio nuts and almonds," they present themselves before Joseph. It seems that at this point they do not talk to Joseph personally, but they are taken to his house, since Joseph has given orders to prepare a feast for them. Thinking that they are still under suspicion they are frightened. Their first impression is that they will be taken into custody on the accusation that they stole money during their first trip, so they hasten to explain the situation to Joseph's steward.

The steward's reply in vs. 23 does not solve the mystery for them. We read: "'It's all right,' he said. 'Do not be afraid. Your God, the God of your father, has given you treasure in your sacks; I received your silver.' then he brought Simeon out to them." Whether this man was involved in the plot and personally

returned the money to them, or whether Joseph paid for his brothers from his own pocket and told one the other servants to put the money in the bag, we do not know. The man may have been lying in saying that he received their silver, but he may also have spoken the truth.

In Joseph's house they receive VIP treatment. The fact that Simeon joined them at this point must have alleviated their fears. They are given the impression of being exonerated. All charges against them are evidently dropped. They will have taken their meal with Joseph as some kind of apology offered for the initial false accusation. When Joseph arrives, the comedy continues. He must have continued to use an interpreter in speaking to them. They present their presents, bow down, thus fulfilling once again the dream and they answer his questions about the family. Joseph is overcome by emotion when he sees his brother Benjamin and he has to withdraw to weep in the solitude of his room. Whether the brothers noticed any of this emotion we do not know. They may have answered his question from their prostrated position, which would have prevented them from seeing Joseph's reactions. Reunions are sometimes just as hard to deal with as separations.

In the serving of the meal we are given some interesting information about the relationship between the Egyptians and the Hebrews. Racial tensions ran high. If the assumption we mentioned earlier, that Joseph's rise to power took place during the period the Hyksos reigned in Egypt, is correct, it would explain why the two groups did not mix. Besides the political tension there must have been a religious one. The cow was probably revered as a divine incarnation and eating of beef by Hebrews must have been a detestable practice to the Egyptians. The fact that the Israelites made a golden calf when they gathered at the foot of Mount Sinai, would be an indication that such was the case. Joseph could have been served separately on the basis of his position as ruler of Egypt and the brothers may not have recognized him as a Hebrew.

What amazes the brothers most is the fact that they are seated at the table in the order of their age: Reuben at one end and Benjamin at the other. This amazes them because it could hardly be a coincidence. It is also puzzling that Joseph honors Benjamin by giving him the largest portion. Evidently one did not serve oneself at the table. Archeology has confirmed that Egyptians did not recline at the table like the Jews later did, but actually sat down.

The result of the gathering is that everybody relaxes. The meal turns into a feast. The good food and, probably even more the good wine, helped to create an atmosphere of joy. The NIV puts the relaxation clearly on account of the drinks. We read: "So they feasted and drank freely with him." (vs. 34) The KJV says: "And they drank, and were merry with him." The brothers celebrate the fact that all charges against them are dropped, but Joseph celebrates the reunion. Yet the moment to reveal himself has not yet come.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

In this chapter Joseph puts his brothers to the last test. Evidently he felt not completely convinced yet that they had repented of their sin. We could paraphrase Heb. 9:22 - "And without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness," as "Without repentance there is no revelation." Even as Joseph could not make himself known to his brothers without the assurance that they had had a change of heart, so Jesus Christ cannot reveal Himself to us unless we repent of our sins.

Joseph's final test is very simple, but clever. He wants to know what his brothers' reaction would be if Benjamin would be prevented from returning with them. In order to perform this test he orders his silver cup to be hidden in Benjamin's grain bag. Commentaries make quite a bit of this silver cup. It was not a regular drinking cup, but a larger size goblet used for divination. *The Pulpit Commentary* quotes a Bible scholar, Kalisch, as follows: "Small pieces of gold or silver, together with precious stones, marked with strange figures and signs, were thrown into the vessel; the latter was then supposed to give the answer either by intelligible words, or by pointing to some of the characters on the precious stones, or in some other more mysterious manner. Sometimes the goblet was filled with pure water, upon which the sun was allowed to play; and the figures which were thus formed, or which a lively imagination fancied it saw, were interpreted as the desired omen."

Although this kind of divination was widely practiced in ancient times (and it experiences a revival in our time), there is no indication that Joseph actually indulged in it. We have learned to regard the practice as being linked to demons and as such incompatible with faith in God. Although the boundaries between light and darkness may have been less clearly drawn in ancient Egypt it seems doubtful that Joseph, who knew YHWH and who was so obviously used by God, would have been able to live in both spiritual realms at the same time. This does not mean that he would not be able to use the goblet as a

pretext in dealing with his brothers. It is obvious that they knew what the vessel stood for and what the consequences would be for anyone who would try to steal such a thing.

So Joseph gives orders, first of all, to return all the money to the brothers, as was done the first time and then to put the silver goblet in Benjamin's bag. The brothers have barely left the city when Joseph's steward catches up with them and accuses them of stealing in the worst way possible. Not only did they steal money, but also an object of strategic and spiritual value. The brothers protest their innocence, saying that such an act would be punishable by death. The fact that they say this indicates that they are absolutely sure that the accusation is a mistake.

The steward seems to agree with the verdict they pronounce upon themselves, but he misquotes them on purpose. In vs. 10 we read: "'Very well, then,' he said, 'let it be as you say. Whoever is found to have it will become my slave; the rest of you will be free from blame.'" He obviously understands that Joseph's intent was to frame Benjamin, although he cannot have guessed the reason. The man only obeyed orders. He knows exactly where to look, since he hid the goblet himself in Benjamin's bag, but in order to hide the fact he goes through the motions of an elaborate search, finally discovering the stolen object.

The brothers are crushed. It is not clear whether they believe they are framed, or whether they think Benjamin actually stole the cup. They never make any attempt to clear themselves before Joseph. Joseph is still in the house, waiting for them. He receives them with the assurance that if they thought that his supernatural powers would cease, because the goblet was gone, they were wrong. He could still find out, by divination, who had stolen the cup.

It may be hard for us to get a clear picture of Joseph's position in Egypt and of the divine powers that were attributed to him. People had projected an image of Joseph that had little to do with reality. Joseph had, what we would now call, the gift of prophecy. Twice God had enabled him to explain dreams. This has given him the reputation of having the spirit of a god, who was more powerful than the spirit that ruled Egypt. There is no doubt in my mind that the Egyptians perceived the famine and the years of abundance that preceded it in the framework of a spiritual struggle in which Joseph had taken a victorious lead. We should not look at Joseph with our western eyes and our worldview in which there is no place for a spiritual power struggle.

Whether Joseph ever did anything to clear himself of the aureole that people had placed upon him, we do not know. In the account Moses gives of him, we see him as a rather levelheaded person, who has genuine emotions and who does some clear thinking. We like to think that Joseph just used the concept of magic powers in order to achieve his purpose, not necessarily the powers themselves; but we cannot be sure. Anyhow, before his brothers Joseph presents himself as the people see him: greater than life.

At this point Judah takes the lead. He protests their innocence, but at the same time he speaks about their guilt. In vs. 16 he says: "'What can we say to my lord?' Judah replied. 'What can we say? How can we prove our innocence? God has uncovered your servants' guilt. We are now my lord's slaves; we ourselves and the one who was found to have the cup.'" What he is actually saying is: "We haven't done this, but we are guilty of something else. We did not steal the goblet, but we killed our brother." He is quite sure that Joseph would not understand this. Evidently he says it for the benefit of his brothers; so they would accept this conviction as God's punishment for their real guilt.

But Joseph does understand! He knows how guilty they are. Having suffered because of it, he knows their guilt better than they do themselves. The one who has suffered for our sins knows more about our sins than we do ourselves. We do not have to tell Jesus how sinful we are. He is telling us.

Joseph rejects the suggestion that all of them would become his slaves. He is only after Benjamin. Will his brothers sell Benjamin into slavery, as they sold him? That is what he has to know before he can reveal his identity to his brothers.

It has been said that Judah's speech is one of the most beautiful examples in the whole Bible of ex tempore eloquence. We do not know how his words have come down to us through history. Moses, who wrote them down for us, was not present at the occasion. It is doubtful that Judah himself wrote down later what he said at the spur of the moment. The most likely person, who was the most deeply affected by it, was Joseph. He probably dictated the words later to one of the scribes and thus preserved them for posterity.

The brothers were prostrated on the ground before Joseph. At this point Judah must have gotten up and stood before Joseph's seat. Judah starts out by covering the ground that was covered during the first meeting the brothers had with Joseph. There is no reason to believe that Judah adds things that were not said during the first conversation. Chapter 42:13 probably gives an abbreviated version of a longer dialogue. We do not read there that Joseph asked questions regarding the family; only that the brothers offer the information to prove that they are not a random group of spies, but one single family. But it is very likely

that Joseph tried to hear as much about his father and his own brother as he could and that he asked several questions regarding them.

Joseph learns, what he had not heard before, that Jacob had been pouring out the same affection upon Benjamin as he had upon Joseph before. The difference between Jacob's relation to Benjamin and to Joseph was that he had grown more possessive over the years. Benjamin was not allowed to leave his father. He hears about the struggle Jacob must have gone through in letting Benjamin go. He realizes how severe the hunger in Canaan must be for his father to be forced into this decision. He also learns for the first time how the brothers had accounted for Joseph's disappearance. He knows that their brothers never cleared their consciences of their guilt. All this is passed on to Joseph slowly, word for word, through an interpreter.

Judah paints in vivid colors what will happen to Jacob if Benjamin does not return. The most important part of Judah's speech is found in vs.32-34. Where he says: "Your servant guaranteed the boy's safety to my father. I said, 'If I do not bring him back to you, I will bear the blame before you, my father, all my life!' Now then, please let your servant remain here as my lord's slave in place of the boy, and let the boy return with his brothers. How can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? No! Do not let me see the misery that would come upon my father." Joseph understands clearly that, if Judah offers his life in the place of his brother Benjamin, a profound change has taken place in his heart. It was probably true that Judah did not have the same sadistic disposition as his brothers Simeon and Levi. There are indications that his conscience was more bothered by what they had done to Joseph than the other brothers.' The fact that he moved away from the group and lived by himself for a while, as we read in chapter 38, was probably prompted by his feeling of guilt. But it had been Judah who had suggested to sell Joseph to the Midianite merchants. Now he stands before Joseph, willing to give his life for his brother Benjamin. We do not need much imagination to feel the atmosphere of deep emotion that was created by Judah's words. In his attitude Judah portrays his grand son, who would later give His life for others and thus demonstrate God's love for this world. "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us." (I John 3:16)

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

For me this chapter is the emotional highlight of the whole Old Testament. It is hard to read this drama with dry eyes. The pent-up emotions in Joseph's heart have reached the point where he cannot contain himself any longer. The bung of the vessels bursts and the content squirts out with force. Life at the court with its pomp and etiquette call for restraint and self control. This is no longer possible. So Joseph dismisses all the servants and guards and whoever usually surrounds him. He needs intimacy in order to reveal himself to his brothers.

Then he bursts out in tears. It is hard to imagine what the brothers' first reaction to this outburst was. Kings and presidents are not supposed to burst out in tears. The fact is reported to Pharaoh's palace. The NIV says: "And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him, and Pharaoh's household heard about it." Most commentators agree that this probably does not mean that Joseph's residence was so close to the royal palace that his voice could be heard. Probably the fact that Joseph cried for unknown reasons was reported. The KJV and RSV are probably more correct. KJV reads: "And he wept aloud: and the Egyptians and the house of Pharaoh heard."

Not only does Joseph lose control over his tears, he also is temporarily unable to screen his words. "I am Joseph! Is my father still living?" is what comes out of his very heart. "I am Joseph!" is clear; he reveals his identity to his brothers, but why ask if his father is still alive? There was no reason to doubt that the brothers had told the truth about Jacob. If Jacob would have been dead, Judah's moving speech would have been empty rhetoric. Joseph does not really ask for information, but at the height of his outburst he says: "I want my Daddy!" Here is a full-grown man, who has never severed his emotional bonds with his father. But then who has? Everybody needs the assurance of loving protection that only a father can give to his child. We need that from birth to adolescence, but we never outgrow it. Many people never experience the warmth of motherly love that makes them understand that they are loved. Many also grow up without the safe feeling of having a strong father who loves and guards and answers to our feeling of insecurity and uncertainty. Once we have grown into adulthood those lacks take their revenge upon us. We grow up without understanding what is lacking, but our subconscious knows and we go through life

without the equilibrium of a healthy youth in which we received the right signals from our parents. This emotional lack contributes to a lack of spiritual understanding. Because it is through what our parents tell us, I am not talking about words but attitudes, that we understand who God is.

God has ordained that man, when he is born into this world, learns from the warmth of his mother's love and from the strength of his father's what it means that God loves him. The love our parents demonstrate to us is an image of a spiritual reality. If we do not get those pictures straight when we grow up we experience great difficulty in realizing God's love for us.

The extreme emotional pressure Joseph experienced when he revealed himself to his brothers made him say words that his reason could not account for. But he expressed very precisely what had been hidden for years under the surface of his consciousness.

If we try to probe the depths of Joseph's feelings at this moment, what about the emotions of the brothers? They had never been shocked like this before. The very foundations of their lives were shaken. They had lived their whole life in the shadow world of unreality which sin has created for us. They had followed their sinful desires and had made themselves guilty by their acts of cruelty and deceit. They had taken precautions to cover up this guilt and they had thought themselves rather successful in this effort. Now, all of a sudden, this thin veil is rent and they find themselves in the glorious light of reality.

