

29 JANUARY

Psalm 25:1–7

According to your mercy remember me

This is the first of the acrostic psalms (each verse begins with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet, working through that alphabet which has 22 letters). Spurgeon points out that the psalm has prayer interspersed with meditation:

- Prayer (1–7) and meditation (8–10).
- Prayer (11) and meditation (12–15).
- Prayer (16–22).

This psalm has much to teach us from the school of prayer. When we pray, we lift up our soul to God (1). Spurgeon comments, ‘True prayer may be described as the soul rising from earth to have fellowship with heaven.’ David trusted in God and was conscious of great personal need. He had treacherous enemies who hated him with *cruel hatred* (2–3; 19) and he was conscious of his need for forgiveness on account of his own sin (7,11). He did not pretend that he had no problems but brought his needs to God in prayer.

The word, ‘remember’ appears three times in verses 6 and 7:

- David prayed ‘Remember, O LORD, your tender mercies and your lovingkindnesses, for they have been from of old.’
- He then prayed that God would not remember the sins of his youth (7). When God forgives our sins, he forgets them. Satan loves to accuse us and to rake up our past but he has no right to do so. A great promise of the new covenant is ‘Their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more’ (Hebrews 8:12; 10:17; cp. Romans 8:33–34).
- He prayed, *According to your mercy remember me*. God will hear us and answer us for the sake of his goodness (7) and for the reputation of his character (*for your name’s sake*, 11).

Christian, are you feeling low or perplexed? Are you distressed? Are you feeling the weight of remaining sin and know that you need to plead for forgiveness? **Drag that heavy soul to the throne of grace. Begin to lift it up, and it will take wings and soar up to God. He is merciful and gracious and will meet all your needs (Hebrews 4:16).**

The notes for 30 and 31 January are included with those for February

PILGRIM BIBLE NOTES

God’s holy Word simply explained and applied

January 2014

Bible readings from Genesis chapters 30 to 50
Psalms 24 and 25

Dear Friends

We have now completed twenty-five years of producing and printing Pilgrim Bible Notes and have covered the whole of the Bible three times and the New Testament.

The past year has seen changes in my own life and because of failing health and age, I am no longer able to produce printed copies of the notes. I hope that you will be able to download copies for yourself from the internet; at the time of writing this facility is not available.

The last few months have seen publication of 'A Pilgrim's Treasury — 366 Daily Devotional Bible Studies'. These daily readings are based on Pilgrim Bible Notes but have longer Bible readings; passages are taken from every book of the Bible throughout a year.

We are in a world of constant change but our confidence is in God who does not change. He is altogether powerful and wise and it is a great privilege to know God through the Lord Jesus Christ.

We are able to sing with joy and assurance:

*In heavenly love abiding,
No change my heart shall fear;
And safe is such confiding,
For nothing changes here:
The storm may roar without me,
My heart may low be laid;
But God is round about me,
And can I be dismayed?*

(Anna L. Waring)

May God encourage you through the reading of his precious Word and from meditating on the things that you read.

Yours in Christ

Alec Taylor.

28 JANUARY

Psalm 24

Who is this King of Glory? The LORD strong and mighty

Spurgeon points out that this psalm is divided into three parts:-

- The first glorifies the true God (1–2) and sings of his universal dominion.
- The second (3–6) describes the true Israel, who are able to commune with him (notice the similarity between these verses and Psalm 15).
- The third (7–10) pictures the ascent of the true Redeemer, who has opened heaven's gates for the entrance of the elect.

The psalm begins with a message for all the inhabitants of the earth. *The earth is the LORD'S* (1). The earth that we live in and walk upon, the earth that men have spoiled, is not ours. It belongs to Jehovah, the Lord, the living God. Our message for a rebellious world is that God is the almighty Creator who has sovereign right over us.

God, the Almighty Creator, is alone worthy of our worship (1–2). We are all sinners and are unclean in his sight. Who then is worthy to worship him (3–6)? The sinless Son of God has made the way for us to be forgiven and cleansed from our sin. We are then able to *ascend into the hill of the LORD and to stand in his holy place* (3). He has gone ahead of us into heaven as our forerunner (Hebrews 6:20). He has opened heaven's gates for us.

Verses 7 to 10 point to the victory of the Lord Jesus Christ when he rose from the dead and ascended to heaven in triumph (Ephesians 4:8). He is *the LORD of hosts, he is the King of glory* (10; cp. 1 Corinthians 2:8). The Lord Jesus is not weak. He is *the LORD strong and mighty* and has conquered Satan and all evil powers (8; cp. Colossians 2:15). **Let us worship the King of glory and rejoice in his victories!**

*Who is the King of Glory, who?
The Lord who all his foes o'ercame;
The world, sin, death, and hell o'erthrew,
And Jesus is the conqueror's name.*

(Charles Wesley from his hymn . 'The earth with all her fullness own')

You meant evil against me; but God meant it for good

When he was dying, Jacob charged Joseph and his brothers to bury him in the family burial plot in Canaan (49:29–33). They honoured their father’s wishes and following the mourning ritual they returned from Canaan to Egypt (1–14).

Joseph’s brothers were very fearful after their return to Egypt. They had not forgotten their wicked treatment of their young brother when he was a teenager. They expected him to avenge himself now that Jacob had died. They sent a message to Joseph in which they claimed that Jacob had left a plea that Joseph would forgive them. Joseph wept when he received this message. They could not accept that Joseph had really forgiven them for the evil they had done to him. He must have been hurt by their attitude, for he had already shown them his love and forgiveness (45:15–20).

Joseph was a great man. He told his brothers, ‘*You meant evil against me; but God meant it for good*’ (20). God sovereignly works out his purposes and he cannot be thwarted (Isaiah 14:27). It is wonderful to know that the Lord even uses the malice of our enemies for our good.

When we remember that the Lord has good purposes in the evil done against us, it helps us to forgive those who have wronged us. Joseph comforted his brothers with kind words (21). Joseph’s experiences wonderfully illustrate the words of Scripture: *We know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to his purpose* (Romans 8:28). **Let us worship and adore the Almighty, all-wise God. Let us thank him for watching over us at all times, and for bringing good out of evil.**

Joseph lived until he was one hundred and ten years old. Before he died, he prophesied that God would surely visit the Israelites and bring them back to the promised land. He also charged the Israelites on oath that they should take his bones with them for burial in Canaan when they returned to the promised land (22–26; cp. Exodus 13:19).

- All Scripture quotations are taken from the New King James Version of the Bible unless stated otherwise. They are printed in italics. **If you have a different translation of the Bible, you will still be able to use these notes.**

- The number in brackets eg. (7) refers to the verse number in the passage that we are reading; (14:34) refers us to another chapter and verse in the book of the Bible from which we are reading. When we read from Proverbs, this would be Proverbs chapter 14, verse 34.

- Where verses from other books of the Bible are brought to our attention, the name of the book is also indicated in the brackets eg. (Psalm 19:1).

- Where I ask you to compare another verse of Scripture, I prefix the reference with cp. (eg. cp. Psalm 1:1). I prefer this to the more common abbreviation cf. which relates to the obsolete word ‘confer’.

The word ‘Lord’ in the Old Testament

The Hebrew words translated ‘*Lord*’ are:

- ‘Adon’ which is used with reference to men (Genesis 42:33; 45:8–9), and with reference to God (Joshua 3:11,13; Psalm 8:1).
- ‘Adonai’ literally ‘my Lord’ (Exodus 4:10; Psalm 68:19).
- ‘Yahweh’ (‘Jehovah’), the sacred name for God, considered by many Jews as too sacred to utter. They regularly used ‘Adonai’ in its place. ‘Yah’ is a contracted form of ‘Yahweh’ (Isaiah 12:2; 26:4). The word ‘Alleluia’ or ‘Hallelujah’ (Revelation 19:1–6) means ‘Praise Yah.’

Dale Ralph Davis writes with reference to Exodus 3:12,14: ‘In light of verse 12, God does not here stress his being or existence so much as his presence and “Yahweh” captures and summarises that thought – **he is the God who will be present to be all that his people need him to be.** “Yahweh” means the God who is present to help ... “Yahweh” is a personal name, while ‘the LORD’ is a title ... there’s a devotional warmth in a personal name that a title can’t convey’ (THE WAY OF THE RIGHTEOUS IN THE MUCK OF LIFE – PSALMS 1–12, page 8).

NB. Our Bible translators have made it possible for us to recognise when ‘Yahweh’ is used in the Old Testament. ‘Yahweh’ is printed ‘*LORD*’, whereas ‘Adon’ or ‘Adonai’ are printed ‘*Lord*’.

Then God remembered Rachel, and God listened to her

Rachel was much loved by Jacob but she was miserable because she was childless, and she envied her sister. She said to Jacob, *'Give me children, or else I die!'* (1). Jacob was angry with her and he rebuked her, reminding her of God's sovereign providence. The reason for her failure to conceive a child was that the Lord had closed her womb (2). She gave her maid Bilhah to Jacob so that she could bear children on her behalf as a surrogate mother. The unhappy relationship between Rachel and Leah is obvious from Rachel's words after the birth of Bilhah's second son especially as Leah had stopped childbearing. Naphtali means 'my wrestling' and Rachel said, *'With great wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister, and indeed I have prevailed'* (8).