In C. S. Lewis' book *Perelandra* the hero, Dr. Ransom, encounters a good spiritual being, and eledil, the equivalent of an angel. He realizes that he does not really like the "good" of the angel. Joseph's brothers come out of their darkness into God's glorious light and they do not enjoy it; they are terrified. If we consider Joseph's experience to be the picture of a traumatic spiritual experience of sanctification, we could look upon the brothers' experience as a picture of an even more traumatic conversion. They go from darkness into light, from death into life, from guilt into forgiveness and they are crushed. Here is Joseph, not dead but alive. They did not kill him. He forgives them and accepts them. If it is hard to be born into this world, (no baby enters life without crying), how much more difficult it is to be born again!

The only event that will surpass the story of this chapter is the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. Those who crucified Him will see Him alive. They will cry in anguish, they will prefer to be crushed by falling rocks than to face the light of God and Jesus' forgiveness. "Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?'" (Rev. 6:15-17)

The brothers were not facing the wrath of Joseph, but his love and forgiveness. Their first reaction must have been, though, the thought that Joseph would revenge himself upon them. He had them in his power, nothing would keep him from crushing them. But, as it turns out revenge is far from Joseph's mind. His tears are tears of love.

Grace is so hard to understand. When it first dawned on me that the Lord wanted to enter my life, I was sure He would embarrass me by exposing the filth I knew was inside me. When He did enter, He made clear to me that He was not even inclined to talk about my guilt, since my sins had been done away with at the cross. When the joy of forgiveness broke through, it was an experience beyond my wildest imagination.

The brothers never quite came to grips with the forgiveness of their sins. This is clear from the words they address to Joseph after Jacob's death. We read this in chapter 50:15-21. (In vs.15 we read: "When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, 'What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?'"") The same feeling of anguish will be present when Jesus returns. In quoting Zecharia 12:10 ("And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son,") John says in Rev. 1:7 - "Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen." How much there is to be feared from "the wrath of the Lamb" I do not know. Most of the fear will come from a lack of understanding of God's grace. And when people do not see that their sins can be forgiven, they will not turn to God and repent. After all, who would want to give himself up to be punished? There will be a time, of course, when repentance will no longer be an option. That may be the case when Jesus returns.

Another mystery that we all have a hard time understanding is the fact that God uses our sins to the advancement of His kingdom. It was easy for Joseph to say to his brothers: "And now, do not be distressed

and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you” (vs. 5), they still knew themselves to be guilty to the highest degree. It is hard to accept God’s forgiveness, it is even more difficult to forgive one’s self. Forgiving one’s self means living with absolute moral failure. The only reason for our rehabilitation before God is Jesus Christ. That leaves us, as persons, as moral outcasts. We cannot receive pardon and maintain our human pride in ourselves. The only boasting we are allowed to do is boasting in the Lord.

But, how can God use our sin in the advancement of our kingdom? This must be the lesson Jesus teaches us in the parable in Matt.13:33 of the woman who mixes yeast in her dough: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough.” Of course, sin can only be used for glory when it has been confessed and it is forgiven. But how and why God uses it, I do not understand.

We suppose, on the basis of vs. 4 that the brothers were still lying prostrate before Joseph. He has to tell them to get up and come closer. They do so because they obey the order; not because the immensity of the revelation is wearing off. They still are unable to open their mouths, even after Joseph’s repeated declaration of his identity. There could have been no doubt about the truth of Joseph’s statement. He spoke their language and he knew the details of their dark secret. There may also have been some familiar but unidentifiable features in Joseph about which the brothers had been puzzled, but which they could not place. None of the brothers would have suspected that this viceroy was their brother. If any of them would at one point during any of the two trips have said: “I wonder if we’ll bump into Joseph!” this would have been treated as a bad joke.

Joseph paints with a few words the severity of the famine and the prognosis on the basis of God’s revelation. We do not read that he explains in detail how he received this knowledge, but undoubtedly at some point he will have given them the whole story, including the dreams. He does not have to prove to them that he has become a powerful person in the Egyptian government. They themselves had experienced his power over them.

It sounds strange, though, that he calls himself a “father to Pharaoh.” This is generally interpreted as “confidential friend and counselor,” according to *The Pulpit Commentary*. It could also be that Joseph, in spite of his youth, was older than Pharaoh. He must have been about thirty-nine at this time. The unearthing of the tomb of Tut Anc Ammon produced a mummy of the Pharaoh who died as a teenager.

The land of Goshen to which Joseph refers in vs. 10 was, according to *The Pulpit Commentary* “a region on the east of the Pelusiac branch of the Nile, extending as far as the wilderness of Arabia, a land of pastures, exceedingly fertile, styled also the land of Rameses, and including the cities Pithon and Rameses, and probably also On, or Heliopolis.” This was the only part of Egypt that did receive regular rains, being situated close to the coast of the Gulf of Accaba. It was not dependent upon the flooding of the Nile.

Then he gives instructions to go back to Canaan and bring back Jacob and their families. It is not clear whether Joseph’s words are given in chronological order. I suppose that the following outburst of emotions followed close upon the first one. It would seem strange that Joseph would unfold this well thought out plan before hugging Benjamin and his other brothers. But sometimes it is hard to know what to say in moments of extreme emotional stress. Joseph must have rehearsed these words over and over again before the time of his revelation to his brothers had come.

Vs. 14 tells us: “Then he threw his arms around his brother Benjamin and wept, and Benjamin embraced him, weeping.” This scene must be a picture of the day of resurrection. We will throw our arms around our departed loved ones and we will shed an abundance of healing tears because the time of separation is over. These tears will mix with those that flow as a release of the pent-up emotions of the years of living on earth and God Himself will wipe them away, according to Rev. 7:17 and 21:4.

“And he kissed all his brothers and wept over them. Afterward his brothers talked with him.” (vs. 15). How long afterward? The verse makes a distinction between the way Joseph embraces Benjamin and the way he weeps “over” his brothers. Joseph is deeply moved by the scene of his brothers trying to digest the realization of their guilt and Joseph’s pardon. It must have been a pathetic sight: grown men drawing the balance of their lives and coming up with a huge deficit, which they are unable to pay and which is wiped clean before their eyes. Joseph weeps over their struggle. But finally they are able to talk with him.

Word of the brothers’ arrival reaches Pharaoh, who gives official sanction to Joseph’s promise to his family. Probably Joseph himself sent word to the palace, or appeared in person before Pharaoh. Anyhow, Joseph’s promise is turned into an official government order. Chariots are provided for the emigration of

Jacob and his family to Egypt. The brothers had come as starving beggars, they return triumphantly with the most modern vehicles of their time. They are fulfilling God's plan with the world, but they did not know that.

For the brothers and their families the move to Egypt meant salvation from starvation. For the future generations it would mean centuries of slavery. Even if the brothers would have been able to look into the future they would have been forced to move to Egypt, since survival in Canaan was impossible at that moment. They could have known more about the future than they cared to. God's prophecy given to Abraham must have been common knowledge since Moses knew about it four hundred years later. In Ch. 15:13,14 we read: "Then the LORD said to him, 'Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions.'" This prophecy may never have come to their minds. Joseph's brothers do not give the impression of people living by the Word of God. Jacob was obviously aware of the prophetic word. We gather this from the first few verses in the next chapter. He went to Egypt with fear and God had to reassure him that it was alright.

After the famine was over the family would have had to option to return to Canaan. Evidently life in Goshen was to push to give this serious consideration. It was Canaan God had promised them and they religiously arranged for their burials to be done there, but life was too good and too easy in Egypt to give up. "Après nous le deluge!" (The flood will come after we are dead).

As they set out for Canaan to fetch Jacob and their families they are loaded with food and gifts. There was no need to carry food for one year, but they got enough for the journey back and forth and probably more. There were also "the best things of Egypt," a special gift for Jacob, which Adam Clarke interprets to be "some sort of delicacy." The brothers are all outfitted with new clothing and Benjamin receives a whole wardrobe, which may have included "a coat of many colors." Also Benjamin is given three hundred pieces of silver. The Berkley Bible converts this into "two hundred dollars worth of silver." In our time and age this would be a pittance, but in the olden days, before the gold standard was dropped and inflation hit our planet that must have been a sizable gift. It was ten times more than the money the brothers had received when they sold Joseph.

Vs. 24 adds an interesting note: "Then he sent his brothers away, and as they were leaving he said to them, 'Do not quarrel on the way!'" These words may have been said in jest, but truth can be very effectively communicated in a joking manner. Joseph knew the relationship his brothers had with one another. They were a rough bunch, which was more tied together by their common hatred than by their love for one another. They had mellowed over the years; they had come under conviction of sin, and they had received forgiveness. This had to be translated into a new fellowship with one another. The resurrection of Joseph from the dead, if we may use this image, should have the same effect upon them and their relationships as Jesus' resurrection has for us and visa versa.

Then they arrive home and they tell Jacob the news. What did they tell him? This part of the story remains hidden from us. Did they confess their crime or did the skeleton remain in the closet? I have an inkling that Jacob never heard the full story. We should try to imagine the magnitude of Jacob's emotions. For about fifteen years he had lived with the tragedy of the loss of his son. Joseph was not dead. Jacob mourned because of a lie, but this did not make any difference in his mourning. Then, all of a sudden, he is told that Joseph is not dead; not just alive, but gloriously alive as ruler of Egypt.

It is impossible not to pause here and draw a comparison between the death of Joseph and the death of Christ. The difference is obvious: Joseph never died; he was only thought to be dead. Christ died in reality. But as far as living is concerned the parallel is striking. The fact that Joseph was not dead made all the difference in Jacob's life, as well as in the brothers' lives. The least part of the glory of it for Jacob was that he would not die of starvation. The greatest was that he had his son back. It did mean provision for his old age, but that was peripheral. In the center stood the fact that, what had been the deepest wound in his soul, the great tragedy of his life, was healed.

Yet, this was not the way Jacob experienced it initially. When his sons tell him the news that Joseph is alive, Jacob does not react emotionally. We read in vs. 26 "They told him, 'Joseph is still alive! In fact, he is ruler of all Egypt.' Jacob was stunned; he did not believe them." The KJV and RSV say: "His heart fainted." This gives us the wrong impression. A physical fainting would have meant that the message got through to Jacob and overwhelmed him to the point where he lost consciousness. *The Pulpit Commentary* says: "literally, grew chill, the primary idea of the root being that of rigidity through coldness." The Dutch translates it with "his heart remained cold." ("zijn hart bleef er koud onder.") There was no normal reaction because there was no hope left in his heart. Hope and life go together.

Those who give up hope have given up life. Jacob needed some kind of resurrection himself to be able to react normally again. His soul did not only need healing, it needed reviving. In the resurrection there is hope even for people whose souls have died in this life.

The discovery of the resurrection of Jesus Christ often has the same effect upon people. Wherever the Gospel is preached, the resurrection of Christ is mentioned. But not many people take this seriously or apply it to their lives. When the truth of the fact that Christ conquered death, not only for Himself but also for us, penetrates into a human heart it has a revolutionary effect. It turns lives around and brings dead souls back to life.

Finally, Jacob is convinced by the facts. Hearing Joseph's word repeated, they sound like things Joseph would have said, and seeing the carts convinces Jacob. Again, the brothers may not have repeated everything Joseph said. Especially the words "I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt!" will have been omitted. But Jacob has enough proof to set out for Egypt. If nothing else convinced him, the delicacies Joseph had sent for him would. Joseph knew what Jacob liked. Jacob's experience was similar to Thomas's when he was invited to touch the marks of the nails in Jesus' hands and the scar of the spear in His side. And here we may quote Jesus' words at that occasion: "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." (John 20:29)

But Jacob does not leave without mentioning once more his approaching death. His death had been the main subject when Joseph was supposed to be dead, it is still the predominant theme of his life when Joseph appears to be alive. Jacob was 130 years old at that time, according to what he told Pharaoh in chapter 47:9. He died at the age of 147, seventeen years later, according to chapter 47:28. In spite of Jacob's gloom, death was not immanent.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

On his way to Egypt Jacob stops in Beersheba and he offers sacrifices to God at that place. Beersheba brings back the memories of childhood. Here Isaac had settled and here Jacob had grown up. It is the last sacrifice he brings to God in the land of Canaan. It may have been the last sacrifice he ever brought in his life. We do not read about any other. The fact that God is called here "the God of his father Isaac" indicates that Jacob remembers his father and thinks back over his life.

The news about Joseph's "resurrection from the dead" must have thrown a new light on the person of God in Jacob's thinking. He had received extensive revelations from God, but he had never entered this intimate, warm relationship with God that his grandfather Abraham had. He must have blamed God for the sorrow in his life, particularly the loss of Joseph. Now he sees that God was not who he thought He was. The sacrifice of Beersheba must have been one of the most meaningful sacrifices he ever brought in his life.

The sacrifice must also have been a prayer for guidance. Jacob was aware of God's prophecy to Abraham in Ch. 15:13, and he may have been aware of the dangers to which he exposed his descendants by going to Egypt. He had, of course, little choice. Apart from the joy of seeing Joseph again, the trip to Egypt meant staying alive. The alternative would have been starvation in Canaan. But, if Jacob knew his history, he remembered that Abraham had not done well in going down to Egypt (Ch. 12:14-20) and that God had specifically warned Isaac not to go (Ch. 26:2). So in spite of the fact that he yearns to hold Joseph in his arms again, he first asks God if it is all right. This attitude may have been the greatest spiritual victory in Jacob's life. It is a sure sign of a new relationship with God. He shows that he gives priority to loving God over the love for his son Joseph.