Not to be outdone Leah gave her maid Zilpah to Jacob and she also bore two sons (9–13). Leah's bitterness towards Rachel is shown in her response to the request for some mandrakes which Reuben had gathered. Mandrakes (also called love apples) were a soft, round, yellow fruit about the size of a small plum. Ancient superstition held that they aroused sexual desire and that they were a remedy for childlessness, hence Rachel's request (14–16).

Leah began childbearing again and had two sons and a daughter (17–21). *Then God remembered Rachel, and God listened to her and opened her womb* (22). This does not mean that God had forgotten Rachel but that he was about to intervene on her behalf. She conceived and named her son Joseph (the Hebrew 'yāsaph' means 'he shall add'; 24). She was confident that God would give her another son. Rachel had waited years for the answer to her prayer. The Lord sometimes refuses our requests because of our sin (cp. James 1:5–7; 4:3) or because of his own wise purposes. When prayer appears to be unheard we should wait on God and trust in him. The Lord is kind and loves you so much that he gave his Son to save you (Romans 5:8; 8:32). **Let us think about his goodness and come to his throne of grace with confidence (Hebrews 4:16).**

The sceptre shall not depart from Judah ... until Shiloh comes

Before he died, Jacob called his twelve sons to him to bless them. He also prophesied concerning them and the tribes which descended from them. These prophecies were all fulfilled. Jacob also said something about their character. Reuben is described as being *'unstable as water'* (3–4). He had no depth of character and he did not excel. Scripture has no mention of a single ruler, prophet or judge who descended from him. **Christian, you must have stability in your life if you are to be kept from sin and error** (Psalm 1).

Jacob described Simeon and Levi as *'instruments of cruelty'* who were unable to control their fierce anger which he cursed (5–7). There is sinful anger and there is also righteous anger (cp. Ephesians 4:26). Let us be sure that when we are angry, it is for a just cause. We must never allow such anger to go out of control. **Let us seek to be instruments of kindness and never to be cruel in thought, word or deed.**

Jacob prophesied of the coming of the Messiah (Shiloh) through the line of Judah whose name means 'praise' (8–10). He said, *'The sceptre shall not depart from Judah ... until Shiloh comes; and to him shall be the obedience of the people.'* The sceptre is a symbol of kingly rule. The Lord Jesus is *'the Lion of the tribe of Judah'* (Revelation 5:5).

Dan, *'a serpent'* (16–17) was not to be trusted (many of his descendants were treacherous; see Judges 18). Naphtali was a giver of *'goodly words'* (21). We should follow his example. *'Let your speech always be with grace'* (Colossians 4:6).

Jacob reserved the longest blessing for Joseph (22–26). He had been hated by his brothers and grieved, but the Lord had strengthened him and had made him fruitful (cp. 41:52). Let us strive to develop a mature and godly character. We must be stable in our lives and gracious in our speech. **If we would be fruitful like Joseph, we must persevere and trust in the Lord when we are afflicted. How are you doing?**

The angel who has redeemed me from all evil

Seventeen years passed and Joseph heard that his father's end was near. He took his two sons to see Jacob who did not recognise his grandsons because of his failing eyesight. The old man rallied and his blessing of Ephraim and Manasseh is described as an act of faith (Hebrews 11:21). He also gave them the birthright in the place of Reuben who had acted so shamefully with Bilhah (35:22; 1 Chronicles 5:1–2). Jacob, though very frail, insisted on blessing the younger son Ephraim above the elder one, Manasseh (8–20). He expected God to bring his descendants back to Canaan (21). The portion that Jacob gave to Joseph may refer to the plot of ground near to Sychar where Jesus spoke to the Samaritan woman (22; cp. John 4:5).

As he lay dying, Jacob rehearsed his experience of the goodness of God who had blessed him and provided for him (3,15). He spoke of *'the Angel who has redeemed me from all evil'* (16). This angel is accepted by most commentators as referring to the Lord Jesus Christ (the *'Angel of the LORD'* was worshipped as God; eg. Judges 13:17–22). He had protected Jacob when Laban sought to harm him (31:29) and had caused Esau to receive him in peace (remember, Esau had vowed to kill him, 29:41; 33:4). Many godless people do enjoy a prosperous life and some will acknowledge, 'Life has been good to me.' The child of God sees things quite differently and he has the attitude of Jacob. He reflects on the Lord's dealings with him and says, 'God has been good to me!'

Jacob said to Joseph, *'I had not thought to see your face; but in fact, God has also shown me your offspring!'* (11). He had been crushed by grief, but God had worked beyond his wildest expectations in the life of Joseph. **We must always remember that God is greater than our thoughts (cp. Ephesians 3:20–21).** Satan seeks to drive us to despair and to make us dwell on gloomy thoughts. Do not listen to him, but trust in the Lord.

The LORD has blessed me for your sake

Laban had prospered since Jacob had worked for him and he viewed with alarm Jacob's desire to be released from his service to return with his family to Canaan. He pleaded with Jacob to stay, saying, *'I have learned by experience that the LORD has blessed me for your sake'* (27). The Hebrew translated, *'I have learned by experience'* means 'I have divined.' John Currid states, 'That verb certainly reflects the practice of using omens to learn the divine will (see 44:5,15), one which was well known in the ancient Near East ... Laban is in a state of theological confusion. He knows that Jacob serves Yahweh, and he tries to combine that with his own pagan practices' (COMMENTARY ON GENESIS, volume 2, pages 97–98).

Laban acknowledged that God was with his nephew and had prospered his work. **Are you a blessing to your employer? The Lord expects you to have a good testimony at your place of work (cp. Colossians 3:22–24).** Laban invited Jacob to stay on and to name his wages but Jacob did not trust the man who had deceived him and had changed his wages many times (28; cp.31:7).

Laban knew that he owed Jacob some material reward for the years of faithful service and he asked Jacob what he should give him. Jacob said that he would be satisfied to keep for himself the speckled and spotted sheep and goats and the brown lambs. Laban thought that this was an offer too good to be missed (most sheep, goats and lambs were not marked in such a way). He was determined that Jacob would be left with nothing, so he removed the speckled and spotted animals from the flocks and gave them to his sons and removed them three days' journey away from Jacob who was left with the unmarked animals and little hope of building up a flock as agreed with Laban. John Currid points out that Jacob's system had no real value; it was the Lord who gave him success in breeding a flock of speckled and spotted sheep. God is sovereign over all his creation and he gave Jacob all the strong animals, leaving Laban with those that were feeble (31–42; cp. 31:9–12). Jacob became very prosperous (43) but trouble lay ahead.

Whatever God has said to you, do it

Laban's sons strongly resented Jacob whom they considered to be prospering at their father's expense. Jacob also noticed a change in Laban's attitude toward him (1–2). The Lord told Jacob to return to his own country (Canaan) and people, promising to be with him. Jacob then told Rachel and Leah what God had said to him (3–5).

Do you encounter opposition in your home or place of work? Let Jacob be an encouragement and a challenge to you. Though Laban showed a hostile attitude towards him, he could testify, *'The God of my father has been with me'* (5). That made all the difference. Laban was a cheating rogue who had changed Jacob's wages repeatedly. He would say that the speckled animals would be Jacob's wages. When those animals increased, he would say that Jacob's wages would in future be the striped animals, and so on. God had thwarted the cheating Laban however (6–10). The Angel of God spoke to Jacob in a dream and told him that he had seen all that Laban was doing to him (11–12). Was Laban's treachery an excuse for Jacob to be a poor workman? Not at all. He had served Laban with all his might (6, 38–41). Remember to do your work *heartily, as to the Lord, and not to men* (Colossians 3:23) and he will vindicate you and bless you.

The Lord reminded Jacob of the vow he made at Bethel saying, *'I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed the pillar, and where you made a vow to me'* (13). God remembers the promises that we make to him. Let us be sure to fulfil our vows. The word *'Bethel'* reminded Jacob that the Lord is the God who has given us many very precious promises and that he keeps those promises. The response of Rachel and Leah to Jacob reveals just how much their father had estranged them through his own selfishness and greed. They too felt cheated (14–16). They freely supported Jacob in his plan to return to Canaan and their words remind us of an essential principle in the life of every believer: *'Whatever God has said to you, do it'* (16). **When God speaks to you through his word, are you quick to obey him?**

My pilgrimage

Joseph wanted his family to live apart from the Egyptians in Goshen. He chose five of his brothers to be presented to Pharaoh and briefed them to stress to Pharaoh that they were shepherds, an occupation despised by the Egyptians (46:31–34). Pharaoh kindly received the five brothers introduced to him by Joseph and told them that they could settle in Goshen which was a choice area of Egypt (1–6).