God answers Jacob during the night. He calls his name twice: "Jacob, Jacob!" In spite of the fact that it was Israel, the prince and conqueror, as he is called in vs. 1, who leaves Canaan, God addresses him here as Jacob, the tripper. Maybe God wanted to remind him of the fact that his old nature had not died. But God's words are reassuring. In vs. 3 God says: "I am God, the God of your father," he said. "Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you into a great nation there." It is wonderful to go back to the place of your childhood and to go over your life and to meet the God of your father. If God is only a memory, connected with an earlier stage of your life, you have lived in vain. In this revelation memories and the reality of God's presence melt into one.

Reading vs. 4 - "I will go down to Egypt with you, and I will surely bring you back again. And Joseph's own hand will close your eyes," we would get the impression that God promises Jacob that he would personally return to Canaan. We know this did not happen. Jacob died in Egypt with Joseph at his side and only his remains returned to Canaan to be buried. The promise is given to the people of Israel, so they would have a Word of God to hang on to during the four centuries of slavery. We do not read in the

book of Exodus that anyone ever mentioned this promise. Evidently the Word of God was no longer considered relevant at that period of history. Does not this sound familiar in our twentieth century ears?

So Jacob leaves Canaan in style on the wagons Pharaoh had provided for him and his family. Israel would return to Canaan even more in style. Pharaoh rolled out the red carpet for Jacob; God would roll back the river Jordan for His people. The gates of Egypt opened wide for Israel, the gates and walls and the whole city of Jericho would collapse and crumble when Israel entered there. Jacob left with a demonstration of worldly power, Israel returned with a demonstration of supernatural power. But in between would lay several hundred years of suffering, before God would call His Son back out of Egypt, as Hosea says in Hos. 11:1. But it was during this time of hardship and tribulation that the handful of people would increase and become a people of several million souls.

Vs. 8-27 give us a list of people who moved into Egypt, the total count of which is seventy. The list should not be taken as a statistical account. *The Pulpit Commentary* says about this list: "The phrase 'which came into Egypt' must obviously be construed with some considerable latitude, since in the appended list of seventy persons, 'souls of the house of Jacob which came into Egypt,' are reckoned Joseph, who undoubtedly came into Egypt, but not with Jacob, Hezron and Hamul, the sons of Pharez, as well as the descendants of Benjamin, who probably, and Ephraim and Manasseh, the children of Joseph, who certainly, were born in Egypt." The list gives more a general overview of the beginning of the nation of Israel, than an actual body count of people who were in Jacob's company entering Egypt.

Adam Clarke says about this section: "It may be necessary to observe here. First, that several of these names are expressed differently elsewhere; compare Num. xxvi. 12; 1 Chron. iv. 24. But it is no uncommon case for the same person to have different names, or the same name to be differently pronounced; see chap. xxv. 15. Secondly, that it is probable that some names in this list are brought in by prolepsis or anticipation, as the persons were born (probably) during the seventeen years which Jacob sojourned in Egypt, see v. 12. Thirdly, that the families of some are entered more at large than others because of their peculiar respectability, as in the case of Judah, Joseph, and Benjamin."

There seems to be a discrepancy between this account and Stephen's in Acts 7:14, where he says: "After this, Joseph sent for his father Jacob and his whole family, seventy-five in all." Stephen quotes from the Septuagint, which adds the sons of Ephraim and of Manasseh, born from his Syrian concubine. That Moses did not intend to give an exact list of people entering Egypt is clear from the mention in vs. 12 of Judah's sons Er and Onan, who died in Canaan before this journey was engaged upon.

Getting close to the Egyptian border, Jacob sends Judah ahead to notify Joseph. Our text says "to get directions to Goshen," but from the following verses we gather that the intent was to be able to be met by Joseph half way and to celebration the reunion away from the crowd. Joseph probably would not have been able to be away from his duties for an unlimited number of days. So he could not have moved to Goshen to wait for his father. But he needs no prompting to go when he hears that Jacob is approaching. When they meet they fall into each others arms and weep for a long time an abundance of healing, cleansing tears. Nothing better to heal emotional wounds than tears.

When it says "Joseph appeared before him" a word is used that is commonly reserved for the appearance of God or His angels, according to *The Pulpit Commentary*. So the appearance of Joseph is a demonstration of glory. When Jacob saw Joseph last, some twenty years ago, he was wearing the robe of many colors. This robe seems a faded rag compared to what Joseph is wearing now. The Bible presents Joseph as an image of the resurrection body. Nothing we wear on earth, however expensive it may be, can compare with the glory to come.

Jacob seems to be unable to keep death out of his conversation. We read in vs. 30: "Israel said to Joseph, 'Now I am ready to die, since I have seen for myself that you are still alive.'" The KJV and RSV probably put it more correctly by saying: "Now let me die." There was something in Jacob's experience that could never be surpassed on earth. Anything else that would happen after this would pale in the light of this embrace. Jacob feels that in receiving his son back from the dead he has reached the fulfillment of his life. It is this taste of resurrection that makes him long for death.

Joyful anticipation of death has almost completely disappeared from our theology. When we hear Bach's music on the words "Come sweet death" (Komm susser Tod) we respond with gloom instead of joyful longing. The tendency in our time is to deny death instead of looking forward to it. Several years ago I visited Mrs. van der Leek, the lady who had taken me into her home after my parents died. Her husband had departed and she was in an Old Folks Home. I remarked that soon she would be united with her husband in glory. She agreed, but her sister who was present was shocked and told me not to talk about such things. Several people in that home lived to be a hundred, so she had no reason to anticipate dying in her eighties!

Poor soul! Jacob says more than “I am ready now.” He is willing, since nothing else in life will be able to top this seeing of Joseph in his glory.

Many theories have been advanced about the strong feelings the Egyptians seemed to have toward people tending flocks. Vs. 34 says: “All shepherds are detestable to the Egyptians.” The KJV says: “Every shepherd is an abomination unto the Egyptians.” It is obvious that Joseph’s instructions to his brothers are based on this feeling. It is impossible to determine from our distant perspective what the actual basis for this feeling was. There were probably religious as well as political reasons. The religious one could be that divine qualities were attributed to cattle, so that sacrificing cattle or eating beef would be a sacrilege. The fact that the Israelites in the desert made themselves a golden calf would point in this direction.

A political reason for the aversion could be the fact that the reigning Pharaoh belonged to the category of the shepherd kings, or Hyksos, a foreign power who had usurped the throne of Egypt. *The Pulpit Commentary* believes, though, that Israel’s descent into Egypt occurred before the period of the Hyksos. It is also true that domestic shepherds were considered to be despicable too. Herodotus affirms this, as do some archeological finds of reliefs where shepherds are pictured as lame or deformed, dirty and unshaven. But the feeling of contempt toward this class may have political reasons also. They could have been considered collaborators with the hostile regime. We have to conclude that we do not know. However, the fact that this kind of potentially explosive tension existed is stated emphatically several times throughout this story.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

This chapter is divided in three sections. Vs. 1-12 deals with the introduction of Joseph’s brothers and of Jacob to Pharaoh and their settling in Goshen. Vs. 13-27 depicts the general condition of Egypt during the last years of the famine and Joseph’s measures which changed the infrastructure of the country and vs. 28-31, a section which actually belongs to the following chapter, deals with the end of Jacob’s life.

Vs. 1-12: We are not told who were the five brothers that Joseph picked to have an audience with Pharaoh. It could be speculated that they were the five sons that Lea, Jacob’s only legal wife, had born to Jacob, but we do not know. It seems logical that Joseph would have introduced Benjamin, his only full brother, to the king. It could be that court etiquette ruled out the appearance of large groups at audiences. Probably Joseph wanted to make the best impression possible upon the monarch.

Pharaoh’s question: “What is your occupation?” seems to have been more than a polite inquiry. According to *The Pulpit Commentary*: “Pharaoh’s inquiry was characteristically Egyptian, being rendered necessary by the strict distinction of casts that then prevailed. According to a law promulgated by Amsis, a monarch of the 26th dynasty, every Egyptian was obliged to give a yearly account to the monarch or State governor of how he lived, with the certification that if he failed to show that he possessed an honorable calling he should be put to death.” No wonder Joseph was careful in whom he chose!

Pharaoh treats Joseph’s relatives in a very generous way by making the best of the land available to them. We have to remember, though, that all the kindness Pharaoh bestows upon Joseph’s brother is done for Joseph’s sake, not for theirs. This is the way God treats us for Jesus’ sake.

Jacob’s audience with Pharaoh paints a beautiful picture of the meeting of two worlds. Pharaoh was the king of Egypt, probably the most powerful man in the world at that time. Divine qualities were attributed to him. Jacob was Israel, the prince of God, the man who had conquered in the spiritual world. Here the two meet, and Jacob blesses Pharaoh. We remember the words of the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews: “And without doubt the lesser person is blessed by the greater.” (Heb. 7:7). We also remember that Jacob’s grandfather was expelled from Egypt in an ignominious way by the Pharaoh of that period with the words: “Here is your wife. Take her and go!” Then Pharaoh gave orders about Abram to his men, and they sent him on his way, with his wife and everything he had.” (Ch. 12:19,20). That was almost 200 years before. If anybody had taken the trouble to look into the archives, they probably would not have had the liberty to mention the incident at this time. Jacob is a guest of honor and he represents a kingdom that is not of this world. Here is one of the rare occasions in the Bible where Heaven and earth are not in opposition with each other. The world of Egypt at that time was evidently not synonymous with the powers of darkness.

The impression we voiced earlier that Pharaoh may have been a young man, younger than Joseph, who said that he was a father to him, is reinforced by Pharaoh’s question of Jacob’s age. Jacob answers: “The years of my pilgrimage are a hundred and thirty. My years have been few and difficult, and they do not

equal the years of the pilgrimage of my fathers.” (vs. 9). The word “pilgrimage” is a good description of Jacob’s life, or of the life of any child of God who intends to make Heaven his home. We turn again to Hebrews where the author says in 11:9,10 - “He [Abraham] lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.” The positive content of this confession of Jacob, as the writer to the Hebrews interprets it, is offset by Jacob’s tone of complaint and self-pity. He complains that life has been harder on him than on his ancestors and that it is shorter. The latter he could hardly know since he was still alive when he said this. As far as the difficulties is concerned, most of them were of his own making. Maybe Jacob’s words are a kind of confession to himself. He certainly did not confess his sins to Pharaoh.

About the age of Jacob, *The Pulpit Commentary* says: “Since Joseph was now thirty-seven years of age (ch. xlv. 6), it is apparent that he was born in his father’s ninety-first year; and since this event took place in the fourteenth year of Jacob’s residence in Padan-aram (ch. xxx. 25), it is equally apparent that Jacob was seventy-seven years of age when he left Beersheba after surreptitiously securing the patriarchal blessing (ch. xxviii, 1).” It seems to me that the commentary is wrong on this point, since the hunger was in its second year and Joseph would consequently have been at least thirty-nine at this time. But I do not want to argue with the scholars who wrote *The Pulpit Commentary*.

We may presume that more was said during Jacob’s audience with Pharaoh than is recorded. Jacob may have given a brief account of his difficult years, or, as the KJV calls them “evil.” Pharaoh will have had little idea what a pilgrimage, such as Jacob’s, was and he will have asked more questions. This king probably grew up in the protecting shell of the palace, while being groomed to become the ruler of the country. Hardship and hunger will have been foreign to him. Here he meets a man who has known all this and who has come out richer than the king. He, who had everything the world could offer, receives a blessing twice from a man who had lacked everything and who came because he was starving to death.

Jacob and his family settle in Goshen, which was the best part of Egypt. It was not dependent, as we have seen, on the flooding of the Nile since it received rain from the Red Sea. But it seems that even these rains failed, because Joseph has to provide Jacob with food, even in Goshen. Evidently, the land did not produce anything either during these seven years.

Vs. 13-27 show the condition of Egypt during the famine and the measures Joseph took, which changed the way the Egyptians lived for centuries to come. We should be careful not to judge Joseph’s measures from a twentieth century perspective. What Joseph did was far from democratic; but then democracy was unheard of at that time. The world was developing from a series of small fiefdoms to larger confederacies and kingdoms and after that to super-powers. Egypt had been an important power for several centuries, but evidently Pharaoh was not an absolute monarch in the way Nebukadnezzar, Alexander or the Roman emperors reigned centuries later. Joseph uses the extreme conditions of the famine to consolidate Pharaoh’s power, although the priest caste remained a strong independent influence, seen the fact that their grounds were not transferable to the crown.

The way Joseph carries out the transition from relative independence to complete dependence upon Pharaoh is admirable. He does it in such a positive way that the people are grateful. God had endowed him with wisdom and foresight which he used to save people’s lives. The things that happened in Egypt illustrate the spiritual principle that salvation and independence are incompatible. We are saved by becoming God’s property. Insisting upon our independence means death, as it would have meant death for the Egyptians.

Joseph first brings the money of the Egyptians into Pharaoh’s palace. We could say that what he did was the equivalent of centralizing the banking system. It does not seem that currency was used yet. Payment was probably exclusively made with precious metals, the value of which was established by weight. The next step was the livestock of the Egyptians. This may have meant the animals used to plow the land, but we are not told. The third stage is the transfer of land. The crown gets the title for all real estate, but the people keep on using it with the obligation to pay a tax of 20% on each harvest. If we compare Joseph’s measures with the infrastructure of our modern society we have to say that what he did was a complete overhaul carried out with several strokes of genius. And the people loved him for it. So did Pharaoh!

Vs. 27-31 start the report of the end of Jacob’s life. As we said before, it should have been included in chapter 48. Vs. 27 mentions that Jacob’s family settled in Goshen and that they gained possessions there. Whether this means that they were exempt from paying taxes to Pharaoh and were elevated to the same

status as the priests were, we do not know. Their separate status as well as the fact that they increased rapidly became factors that made the Egyptians turn against them four centuries later, as is recounted in the opening chapters of the book of Exodus. At this point we have moved out of the years of famine into the last years of Jacob's life.

Vs. 28 starts out by saying that Jacob spent seventeen more years in Egypt, that is five years during the famine and twelve after the situation had gone back to normal. Jacob had talked about his approaching death, but it turned out to be more elusive than he thought. He kept on living. He wasn't as persistent as his father, Isaac, though who lived for over thirty years after giving his deathbed blessing to his sons.

When Jacob feels his end is approaching he makes Joseph swear that he be buried in Canaan and not in Egypt. This last wish must have been a matter of faith for Jacob. He knew that Canaan was the land God had promised to Abraham, Isaac and to him and his children. His grandfather had purchased the cave where Sarah was buried first, the cave in the field of Machpelah.

As we have seen before, Jacob had purchased a field from Hamor at Sechem, and according to Stephen, when he gives his defense speech in Acts 7, "Their bodies were brought back to Shechem and placed in the tomb that Abraham had bought from the sons of Hamor at Shechem for a certain sum of money." (Acts 7:16). Stephen combines the purchases of Abraham and Jacob and gives, so to speak a telescoping rendering of the two incidents. Adam Clarke supposes that the bodies of Jacob's sons were buried at Sechem, but that Jacob himself was placed in the tomb where Sarah, Abraham and Isaac were buried.

The point, however, is the promise of the land and Jacob's faith that God would in fact give it to his descendants. Joseph would demonstrate the same faith at the end of his life, when he made arrangements for his body to be taken back to Canaan. (See ch. 50:24,25). The author of the Hebrew epistle emphasizes this faith factor, when he says: "By faith Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and gave instructions about his bones." (Heb. 11:22). Jacob's demand that he be buried in Canaan was a demonstration of faith in the promise of God, but it was also a confession that, in spite of the affluence of Egypt, Egypt was not the place of God's promise. Again, in the light of Heb. 11, Jacob's last wish was a confession that this earth is not our final destination and that death is not the last word.

When Joseph confirms his father's wish with an oath, Jacob worships, leaning "on top of his staff," or as the KJV has it "upon the bed's head." The use of these two different words is an interesting example of difficulties in Hebrew translation. The word "bed" and "staff" are identical in Hebrew in that they are both written with five consonants (HMTTH), and since originally the vowels were not inserted in writing, there is no way to tell them apart out of context. The LXX translates HMTTH with staff. It does make perfect sense, however, that Jacob would lie back down on his bed, after talking to Jacob.

The staff adds a spiritual dimension to the sentence. The NIV says: "Israel worshipped as he leaned on the top of his staff." As the KJV put it, Jacob just lay back down after wearing himself out. "And Israel bowed himself upon the bed's head." The act of worship gives a beautiful touch to the scene. If Jacob would only be reclining on his bed, there would have been no need to even mention this.

Worship is a rare entity, even in the Bible. We very rarely read that people are so overcome by the realization of what God has done in their lives, that they fall down before Him.

Eliezer bowed down and worshipped the LORD when he realized that God had guided him to Rebecca. (Gen 24:26) In Ex. 12:27 at the first Passover, we read: "Then the people bowed down and worshipped." When Moses sees God's glory, we read: "Moses bowed to the ground at once and worshipped." (Ex. 34:8) Judges 7:15 - "When Gideon heard the dream and its interpretation, he worshipped God." At the dedication of the temple: "When all the Israelites saw the fire coming down and the glory of the LORD above the temple, they knelt on the pavement with their faces to the ground, and they worshipped and gave thanks to the LORD, saying, 'He is good; his love endures forever.'" (II Chr.7:3). "Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, 'Amen! Amen!' Then they bowed down and worshipped the LORD with their faces to the ground." (Neh. 8:6) The Magi in Matt. 2:11 "saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him." And the apotheosis of all worship we find in heaven. We read in Rev 5:14. "The four living creatures said, 'Amen,' and the elders fell down and worshipped."

Worship is always connected with a glimpse of reality. It is when people see through the veil and smog of their lives and realize who God really is and what He has really done, that they bow down in awe and praise before Him. For Jacob it was the realization that in all the evil and sorrow he had gone through God had blessed him beyond his wildest imagination. He bargained and cheated and cut corner to obtain a

blessing which ultimately God had poured out upon him in such an overwhelming measure that he could not contain it. Leaning on his staff he pours it out before the Lord.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

We are not told how many years later this last scene of Jacob's life takes place. Vs. 1 says: "Some time later Joseph was told, 'Your father is ill.'" When Joseph comes to visit his father he brings his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, with him. What follows could be a replay of an incident that occurred years earlier when Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau. Only here the scene enrolls itself before our eyes as it should have been without the deceit and anger and shallowness. Jacob must have clearly relived the moment when he kneeled before his father to receive a blessing which he tried to steal. The guilt feelings had probably never completely disappeared. Here he atones for his sin by blessing Joseph's children.

Jacob gets up when he hears that Joseph is coming. He is weak and almost blind but his mind is clear and sharp. He starts out by recounting his experience at Bethel, where God appeared to him when he fled from Esau and was on his way to his mother's family in Paddan Aram. He repeats the words God said to him in Ch. 28:13-16 - "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it."

Jacob's quote was not a literal one but he gave the essence of God's promise to him; the main point being that God would make him fruitful and give him the land. Having established his claim on God's promise he adopts Joseph's sons as his own. On the basis of Jacob's words Ephraim and Manasseh later became two separate tribes in Israel. There was no tribe of Joseph. The fact that the total of the tribes added up to twelve is due to the fact that Levi was set apart as the tribe of priests and temple servants.

In vs. Jacob says: "Any children born to you after them will be yours; in the territory they inherit they will be reckoned under the names of their brothers." There is no indication that Joseph ever had more than these two sons. Jacob's words may refer to Joseph's grandchildren. The intent of the words is probably to make a stipulation about the division of the land. Any other children of Joseph would not inherit separately, there would not be three tribes of Joseph or more.

Jacob still harbors the sadness of Rachel's death. His thoughts go back over the time when Benjamin was born at Bethlehem and his mother died in childbirth. The picture of an old man, full of memories of the past, is painted in a beautiful way in these verses. Jacob shows on the one hand deep spirituality and divine authority, on the other hand he still carries with a heavy load of sadness of a long life full of emotional scars.

There is still a place along the road in Bethlehem that is called "Rachel's grave." Whether it is an authentic landmark or not is hard to prove.

Because of his blindness Jacob does not recognize Manasseh and Ephraim. Undoubtedly this was not the first time he met them; he must have seen them at least once when he first arrived in Egypt. Now he takes them on his lap, at least that is the impression we get, and he kisses them. I will not elaborate on the value of grandchildren for fear of getting carried away. Prov. 17:6 says: "Children's children are a crown to the aged, and parents are the pride of their children," and I say "amen" to this with all my heart. So Jacob has my full attention as he sits there on the edge of his bed with his two grandchildren close by him. I said he must have had them on his knees, but we have to bear in mind that the young men must have been in their twenties. They were born during the first seven years of Joseph's reign and in the second year of the second period, the famine, Jacob came to Egypt, which, at this time was seventeen years ago."

Again Jacob starts to reminisce, and in vs. 11 we read: "Israel said to Joseph, 'I never expected to see your face again, and now God has allowed me to see your children too.'" Jacob had spent years thinking his son was dead and now he sees how God's promise has come full circle. Joseph is alive and here are his two sons. We feel the deep joy and peace that must have been in Jacob's heart coming through in these words. God knew, and He did so much better than we thought!

Then it is Joseph's turn to worship. We do not read that what he did had any spiritual connotation, but the act of his body was an act of worship. We read in vs. 12 "Then Joseph removed them from Israel's knees and bowed down with his face to the ground." He must have seen the same picture his father saw and it brought him again to the recognition how wonderful God's mysterious ways are. Shakespeare called one of his plays "All is well that ends well." What an end! And half has not yet been told!

The following scene is full of unexpected turns, and it is described in great detail. Joseph approaches Jacob and holds Manasseh with his left hand so that he will meet with Jacob's right hand and Ephraim is at Joseph's right hand, so he will stand opposite to Jacob's left. This was done so that the oldest son would receive Jacob's right hand blessing and the younger one the left hand. The way these different positions are painted is very interesting. But when Jacob stretches out his hands he crosses his arms so that his right hand touches Ephraim's head and his left Manasseh. Joseph's approach had been deliberate and well thought through. Therefore he is dismayed to perceive that his father messes up his plans. He has the impression his father does not know what he is doing, and so he tries to prevent the mistake by removing his father's right hand from Ephraim's head. But Jacob is not to be moved. Evidently he knows what he is doing and he persists. So Jacob gives the blessing of the oldest son to the youngest, just as Isaac had done to his sons. Only Isaac had been tricked in to it and had not done it willingly and purposely like Jacob did here.

Another interesting feature is that Jacob blesses Joseph in blessing his children. He says: "May the God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day, The Angel who has delivered me from all harm- may he bless these boys. May they be called by my name and the names of my fathers Abraham and Isaac, and may they increase greatly upon the earth." The content of this blessing is of an unearthly beauty. It covers the whole gamma of God's plan of salvation and of His work in human lives. It is a blessing in the highest sense of the word.

First of all, Jacob traces the line of the history of revelation: God revealed Himself to Abraham and Isaac. He is the God of history, the God of promise, and the God of life and of salvation. The promise given to Eve that one of her sons would crush the serpent's head, is the essence of this revelation. He was the one Abraham was waiting for when he expected God to give him a son. He is the one that would come through the channel of human births through the person of Jacob.

Secondly, Jacob wraps up the whole of his life in the words "the God who has been my shepherd." He saw the same connection between his daily occupation with his herd and God's occupation with him as David saw and expressed so beautifully in the 23rd Psalm. We have seen already, in studying the period of Jacob's sojourn in Paddan Aram, that Jacob must have been an excellent shepherd. Laban recognized that he was worth his weight in gold. God is the real shepherd, the only perfect one, the one who lays down his life for his sheep, as Jesus states in John 10:11 - "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." This part of God's guidance Jacob could not understand at that point of history, but we can.

Thirdly, Jacob speaks about "the Angel who has delivered me from all harm." *The Pulpit Commentary* points out that this Angel is identified with Elohim, and that he must have been the "Jehovah Angel" with whom Jacob wrestled at the Jabbok. It also says: "The first use of the term goel, ... to buy back or redeem, to separate or untie, or to stain as with blood, hence to be stained or polluted, as one who suffers a kinsman's blood to go unavenged, hence to remove the stain of blood by taking vengeance on the murderer. Applied under the law to the next of kin (Levit. xxv. 25; xxvii. 13, 15, 19 &c.), it is also used of God redeeming men, and especially Israel, from captivity (Exod. vi. 6; Isa. xliii. 1). In this sense it was employed by Jacob (cf. ch. xlvii. 16 with xlix. 18) and by Job (xix. 21) to describe the Divine Rescuer who had delivered them from ill both temporal and spiritual, and who was to complete his emancipating work by ultimately ransoming them from the power of the grave. The Goel to whom both Jacob and Job looked forward, and of whom both Moses and the prophets testified, was Christ. (Gal. iii. 11; Titus ii. 14; 1 Pet. i. 18)"

In modern Christian terminology we would say: "May these boys find Christ as their Savior."

Jacob continues to say: "May they be called by my name and the names of my fathers Abraham and Isaac, and may they increase greatly upon the earth." Ephraim and Manasseh are emphatically classified as the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, because their mother was Egyptian. Jacob's words take away all doubt about their future status among the tribes. As a matter of fact the name Israel would at one crucial point in history be attached to the Northern kingdom of which Ephraim would be the main part. Sadly enough, they were also the first part of God's people to abandon God's revelation. King Rehobeam decided to worship God at the place of his own choosing instead of at Jerusalem where God had promised to reveal Himself. This became the undoing of the nation by which they lost their identity and dissolved themselves among the nations of the world.

It was never God's intention that part of Israel would get lost. He wanted Ephraim and Manasseh to be a proverbial blessing. The fact that Jacob's blessing did not hold eternally does in no way diminish the power of prophecy. God's promises are generally not self-fulfilling; without faith there is no fulfillment.

The last verse of this chapter presents a problem. We read in vs. 22 - "And to you, as one who is over your brothers, I give the ridge of land I took from the Amorites with my sword and my bow." There is no account in Scripture of any military exploit by which Jacob would have conquered part of the land. The theories vary as to what Jacob may have meant with the phrase "I give the ridge of land I took from the Amorites." The Hebrew word translated with "ridge of land" is "Shechem achad." We know of the purchase of a parcel of ground by Jacob, which is recorded in ch. 33:19. "For a hundred pieces of silver, he bought from the sons of Hamor, the father of Shechem, the plot of ground where he pitched his tent." There is also the record of the atrocity committed by Jacob's sons, who massacred the inhabitants of Shechem. It seems doubtful, however, that Jacob would have taken credit for this. As we have seen before, Jacob's sons were probably buried at Shechem. At least this is the tradition Stephen quotes in Acts 7:16 (Their bodies [the Patriarchs'] were brought back to Shechem and placed in the tomb that Abraham had bought from the sons of Hamor at Shechem for a certain sum of money.)

There is the story of Jesus' meeting with the woman at the well at Sychar. John says about the place: "So he [Jesus] came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph." And the woman affirms the tradition when she says to Jesus: "Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his flocks and herds?" (John 4:12.) All this fits together as far as the location is concerned, but the conquest Jacob talks about is not recorded.

When Israel arrives in Canaan the area indicated by Jacob was, in fact, allotted to Ephraim. In Joshua, we read: "The allotment for Joseph began at the Jordan of Jericho, east of the waters of Jericho, and went up from there through the desert into the hill country of Bethel. It went on from Bethel (that is, Luz), crossed over to the territory of the Arkites in Ataroth, Descended westward to the territory of the Japhletites as far as the region of Lower Beth Horon and on to Gezer, ending at the sea. So Manasseh and Ephraim, the descendants of Joseph, received their inheritance."²⁷³ The city of Shechem was eventually given to the Levites, according to Joshua, "The rest of the Kohathite clans of the Levites were allotted towns from the tribe of Ephraim: In the hill country of Ephraim they were given Shechem (a city of refuge for one accused of murder) and Gezer."²⁷⁴

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

In this chapter Jacob addresses his sons for the last time. We get the impression from vs. 33, that he dies that very day in the presence of his sons. "When Jacob had finished giving instructions to his sons, he drew his feet up into the bed, breathed his last and was gathered to his people."

This chapter is unique in the Bible. Jacob leaves this world in a regal matter, and he addresses his sons with an authority, which seems to have been lacking throughout his life. With a few exception his words do not contain much blessing. They are prophetic utterances and judgments upon the character of his boys and the character of the tribes that would evolve from them. We can understand why Bible critics would read in these words projections from a future time, when Israel had become a nation and the individual characteristics of each tribe were known. Accepting these verses as Jacob's own utterances implies the recognition that God revealed to him what the future held.

The fact that much of what had gone wrong in Jacob's family had been his own doing, (and there was much that had gone wrong), did in no way diminish the personal responsibility of the sons. There is no injustice in the judgments pronounced.

We must also take much of what is said as an expression of grace. In every instance in the Bible where God announces judgment the intent is that people would mend their ways and repent.

One would wonder what would have happened if Jacob had in earlier days gathered his sons like this and admonished them. The picture we get of the character of Jacob is one of a shy, fearful person, who would scheme in order to achieve his goals, but who generally did not have the nerve to stand up and speak, even to his own sons. His approaching end changes this. The glimpse of eternity he catches in his last days lifts him up above himself and makes his "Israel," the prince of God.

Jacob's language is highly poetical. *The Pulpit Commentary* says: "Jacob's patriarchal benediction takes the form of an elevated poem, or sublime religious hymn, exhibiting the well-known classes of

²⁷³ Josh. 16:1-4

²⁷⁴ Josh. 21:20,21

parallelism, the synthetic, the antithetic, and the synonymous, not alone in its separate clauses, but sometimes also in its stanzas or verses.”

Adam Clarke even goes so far as to make an effort to reproduce the original poetical form of the Hebrew in English, with quite a bit of success. We will not copy the whole chapter in this way, but give the example of the opening verses:

“Come together and hear, O sons of Jacob!
And harken unto Israel your father.
Reuben, my firstborn art thou!
My might, and the prime of my strength,
Excelling in eminence and excelling in power:
Pouring out like the waters: - thou shalt not excel,...”

There are other examples in the Bible of similar addresses of people who are about to leave this world. Moses’ final address to the nation of Israel some four centuries later has much in common with Jacob’s farewell.²⁷⁵ The supreme example is found in John 17, where Jesus prays for His disciples and for those who will believe in Him through their message. Jesus’ words breathe an intimacy of fellowship with the Father and a love toward those the Father had given Him, which is unparalleled in any other farewell address.

Beginning with vs. 3 Jacob addresses each of his sons individually, but in front of all. Reuben is the oldest. Reuben is given an excellent testimony as far as his character is concerned. “Excelling in honor, excelling in power.” He also was a impetuous passionate person. “Turbulent as the waters.” Both the KJV and RSV say here: “Unstable as water.” Generally speaking he was a fine species of manhood. As the oldest son he should have been given. Adam Clarke quotes the Targum of Onkelos which paraphrases it as: “Thou shouldst have received three portions, the birthright, the priesthood, and the kingdom.” Clarke continues to quote the Targums of Jonathan ben Uzziel and Jerusalem, saying: “But because thou hast sinned, the birthright is given to Joseph, the kingdom to Judah, and the priesthood to Levi.”

The reason for Reuben’s rejection is the incident described in chapter 35:22 - “While Israel was living in that region, Reuben went in and slept with his father’s concubine Bilhah, and Israel heard of it.” We remarked before that this act of incest was probably more an act of revenge than an excess of sexual desire. Reuben, as well as all of Jacob’s children, except for Joseph and Benjamin, suffered greatly from their father’s lack of love. But, as said before, this did not excuse Reuben. He was responsible for his act.

All commentators agree that Reuben as a tribe never amounted to anything in the nation of Israel, either in numbers or achievement.

Adam Clarke translates Jacob’s words for Simeon and Levi as follows:

“Simeon and Levi, brethren:
They have accomplished their fraudulent purposes.
Into their secret council my soul did not come;
In their confederacy my honor was not united:
For in their anger they slew a man,
And in their pleasure they murdered a prince.
Cursed was their anger, for it was fierce!
And their excessive wrath, for it was inflexible!
I will divide them out in Jacob,
And I will disperse them in Israel.”

Jacob denies any association with the crimes of Simeon and Levi. The incident referred to is, undoubtedly, the massacre described in Ch. 34:25 - “Three days later, while all of them were still in pain, two of Jacob’s sons, Simeon and Levi, Dinah’s brothers, took their swords and attacked the unsuspecting city, killing every male.” Jacob’s reaction at that time was less one of moral indignation, that of fear for his own safety. We read in vs. 30 - “Then Jacob said to Simeon and Levi, ‘You have brought trouble on me by making me a stench to the Canaanites and Perizzites, the people living in this land. We are few in number, and if they join forces against me and attack me, I and my household will be destroyed.’” There is a

²⁷⁵ See Deut. 32, 33

tragic note in the fact that Jacob only found the courage, which he lacked during his life, to speak these words in the face of death.

The words "And in their pleasure they murdered a prince," are, evidently, open to different translations. The NIV renders it with: "and hamstringed oxen as they pleased." The KJV translates it with: "and in their self-will they digged down a wall." We saw Clarke's interpretations above: "And in their pleasure they murdered a prince." As before, we see the description as an indication that the man had a sadistic streak in their character. It should be noted that Jacob does not curse the persons, but their acts. As God's children we have no liberty to curse anybody, not even the devil. Jude transmits this thought in vs. 9 of his epistle: "But even the archangel Michael, when he was disputing with the devil about the body of Moses, did not dare to bring a slanderous accusation against him, but said, 'The Lord rebuke you!'"

There is a hidden treasure in the prophecy "I will scatter them in Jacob and disperse them in Israel." The scattering of Levi was connected with the blessing that the Lord would be their portion, because of their priesthood in the nation. *The Pulpit Commentary* says here: "While for the sin (the deed, not the doers) Jacob has a curse, for the sinners themselves he has a well-merited chastisement. They had been confederate in their wickedness, they should in future, when returning to occupy their God-assigned inheritance, be disjoined. That this prediction was exactly fulfilled Scripture testifies. At the second census in the wilderness, shortly before the conquest, the tribe of Simeon had become so reduced in its numbers (reckoning only 22,000 as against 76,500 in Judah) as to be the smallest of the twelve (Numb. xxvi. 14); to be passed over entirely in the last blessing of Moses (Deut. xxxiii.); to be accorded no independent allotment of territory in Canaan on the completion of the conquest, having only a few cities granted to it with the borders of Judah (Josh. xix. 1-9); and to be ultimately absorbed in the more powerful and distinguished tribe under whose protection and tutelage, so to speak, it had been placed (1 Chron. iv. 27). The tribe of Levi also was deprived of a separate inheritance, receiving only a number of cities scattered here and there among the possessions of their brethren (Josh. xxi. 1, 40); and, though by its election to the priesthood the curse may be said to have been turned into a blessing, yet of this signal honor which was waiting Levi Jacob was completely silent, showing both that no prophecy was of any private interpretation (the seer seeing no further than the Holy Spirit helped him), and that Jacob spoke before the days of Moses. It is almost incredible that a late writer would have omitted to forecast the latter-day glory of the tribe of Levi; and this opinion is confirmed by observing the very different strain in which, after Levi's calling had been revealed, the benediction of Moses himself proceeds (Deut. xxxiii. 8-11)."

The blessing pronounced on Judah is one of the richest in the Bible and the highlight of Jacob's prophecy. Again we cannot resist giving Adam Clarke's poetic rendering of the vs. 8-12.

"Judah! thou! They brethren shall praise thee.
Thy hand, in the neck of thine enemies:
The sons of thy father shall bow themselves to thee.
As a lion's whelp is Judah:
From the prey, my son, thou hast ascended.
He couched, lying down like a strong lion,
And like a lioness; who shall arouse him?
From Judah the scepter shall not depart,
Nor a teacher from his offspring,
until that Shiloh shall come,
And to him shall be assembled the peoples.
Binding his colt to the vine,
And to the choice vine the foals of his ass,
He washed his garments in wine,
His clothes in the blood of the grape.
With wine shall his eyes be red,
And his teeth shall be white with milk."

Bible critics who operate from the pre-conceived idea that we live in a closed system and that prophecy is an impossibility, refer these verses to the time of David, when it had become obvious that the tribe of Judah had become predominant in Israel. If we would not confess to believe in an omniscient God and in a Holy Spirit who can reveal God to men, we would not have choice but to agree with the above mentioned sages.

Judah's role as the leader of Israel, as the Lion, as the tribe from which the Messiah would come, is here foretold by Jacob centuries before the signs were even visible on the horizon. The Bible does not describe the banner of Judah, but it must have had the image of a lion on it. In Rev. 5:5 Jesus is called "The lion from the tribe of Judah."

Vs. 10 is at the same time one of the great Messianic prophecies of the Bible and one of the problem verses as far as interpretation is concerned. The NIV says: "The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his." The KJV renders it with: "The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come; and unto him shall the gathering of the people be." The intent of the words is clear: Judah will be the tribe that produces the rulers of the nation. The problem is the word translated with "ruler's staff" or "lawgiver." The root word has the meaning of "to cut, to cut into, hence to decree, to ordain, having the sense of one who decrees; hence leader," according to *The Pulpit Commentary*. The same commentary suggests that the parallelism of the verse requires the word to be "regarded as not the person, but the thing that determines or rules." Adam Clarke, however, maintains that "from between his feet," should be translated as "out of his thigh," meaning progeny, natural offspring.

But the real problem is the word "Shiloh." The KJV simply leaves it untranslated. Evidently the original meaning of the word is not clear. *The Pulpit Commentary* states several possibilities, namely that Shiloh could be taken as the name of a place. The word can also be taken as an abstract noun meaning "to be safe." Judah should reign until it would attain to rest. The majority or interpreters, ancient and modern agree that the word should be taken as the name of a person and that the person referred to is the Messiah.

History has justified the latter interpretation and from our historic perspective we should have no problem seeing in Jacob's words the prediction that the Messiah would come from Judah. As the writer to the Hebrews says: "For it is clear that our Lord descended from Judah." (Heb. 7:14)

Vs. 11 is a very remarkable verse in that it combines various images that have become essential symbols in the life and work of Christ. "He will tether his donkey to a vine, his colt to the choicest branch; he will wash his garments in wine, his robes in the blood of grapes." There is a danger of reading too much in these words, but the danger of not reading enough in it is also present. Jacob's personal understanding of his own words may have differed substantially from what the Holy Spirit intended to say. Peter emphasizes this when he says in I Pet. 1:10-12 - "Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, Trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things." Peter actually says that we are in a better position to understand what the prophets meant when they prophesied than they themselves.

Jacob predicted that Judah's wine would be famous and that it would grow in abundance. That is probably the main message he wanted to convey to his son. But in doing so he connects a donkey to a vine and he makes the blood splatter on Judah's clothes. Jesus rode a donkey on His way to the cross, thus fulfilling Zechariah's prophecy: "Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." (Zech. 9:9) It is impossible to sufficiently probe the depth of the fact that the King's way to the throne was His way to the cross. Everybody thought that the King would come to ascend the throne, nobody could guess that the triumph of Jesus' entry was to be nailed on the cross. The misunderstanding about the reason for the coming of the Messiah would last till the Holy Spirit came down at Pentecost. One of the last questions the disciples asked Jesus before His ascension was: "So when they met together, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6) Jesus had told them before: "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Matt. 20:28) but nobody had taken Him seriously.

In the same week Jesus rode the donkey He took the cup during the Last Supper and said: "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." (Matt. 26:28) More than fifteen centuries before, Jacob tied the two together. The wine became an image of the blood of Christ, that did not only stain His robe, but washed ours. Isaiah paints Jesus' atoning death as follows in chapter 63:1-3 "Who is this coming from Edom, from Bozrah, with his garments stained crimson? Who is this, robed in splendor, striding forward in the greatness of his strength? 'It is I, speaking in righteousness,

mighty to save.’ ‘Why are your garments red, like those of one treading the winepress?’ ‘I have trodden the winepress alone; from the nations no one was with me. I trampled them in my anger and trod them down in my wrath; their blood spattered my garments, and I stained all my clothing.’“ It was this treading of the winepress of God’s wrath, by which His own blood flowed, that were cleansed from sin; as John says in Rev. 1:5 “And from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, and the first begotten of the dead, and the prince of the kings of the earth. Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood.” (KJV)

Also, in the same week Jesus rode the donkey into Jerusalem and took the cup of wine, symbol of the blood of the new covenant, He pronounced the parable of the vine. “I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.” (John 15:5) Jacob’s prophecy about Judah was, word for word, fulfilled in his grandson Jesus Christ.

Finally, Judah’s wine is an image of the joy of the Lord. The book of Psalms sings about the wine in Ps. 104:15 “Wine that gladdens the heart of man.” And Ps. 4:7 indicates that there is a joy that is greater and deeper than the one brought on by wine: “You have filled my heart with greater joy than when their grain and new wine abound.” Also Paul points to the real thing which is foreshadowed by the joy of wine drinking when he says: “Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit.” (Eph. 5:18) Listening to me! You would say I am advertising wine drinking; I haven’t touched the stuff for years!

Since we have copied Adam Clarke so far we better keep on doing so now for vs. 13

“At the haven of the seas shall Zebulun dwell,
And he shall be a haven for ships.
And his border shall extend unto Sidon.
Issachar is a strong ass
Couching between two burdens.
And he saw the resting-place that it was good,
And the land that it was pleasant;
And he inclined his shoulder to the load,
And he became a servant unto tribute.”

Clarke quotes The Targum of Joathan, which paraphrases the passage thus: “Zebulun shall be on the coasts of the sea, and he shall rule over the havens; he shall subdue the provinces of the sea with his ships, and his border shall extend unto Sidon.” *The Pulpit Commentary* comments that the territory “allotted to Zebulun neither actually touched the Mediterranean, nor reached to Zidon.” The territory allotted to Zebulun is described in Joshua.²⁷⁶ The Book of Judges says that the tribe never took full advantage of its heritage. “Neither did Zebulun drive out the Canaanites living in Kitron or Nahalol, who remained among them; but they did subject them to forced labor.”²⁷⁷

We have two problems in connection with the above prophecy: the first one regarding the allotted territory, the second regarding Zebulun’s role in sea faring and commerce. Of course, Joshua knew Jacob’s prophecy; this is obvious from the allotments to the other tribes, but also, if the book of Genesis had not been written in Joshua’s time the chain of Scriptural revelation would have been broken. Why then did Joshua not give Zebulun his full heritage in accordance with Jacob’s words? Some incident must have taken place, or there must have been something in Zebulun’s attitude that made Joshua believe that there would be no point in giving the tribe what was due to them.

Secondly, sea faring never became an important feature among any of the tribes of Israel. There may have been more going on than we are aware of. Deborah mentions ships in her song in Judges 5, but the reference is to Dan and maybe Asher. “Gilead stayed beyond the Jordan. And Dan, why did he linger by the ships? Asher remained on the coast and stayed in his coves.”²⁷⁸ King Salomon tried his hand on shipbuilding, but the actual sea faring seems to have been left to the people of Tyre. And this maritime trade was carried out on the Red Sea, not on the Mediterranean. In I Kings 22:48 we read: “Now Jehoshaphat built a fleet of trading ships to go to Ophir for gold, but they never set sail; they were wrecked at Ezion Geber.”

²⁷⁶ Josh. 19:10-16

²⁷⁷ Judges 1:30

²⁷⁸ Judges 5:17

The Westminster Dictionary of the Bible says about Jacob's prediction regarding Zebulun: "Jacob, in his farewell address, blessing his sons, pictured Zebulun as dwelling at the haven of the sea, being a haven of ships and having his border on Sidon (Ch. 49:13). This picture was realized in its essentials, but not in its details. Zebulun was allotted territory in the vicinity of the sea and enjoyed the markets of the towns on the coast; but it was itself separated from the Sea of Galilee by Naphatali and Issachar, and from the Mediterranean Sea and the city of Sidon by the tribe of Asher."

Lastly there is Moses' final address in which he says about Zebulun: "Rejoice, Zebulun, in your going out, and you, Issachar, in your tents. They will summon peoples to the mountain and there offer sacrifices of righteousness; they will feast on the abundance of the seas, on the treasures hidden in the sand."²⁷⁹ There seems to be no historical evidence that this ever happened, but that does not prove or disprove anything.

The characteristics Jacob attributed to his son Issachar are not very flattering. He is compared to a donkey and a slave, mainly because he prefers an easy life to the trouble it would mean to be free. He, obviously, did not invent the words "Give me liberty or give me death." He wants life at all cost and an easy life at that. His is to be the attitude of the mule.

According to *The Pulpit Commentary* the word "mishpetaim," translated as "between two saddlebags" or "between two burdens" (KJV) could be rendered with "within their own boundaries." The Onkelos and Targums of Jerusalem and Jonathan give their authority to this translation. The commentary continues: "Issachar was to manifest a keen appreciation of the land or portion of territory that should be assigned to him, and to renounce the warlike spirit and military enterprises of his brethren for the indolent and luxurious repose of his fat pastures, crouching between his sheep-folds, or rejoicing within his tents, like a lazy ass, capable indeed of mighty efforts, but too self-satisfied to put forth much exertion, devoting himself to agriculture and pastoral pursuits, and preferring rather to pay tribute to his brethren, in order to secure their protection, than to leave his ploughshare and cast aside his shepherd's crook to follow them into the tented field of war, as the patriarch next describes."

There are lessons to be learned from Jacob's prophecy about Issachar. It is not sinful to enjoy blessing. When God leads us into green pastures we better enjoy them. But we should draw a line between phlegmatic enjoyment and lethargic inactivity. If peace is obtained by paying off the enemy we will have short-term enjoyment for long-term suffering. We are in a situation of war, although God does give us time out for restoration. Ironically, it is about Issachar that we read in I Chr. 12:32 - "Men of Issachar, who understood the times and knew what Israel should do." It took them a few centuries, but they did learn something.

Adam Clarke's rendering of the prophecy about Dan in vs. 16,17 reads as follows:

"Dan shall judge his people,
As one of the tribes of Israel.
Dan shall be a serpent on the way,
A cerastes upon the track,
Biting the heels of the horse,
And his rider shall fall backwards."

Clarke further comments: "Dan, whose name signifies 'judgment,' was the eldest of Jacob's sons by Bilhah, Rachel's maid, and he is here promised an equal rule with those tribes that sprang from either Leah or Rachel, the legal wives of Jacob. Some Jewish and some Christian writers understand this prophecy of Samson, who sprang from this tribe, and judged, or as the word might be translated 'avenged,' the people of Israel twenty years. See Judg. xiii2; xv. 20."

Clarke continues about vs. 17. - "Dan shall be a serpent. The original word is nachash, and this has a great variety of signification. It is probable that a serpent is here intended, but of what kind we know not. 'A cerastes upon the track.' The word shephiphon, which is nowhere else to be found in the Bible, is thus translated by the Vulgate. The cerastes has its name from two little horns upon its head, and is remarkable for the property here ascribed to the shephiphon. The word orach, which we translate path, signifies the track or rut made in the ground by the wheel of a cart, wagon, etc. And the description that Nicander gives of this serpent in his Theriaca perfectly agrees with what is here said of the shephiphon: 'It lies under the sand, or in some cart rut by the way.' It is intimated that this tribe should gain the principal part of its conquests more by cunning and stratagem than by valor; and this is seen particularly in their conquest of

²⁷⁹ Deut. 33:18,19

Laish, Judges xviii, and even in some of the transactions of Samson, such as burning the corn of the Philistines, and at last pulling down their temple, and destroying 3,000 at one time; see Judg.xvi.26-30.”

Ch. 49:18 is one of the great verses of the Bible: “I look for your deliverance, O LORD. (NIV) Or, as the RSV renders it: “I wait for thy salvation, O LORD.” A literal translation would be: “In thy help do I hope, O Jehovah!” *The Pulpit Commentary* points out that in this verse we find the first occurrence of the term salvation. The word is derived from a verb that means “to be roomy or spacious,” or, “to be set free.” We find the same word in Ps. 119:45 - “I will walk about in freedom, for I have sought out your precepts.”

Some attempts have been made by commentators to place Jacob’s ejaculation in the context of physical condition and see it as a cry for help to be delivered from his suffering. Undoubtedly, these words are richer and deeper than that! Jacob sees the great lines of God’s plan of salvation, of which he had become such a vital part. What he passed on to his sons was not just a word about their future, a lifting of a tip of the veil; it was God’s revelation of Himself and His glory to a lost world. Jacob saw his life and the future of his children in the light of eternity. He knew that to die would be gain, as it would mean “to be with Christ.”

George Bernard Shaw once said: “Youth is a wonderful thing. Too bad it is wasted on young people!” We could catch the spirit of his words and turn them around and say: “It is wonderful to see heaven opened and Christ waiting for us. Too bad we have to wait till our dying moment to catch the glimpse.” What I mean is, waiting for the Lord’s salvation should be the tenor of our life. It should color our actions and scent our attitude. We read about Stephen in his dying moment that he said: “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” (Acts 7:56) Moses saw this through the whole of his life, according to Heb. 11:27 - “he persevered because he saw him who is invisible.”

Clarke’s poetic rendering continues with vs. 19:

“Gad, an army shall attack him,
And he shall attack in return.”

The Pulpit Commentary brings out some interesting features of this verse. It says: “The threefold alliteration of the original, which is lost in the received translation, may be this expressed: ‘Gad - a press presses him, but he presses the heel’; or, ‘troops shall troop on him, but he shall troop on their retreat.’ The language refers to attacks of nomadic tribes which would harass and annoy the Gadites, but which they would successfully repel.”

Adam Clarke, however, says here: “This is one of the most obscure prophecies in the whole chapter, and no two interpreters agree in the translation of the original words. The prophecy seems to refer generally to the frequent disturbances to which this tribe should be exposed, and their hostile, warlike disposition, that would always lead them to repel every aggression. It is likely that the prophecy had an especial fulfillment when this tribe in conjunction with that of Reuben and the half tribe of Manasseh, had a great victory over the Hagarites, taking captive 100,000 men, 2,000 asses, 50,000 camels, and 250,000 sheep; see 1 Chron. v. 18-22.”

The next verse is put in poetical form as follows:

“From Asher his bread shall be fat,
And he shall produce royal dainties.”

As a parallel blessing for Asher we have Moses’ words in Deuteronomy: “Most blessed of sons is Asher; let him be favored by his brothers, and let him bathe his feet in oil.”²⁸⁰ Evidently the most fertile part of the promised land was allotted to Asher, which attributed to his cuisine that became famous in Israel. “Gefuelte Fish” may have found its origin in this blessing. Asher elevated cooking of food to an art. Food can be a blessing and a temptation. I am not an expert on the subject of gourmet cooking. The enjoyment of good food could rank among other enjoyments such as enjoying good music. Undoubtedly the gift of enjoyment is part of the blessing God bestowed upon man at his creation. But sin corrupted this gift also. The line between enjoyment and enslavement is a very thin one. It seems to me that gourmet food is more dangerous for man than music by Bach, but this judgment is probably too subjective. What I am trying to say is that Jacob’s blessing to Asher was a mixed one. No statistics of death by heart attacks are available for the tribe, but the death rate was probably higher than among the others. Enjoyment of good food, like all other enjoyments, should never be indulged in outside fellowship with God.

²⁸⁰ Deut. 32:24

Vs. 21 in the NIV reads: “Naphtali is a doe set free that bears beautiful fawns.” The KJV and RSV virtually concur with this. But in *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* we find a surprise.

“Naphtali is a spreading oak,
Producing beautiful branches.”

The commentary adds here: This is Bochart’s translation; and perhaps no man who understands the genius of the Hebrew language will attempt to dispute its propriety; it is as literal as it is correct. Our own translation scarcely gives any sense. The fruitfulness of this tribe in children may be here intended. But as great increase in this way was not an uncommon case in the descendants of Jacob, this may refer particularly to the fruitfulness of their soil, and the especial providential care and blessing of the Almighty; to which indeed Moses seems particularly to refer, Deut. xxxiii. 23: ‘O Naphtali, satisfied with favour, and full with the blessing of the Lord.’ So that he may be represented under the notion of a tree planted in a rich soil, growing to a prodigious size, extending its branches in all directions, becoming a shade for men and cattle and a harbor for the fowls of heaven.”

Not understanding “the genius of the Hebrew language” I will not attempt to dispute its propriety. The Septuagint gives the translation with the word “oak” instead of “doe”. But *The Pulpit Commentary* insists that the word signifies “hind or gazelle.” The choice is between a creation of the third day or of the sixth day. The intent is, obviously, to express beauty for which both the picture of a tree and a gazelle are fitting images.

The next blessing goes to Joseph. We turn again to Adam Clarke’s poetry:

“The son of a fruitful [vine] is Joseph;
The son of a fruitful [vine] by the fountain:
The daughters [branches] shoot over the wall,
They sorely afflicted him and contended with him;
The chief archers had him in hatred.
But his bow remained in strength,
And the arms of his hands were made strong
By the hand of the Mighty One of Jacob;
By the name of the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel.
By the God of thy father, for He helped thee;
And God All-sufficient, He blessed thee.
The blessing of the heavens from above,
And the blessings lying in the deep beneath,
The blessings of the breasts and of the womb,
The blessings of thy father have prevailed
Over the blessings of the eternal mountains,
And the desirable things of the everlasting hills.
These shall be on the head of Joseph,
And on his crown who was separated from his brethren.”

It would add to the consistency of Jacob’s use of images if he compared Naphtali with an oak tree and Joseph with a vine. Clarke’s translation, however, attributes the image of the vine to Jacob and not to Joseph. It seems to me, though, that the Hebrew is sufficiently complicated that the meaning of the words can be argued both ways. I would prefer to think that Joseph is meant by the vine, and not Jacob. The word “vine” itself does not seem to be in the original though, although every translator supplies it to make meaning out of “the daughters [that] shoot over the wall.”

Part of the prophecy appears to be looking back over Joseph’s life and part looks into the future. Joseph adversity is mentioned in the image that compares him to the aim of the archers. The question is, who did Jacob have in mind with this picture? It seems very doubtful that he had ever heard the full story of what happened to Joseph. If he had been aware of the fact that his brothers, who initially had wanted to kill him had sold Joseph, it seems, that Jacob would have added some curses for some of his sons in this chapter. Most likely, Jacob had the real enemy, the powers of darkness, in mind when he talked about the archers. And he was right. Even in Joseph’s painful experience, the struggle was “not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” (Eph. 6:12)

Joseph's defense was the power of God in his life. In spite of all the pressure that had been put upon him he had never given up, either in the house of Potiphar, nor in prison. God had given him the training David talks about in Ps. 18:34 "He trains my hands for battle; my arms can bend a bow of bronze."

Jacob seems to be mixing his metaphors. He piles them up on his son. The vine, the bow, the rock do not seem to have much in common. Yet there is strength in all three of them. The vine does not give the impression of strength, but it conquers obstacles by the power of its growth. It scales a wall by climbing over it, one inch at the time. The bow has the strength of momentum that gives the impact to the sharp and lethal pointed arrow. The rock is the strength of the immovable. Those were the virtues Jacob recognized in his son and crowned with his blessing for him.

When David uses those images in his psalms they are often applicable to physical exploits. Examples are:

Ps. 18:34 - "He trains my hands for battle; my arms can bend a bow of bronze."

Ps. 18:2 - "The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge. He is my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold."

Ps. 27:5 - "For in the day of trouble he will keep me safe in his dwelling; he will hide me in the shelter of his tabernacle and set me high upon a rock."

But in Joseph's life these images were symbols of moral strength. Joseph did not counterattack by taking revenge or by using his authority to subdue his brothers. His sharp arrows were genuine love and forgiveness. He climbed the wall by growing over it, like the vine. Jacob does paint a most beautiful picture of his son's character.

Joseph's experiences were among the most horrible that could befall man. Yet he stood up and remained victorious. The only explanation for his attitude is the presence of God in his life. When tempted by Potiphar's wife his answer is "How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" (Ch. 39:9) And Pharaoh's conclusion about Joseph is "Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is the spirit of God?" (Ch. 41:38)

Jacob reveals the secret of Joseph's life by saying: "Because of the hand of the Mighty One of Jacob, because of the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel, Because of your father's God, who helps you, because of the Almighty." A son or daughter in whose life God occupies the first place is a child a parent can be proud of. Jacob is rightfully proud of Joseph.

The blessing poured out upon Joseph is expressed in terms of earthly and material prosperity. But there is an indication that the essence of the blessing goes far beyond that which meets the eye. The last two verses of Jacob's address to Joseph indicate this. "Blessings of the heavens above, blessings of the deep that lies below, blessings of the breast and womb." And, "Your father's blessings are greater than the blessings of the ancient mountains, than the bounty of the age-old hills." These words breathe the spirit of heaven, of life, and of eternity.

The last blessing goes to Benjamin, if we can call it a blessing. The last verse of Clarke's poem reads:

"Benjamin is a ravenous wolf:

In the morning he shall devour the prey,

And in the evening he shall divide the spoil."

This rendering is essentially the same as in the official translations. We only copy it for the sake of completeness.

The commentaries agree that the prophecy alludes to the warlike character of the tribe of Benjamin. As examples of this attitude Ehud is mentioned, who assassinated Eglon (Judges 3:15-30); and king Saul, whose acts of excessive cruelty are too many to mention in the context of this study.

With vs. 27 ends the blessings that Jacob pronounced over his sons. We can hardly say that these were blessing in the common sense of the word. As vs.1 of this chapter indicates, Jacob's words were more a predication than a blessing, with the exception of the prophecies given to Judah and Joseph. In Jacob's own words, he said to his sons: "Gather around so I can tell you what will happen to you in days to come." (vs.1) But even in the words of warning and in the curses pronounced there is a hidden blessing, because the fulfillment of prophecy is often linked to the attitude of the people involved. In Levi's case, for instance, the scattering about of the tribe in the promised land was the best thing that could happen to them. They received no inheritance of lands or cities, because the Lord was their inheritance. In fulfilling the ministry of the priesthood they became the most prominent tribe in the nation.

The chapter ends with Jacob's instructions about his burial and his actual death. Jacob's last charge to his sons is the same as the one he had given to Joseph in ch. 47: 29-31. There he had said: "Do not bury me in Egypt, But when I rest with my fathers, carry me out of Egypt and bury me where they are buried."

Here he is more specific, giving details about the purchase of the cave of Machpelah. We find the reference in ch. 23. His sons must have been aware of the facts, since Lea had been buried there already. The main impact of the charge, besides being a last wish regarding funeral arrangements, was the reminder that there existed a place in the land which God had promised to them, to which they had legal rights. This reminder plays an important role during the whole period of Israel's presence in Egypt and at the exodus. At the death of Joseph it would be reinforced.

The way in which Jacob left this world is very impressive. He must have been sitting up during his last conversation with his sons. He was very much in command of the situation. Having finished his task he lay back down on his bed and breathed his last breath. We do not read about any death struggle. The KJV reports the moment even more impressively than the other versions: "And when Jacob had made an end of commanding his sons, he gathered up his feet into the bed, and yielded up the ghost, and was gathered unto his people." The yielding up of the ghost reminds us of the authoritative way Jesus died on the cross. The KJV says: "And when Jesus had cried with a loud voice, he said, Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit: and having said thus, he gave up the ghost." (Luke 23:46) Jacob left this world in a regal way, as befores a prince of God.

Jacob was one hundred forty-seven years old when he died. He started his life as a tripper-up of people, according to the meaning of his name. Of all the patriarchs he had the most personal encounters with God. Yet, somehow the supernatural did not seem to influence his character very deeply. There was little of the daring faith of Abraham and of Abraham's deep love for God in his life. There were no fragrant traces of surrender, as we find in Isaac's life. Jacob remained a rather self-centered individual till the very end. His scheming diminished because his energy went down. There was the presence of God with him, which overawed him and broke him to the point where he limped through life after his victory in Peniel. But the love of God had never struck a deep resounding cord in his life.

Yet, God calls Himself the God of Jacob, the God of Israel. Looking at this life, that was maimed by sin, we still stand in awe.

CHAPTER FIFTY

There are three clearly marked section in this chapter: Vs. 1-14 Jacob's burial, vs. 15-21 the final reconciliation between Joseph and his brothers and vs. 22-26 Joseph's final days. Vs. 1-14. Jacob's burial.

There is an abundance of sadness and grief in this chapter. All this is the results of the fall of Adam and Eve described in chapter 3. Death came into this world through one man and through one act of sin. Paul expresses this so beautifully in Rom. 5:12 - "Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned...." What a contrast to the life and joy that fill the first two chapters of Genesis! In chapter 49 we got a taste of eternity in Jacob's prophetic utterances. Leaning on his staff he waited for God's salvation. Here we realize, not only the havoc sin has caused, but also how far away is the day when God will wipe away all tears from our eyes. (Rev. 7:17)

Tears are a gift of God, and antidote against the sin that tries to poison our emotions. Joseph shed a lot of tears during his life. Probably not all of them are recorded; some were held back and some streamed freely from his eyes. People who can cry keep their emotions healthy. Here, Joseph let himself go without any restraint. He had loved his father, and, as we have seen in ch. 45:3, his loud cry: "I am Joseph! Is my father still living?" was more than a request for information. He said: "I want my Daddy!" Everybody needs a "Daddy," regardless of his social status in life.

On the other hand the ways emotions are expressed differ from culture to culture. Northern Europeans will not give themselves to the wailing and hand wringing, as the Southern Europeans will. This does not mean that a pale and drawn dry face is less sad than the one that opens all the sluices.

There is nothing wrong in mourning, but mourning should be accompanied by hope. That is why Paul introduces his comforting remarks about the return of the Lord and the resurrection of the dead with the words: "Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope." (I Thes. 4:13) Jesus' tears at Lazarus tomb are proof of the legitimacy of grief. (John 11:35)

The Egyptians had made embalming into a very sophisticated art. The well-preserved mummies testify to this. As a matter of fact the knowledge of medicine in general seems to have been rather well advanced in Egypt. *The Pulpit Commentary* points out that the guild of physicians was made up of specialists, each of

whom was qualified to treat a single disorder. Whether the embalmers were part of this guild or belonged to a separate order is an open question.

Embalming, however, was not a science in the modern sense of the word. Maybe we should say that what we call science is not real science. Modern science does not recognize a unified field of truth. The Egyptian practice of medicine was part of a complex of knowledge in which the various parts were interrelated. Embalming was as much a religious practice as a medical one. The Egyptians were wrong in their presumption that the preservation of the body ensured the continuation of the soul. This seems to have been the major reason for embalming. As far as we know the Hebrews did not embalm their dead. We do not read about the practice in connection with the burial of Abraham and Isaac. It seems that the stronger the hope of life after death, the lesser the attention that was paid to the remains of the deceased.

The Egyptians were correct in their understanding that there is common ground between theology and medicine. Even in our modern society there is recognition that faith is helpful in psychology and that the health of the soul promotes physical health. Although this is recognized it is rarely put into practice.

In Joseph's arrangements to have his father embalmed we find a strange mixture of the two worlds to which Joseph belonged. As a child of Jacob he partook of the blessing God had given to Abraham. He believed in the promise that his people would possess the land and, probably, he understood that more was meant than the borders of Canaan. The fact that the patriarchs lived in tents and refrained from building cities expressed their conviction that God had something better in mind for them. Joseph was a son of a nomad and a pilgrim. He also was part of the sophisticated culture and society of Egypt. Somehow he balanced both extremes quite well in his life. His moral rectitude testified to this. A couple of centuries later the two elements would clash violently in Moses.

Jacob is to be buried in Canaan in the place that was the "earnest of the promise," the down payment on God's promise that Israel would possess the land one day. But Israel was embalmed in Egypt, according to the rites and customs of this sophisticated culture. *The Pulpit Commentary* goes into quite some detail to describe what went on behind the closed doors of the embalmer room. Some of it must have been rather gory. The tendency to cover up the ugliness of death is almost as old as man himself. The more sophisticated a civilization the better man succeeds in covering up the traces of corruption and decomposition. Primitive cultures are often more honest about the reality that man is dust and that he returns to dust. We could ask the question what is gained by making a corpse look like a sleeping beauty? The only gain made is by the funeral home.

During the time of his embalming and one full month after that Jacob is mourned. Then again at the actual funeral in Canaan a time of mourning is observed. I do not know what the Egyptian philosophy of mourning was. In the primitive cultures of the tribes of Irian Jay the intent of mourning over a dead relative is to assure the departed spirit that people are genuinely sad, so that the spirit will not return and harm them. The hope is that the spirit, on his way to the other world, will only look back over his shoulder and continue his journey. The spirits of the dead can cause innumerable harms if they come back because grief was not expressed sufficiently. For the tribespeople mourning is more a means of protecting themselves than of expressing a sadness because of loss. Sadness is present, of course, but the official mourning has little to do with that. When a group decides to come together a week after the death occurred in order to spend a whole day and a night wailing, we can hardly suspect that there is real grief. Grief is spontaneous. Whether the Egyptian mourning was backed up by the same kind of philosophy is hard to determine. But I suspect that there was a strong religious element in it. There must have been more than sorrow about death and loss.

The question is how far can a Christian, or an Old Testament believer go in expressing his grief. We understand from the Bible that the spirit of man goes back to God. Salomon says in Eccl. 12:7 - "And the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it." Paul is sure that to die is gain, because it means, "to be with Christ." (Phil. 1:21-23)

The tears of a Christian on the occasion of death should be shed because of sin that caused death. This is so impressively expressed in Bach's St. Matthew Passion, where at the end of the first part the choir sings: O man, bewail the vastness of your sin.²⁸¹

Several theories have been proposed to explain why Joseph did not go in person to Pharaoh with his request for a leave to go and bury his father in Canaan. A person who was in mourning or who expressed sadness could not approach the Persian monarchs. Both the stories of Esther and Nehemiah collaborate this. (Esth.4:2; Neh. 2:1,2) But the Persian court and Pharaoh's in Joseph's time were separated by several centuries. It has been suggested that Joseph had let his hair and his beard grow during the period of

²⁸¹"O Mensch, bewein Dein Sunde gross!"

mourning and that he could not appear before Pharaoh without being shaven and shorn. It is obvious that he needed special permission to leave the country. He also had to promise to return to Egypt. The fact that Jacob had expressed the desire to be buried in Canaan and Joseph's oath to his father evidently carried weight with the king.

It is not clear why the sons of Jacob did not return to Canaan to stay at this time. Life in Egypt must have been easier for them. They must have been aware of God's prophecy to Abraham in Ch. 15:13, but either they did not take it seriously, or they figured that the fulfillment was too far removed to be relevant to them. They must not have been too concerned about what would happen to the future generation. Although the sojourn of Israel in Egypt and its enslavement was used by God, it could have been avoided. God's prophecy to Abraham was not self-fulfilling, I believe.

The funeral procession consisted of "a very large company," according to vs. 9. Besides the immediate family, (the children stayed behind in Egypt) there was a large group of government officials, accompanied by an army of cavalry. Vs. 7 says: "All Pharaoh's officials accompanied him; the dignitaries of his court and all the dignitaries of Egypt." This cannot have been meant literally because such an exodus would have left Pharaoh's court empty. Most of the people must have joined the group out of respect for both Joseph and Jacob. The theory that by this time Joseph had lost his pre-eminent position in Egypt and that this was the reason why he did not appear in person before the king seems to be effectively refuted by the number of high dignitaries that accompanied the hearse.

As a matter of fact, the Egyptians must have outnumbered the family of Jacob to the point where the Canaanites believed that the mourning ceremony was for an Egyptian. (vs. 11)

According to vs. 10 there was another loud demonstration of grief at "the threshing floor of Atad," which lasted seven days. *The Pulpit Commentary* points out that a threshing floor, being a large open area, was a very convenient place for a group of people such as this to gather. There are differences of opinion among the learned about the meaning of "Atad," as to whether this stands for the name of a person or for the buckthorn that may have grown there. Also the phrase "near the Jordan" or "beyond the Jordan," as the KJV and RSV translate it, is open to different interpretations. It seems logical to suppose that the place would not be too far from the cave of Machpelah. It is quite possible, however, that the Egyptians stopped at the border of Canaan, because they did not want to give the impression of carrying out an invasion, and that only the immediate family went on to the grave site by themselves.

Vs. 15-21. The final reconciliation between Joseph and his brothers.

There are several problems hidden under the surface of this passage, some are psychological, some historical. The brothers were uneasy about Joseph's attitude toward them. They were not sure that he had really forgiven them. This proves in the first place that they had not forgiven themselves. It is one thing to be forgiven and another one to forgive either others or oneself. God intends the two to be connected as is clear from the application in Jesus' parable of the slave who owed his master ten thousand talents. (Matt. 18:23-35) Again, there is a difference between forgiving others and forgiving oneself, but those two are connected also. If we are able to forgive others we show that we believe in forgiveness. And if we believe in it we can accept it also.

We tend to judge others in the light of our own character. A person who is a liar will never put his trust in someone else's promise. Joseph's brothers could not imagine that Joseph had really forgiven them, because they would never have been able to forgive. The problem will remain as long as we start from the bottom. Our sinful human nature cannot forgive sin. Only when our sin is forgiven will God's forgiveness become a model for us in our relationship with others. Forgiveness between human beings is only possible when relations are viewed from above. That is why Paul says: "Forgive as the Lord forgave you." (Col. 3:13)

The historical problem is whether Jacob knew about the crime the brothers had committed against Joseph. It seems to me that Jacob would have mentioned something about it in his last words to his sons before his death. The brothers say he did, but nothing of the kind is recorded. The brothers' conscience would probably have been clearer had they made a full confession to their father. As we mentioned before, we suspect that this skeleton had remained in the closet as long as Jacob lived.

We read that Joseph wept when his brothers approached him on the subject. Joseph's tears may be accounted for by the fact that his brothers misunderstood his forgiveness, but also by the fact that the brothers were lying to him, and he knew this. Joseph loved his brothers, but they feared him. Love and fear are incompatible. Nobody puts that better than the Apostle John: "There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love." (I John 4:18)

If it is true that Jacob never knew about the crime, the brothers just made up Jacob's request to Joseph to forgive them. It is a serious sin to manipulate people by wrongly invoking the wishes of a dead person; it amounts to falsifying a testament. It would be rather naive, though, to suppose that the brothers were above such a thing. But the brothers realized that Joseph's power was awesome and that he could have crushed them easily if he wanted to do so.

Joseph's reply to his brothers touches upon the deep mysteries of God's plan with this world. Joseph shows an understanding of God's character that is unequaled in the Bible. He lifts up a tip of the veil that covers the secret of God's dealing with sin and evil in this world. Joseph gives an answer to the question millions of people has asked: "If God is love, how come..."

In the first place Joseph states that he is not in the place of God. In some ways he was, as a representative of God, in Pharaoh's own words: "one in whom is the spirit of God," (Ch. 41:38) Joseph was the savior of the world of his time. But he was not in the place of God in the sense that he was at liberty to carry out God's judgment. Joseph could have quoted Heb. 10:30 - "For we know him who said, 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' and again, 'The Lord will judge his people.'" In vs. 20 he cuts through to the core of the mystery when he says: "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."

Unless we see God's acting in this world against the background of the struggle between God and Satan we will not be able to make much sense of it. It is obvious that God is not the author of evil. He created the angel who later became Satan, but He did not create evil. We could just as well blame the hen for a rotten egg that she laid one month before as we can blame God for sin. How God does it, nobody knows, but somehow He outwits the enemy at every turn. As a supreme chess master God wins the game by sacrificing His most valuable pieces. That is why Paul says in Rom. 8:28 "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." I believe this is the lesson of Jesus' parable of the yeast. "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough." (Matt. 13:33) God uses a certain measure of evil to advance His purpose.

There is no question as to whether the intent of the brothers was evil. First they wanted to kill Joseph, and when they changed their mind and decided to sell him as a slave instead, it was not because of feelings of mercy. There may have been some pity in Judah and Reuben, but certainly not in the others. But God used Joseph's suffering to bring him where He wanted him to be and to perfect him for the job he would have to do. The Father in the same fashion treated Jesus. As the writer to the Hebrews puts it: "In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering." (Heb. 2:10)

This truth must have stood before Joseph's eyes throughout his thirteen some years of suffering as a slave and a prisoner. God had shown him enough glimpses of glory to come in the dreams he received as a teenager, to enable him to persevere. Joseph had understood God's plan all the way through, during all his ups and downs and God had honored his faith.

Finally, the fact that Joseph was able to forgive his brothers so completely, as if they had never done him any harm, indicates that he knew that God had forgiven him. No sins of Joseph are mentioned in the Bible. But this does not mean, of course, that he did not have any. Joseph understood something of God's plan of salvation because of the forgiveness he had received himself. Only those who are forgiven can forgive.

We read in vs. 18 "His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. 'We are your slaves,' they said." This they did out of fear. Joseph never treated them as slaves. In vs. 21 he says to them: "So then, do not be afraid. I will provide for you and your children." And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them. It is good for a man, though, to consider himself a slave of Christ after having received forgiveness from Him. Paul says in Rom. 6:19 "I put this in human terms because you are weak in your natural selves. Just as you used to offer the parts of your body in slavery to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer them in slavery to righteousness leading to holiness." But Christ does not treat us as slaves, or even considers us to be His slaves. In John 15:15 He says to His disciples: "I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you." This is the paradox of the life of a Christian. He calls us "friends," we call ourselves "slaves."

Vs. 22-26. Joseph final days.

No explanation is given as to why Joseph and the rest of Jacob's sons went back to Egypt and stayed there. From vs. 19 we could gather that, even ten years after the seven years' famine, the world economy had not yet returned to normal yet. As far as the choice of Joseph's brothers to go back to Egypt is concerned, we suggested above that they simply enjoyed the easy life of Egypt. Joseph himself had probably not choice but to stay in Egypt. He had lived there for more than ninety years of his life and his position, as one of the most powerful men in the country would have made it impossible for him to leave. It could be that the political climate had started to change already and that the departure of Jacob's family would have been considered an act of hostility, which the Egyptians would have tried to prevent. We do not know the reasons.

Both of Joseph's sons had children, grandchildren and probably great-grandchildren during Joseph's life. Joseph saw them grow up and saw to it that they were properly educated. Some commentators interpret the words "were placed at birth on Joseph's knees" this way. Ephraim is mentioned first, which indicates that Jacob's blessing to him as the oldest son, although he was the younger of the two, had a permanent effect. In the Old Testament the

fact that one is allowed to see his grandchildren is taken as a token of blessing. It is an image of eternal life. Prov. 17:6 says: "Children's children are a crown to the aged, and parents are the pride of their children."

Joseph's words in vs. 24 and 25 are the only examples of Joseph's faith mentioned in the epistle to the Hebrews. We read: "Then Joseph said to his brothers, 'I am about to die. But God will surely come to your aid and take you up out of this land to the land he promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.' And Joseph made the sons of Israel swear an oath and said, 'God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up from this place.'" These words put him in "the Hall of Fame" in Heb. 11. Heb. 11:22 says: "By faith Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and gave instructions about his bones." It would seem that Joseph performed more spectacular acts of faith in his life, but they did evidently not fit into the framework of Heb. 11, where the author speaks particularly about the relationship between God's promise and faith.

It seems from the context of these last verses of Genesis that Joseph died before any of his other brothers. But the word "brothers" may be used in a wider sense than of the eleven other sons of Jacob. Again, we are not told why the descendants of Jacob made no effort to return to Canaan at any time after their father's death. We understand though why Joseph could not go or why, immediately after his death he could not be buried in Canaan. Evidently he was still considered a national hero in Egypt. The words of Joseph seem to indicate that the Israelites were in a bind and that a return to Canaan was a physical impossibility. This lends prophetic force to Joseph's words.

Joseph does not demand a burial in Canaan immediately after his death. He foresees an exodus and he wants the coffin with his remains to be part of this exodus. This shows an amazing insight on the sight of Joseph. He must have imagined what the exodus would be like and how people would respond emotionally. The presence of Joseph's remains would give to the people who were leaving Egypt a sense of history, which they would desperately need. In the thinking of the people who left Egypt, those who had been born there, who had lived there for centuries, who knew nothing but Egypt, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob would be a mythical figure from ancient history. The bones of Joseph would provide some link with reality, as they knew it.

There is some difference of opinion as to how long Israel spent in Egypt. Adam Clarke says that Joseph was carried to Canaan 144 years after his death. *The Pulpit Commentary* speaks about "a period of 360 years." I do not know where Clarke gets his figure. According to Exodus, Israel spent 430 years in Egypt. We read there: "Now the length of time the Israelite people lived in Egypt was 430 years. At the end of the 430 years, to the very day, all the LORD's divisions left Egypt."²⁸² Joseph was thirty years old when he was

elevated to the position of ruler in Egypt, according to Ch. 41:46. When he invited his father and family to come to Egypt there were still five years of famine left, which means that it was nine years later, the seven years of abundance being finished. (See Ch. 45:6) This makes Joseph 39. Since he died at the age of 110 his family must have been in Egypt for 71 years at his death. $430 - 71 = 359$, which brings us close to *The Pulpit Commentary*.

Imagine the sense of historical background of people who have lived in a country for 430 years. The American Negro's and the Israelites in Egypt are the only examples known to me of people who really care enough about their roots to take them seriously. But if we would transpose the period of Israel's stay in Egypt upon European history, we would be back in the sixteenth century. Columbus' discovery of America

²⁸² Ex. 12:40,41

would be three quarter century old history. The Dutch would not have come yet to lay the foundation of New York. No European roots would have entered the soil yet. For Americans it would have been pre-history.

In spite of the fact that Israel was in Egypt for a period of time that would span almost the whole of the history of Western civilization, the knowledge of YHWH, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, did not disappear, nor was His promise forgotten. By the time Israel left Egypt Joseph's coffin had become an ancient relic, but its presence kept the memory alive.

Joseph's wishes were carried out to the letter. Exodus tell us: "Moses took the bones of Joseph with him because Joseph had made the sons of Israel swear an oath. He had said, 'God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up with you from this place.'"²⁸³ And in Joshua, we read: "And Joseph's bones, which the Israelites had brought up from Egypt, were buried at Shechem in the tract of land that Jacob bought for a hundred pieces of silver from the sons of Hamor, the father of Shechem. This became the inheritance of Joseph's descendants."²⁸⁴

This brings us to the end of the book of Genesis, the book of "Beginnings." In it we read how God created heaven and earth and life, as we know it. We see sin and death come in and practically destroy God's creation. At the beginning stands the Tree of Life, at the end Joseph's coffin. But the coffin is not the end of life. Joseph's last words were: "God will surely come to your aid." The KJV says: "God will surely visit you." He did!

Nabire, I.J. Indonesia, October 24, 1994.

²⁸³ Ex. 13:19

²⁸⁴ Josh. 24:32