Joseph afterwards brought his father to Pharaoh (7–10). While speaking to the king, Jacob described his life as *'my pilgrimage'* (9). He had known evil times which were the bitter harvest of resorting to deception to advance his own cause but he died in faith, worshipping God (Hebrews 11:21). We, too, are pilgrims on this earth and we must live as those who are travelling to heaven (Hebrews 11:13–16; 1 Peter 2:11). John Bunyan was much aware of this in calling his spiritual classic *'The Pilgrim's Progress'* (if you have not read this book, you are missing a real treat). **Our pilgrimage is not easy and there are many battles, but we have a glorious destination and the Lord is with us as we travel. What more could we want?**

*Since, Lord, thou dost defend
Us with thy Spirit.
We know we at the end
Shall life inherit.
Then fancies flee away!
I'll fear not what men say;
I'll labour night and day
To be a pilgrim.*

(John Bunyan)

Joseph's prudent administration at the time of famine brought in a massive revenue to the royal treasury (13–26). Jacob's family soon grew and prospered and the patriarch lived in Egypt for seventeen years until his death. He made Joseph promise to bury him not in Egypt, but in the family grave in Canaan (27–31). Perhaps we pay scant regard to our funerals and those of our loved ones? Our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit and it is important that they have a decent burial.

Now let me die

Abraham and Isaac had both called on the Lord at Beersheba (21:33; 26:25) When Jacob arrived there he offered sacrifices to God who spoke to him in a vision at night and reassured him about taking his family to Egypt. The Lord told him, ‘*Do not fear to go down to Egypt, for I will make of you a great nation there*’ (1–3). Jacob may have hesitated about settling in Egypt because of Abraham’s unhappy experience in that country (12:10–20). Moreover, God had told Abraham that his descendants would be afflicted in a strange land (15:13). The Lord had forbidden Isaac to go to Egypt (26:2) but promised Jacob that he would go with him and that Joseph would put his hand on his eyes (would be with him when he died, 4).

Verses 7 to 27 list those who went with Jacob to Egypt. Sixty-six moved to Egypt plus the wives of his sons (26). Jacob sent Judah ahead *to point out before him the way to Goshen* (28). This shows that he recognised Judah as leader among his sons rather than Reuben, his first-born. He had a joyful and tearful reunion with Joseph in Goshen, the territory of Egypt where they would settle. Jacob (Israel) said to Joseph, ‘*Now let me die, since I have seen your face, because you are still alive*’ (30). This was not an expression of despair such as uttered by Elijah (1 Kings 19:4). He had seen Joseph’s dreams fulfilled and he was now a very happy man. **He was prepared to die whenever God called him. Are you? Do you look forward to being with the Lord in heaven?** If you have any lingering doubts about your own salvation, come to the Lord now and ask him to save you and to make you his own.

*It is not death to die,
To leave this weary road.
And midst the family on high,
To be at home with God.*

*Jesus, thou Prince of life,
Thy chosen cannot die;
Like thee, they conquer in the strife
To reign with thee on high.* (George W. Bethune)

Why did you steal my gods?

Rachel was quite correct in urging Jacob to obey the will of God (16), but she then sinned against God. The human heart is very perverse (Jeremiah 17:9) and we must be very careful. We too may say good things and then fall into sin. How did Rachel sin?

- She stole her father’s household idols (19). Such idols were often no larger than a child’s doll and they could be hidden away easily. They were used in divination (cp. Ezekiel 21:21) and Rachel may have stolen them to prevent her father using them to determine the route that Jacob had taken for his escape.
- She knew that there is only one God and that any trust in idols or the superstitions associated with them is wicked.
- She probably lied to her father to cover up her theft (34–35).

Jacob departed secretly from Padan Aram and it was three days before an angry Laban realised that Jacob and his family had left the area and that his idols were missing. He set out with his men to apprehend Jacob and caught up with him after seven days in pursuit. The hill country of Gilead was over three hundred miles from Haran. Laban was quite hypocritical in his words to Jacob. Would he really have given his son-in-law the kind of farewell that he suggested (26–28)? Laban told Jacob that the Lord had warned him in a dream against harming him, but he reproached him for the theft of his idols. Jacob protested his innocence, not knowing that Rachel had stolen the idols (29–32).

Isn’t it amazing that Laban could still revere dumb idols and use them for divination when he knew about the living God? His question, ‘*But why did you steal my gods?*’ (30) demonstrates the futility of trusting in dumb idols which are powerless to prevent themselves from being stolen. **Christians must have nothing to do with lucky charms or trust in any object that is supposed to protect us or to guarantee good fortune. They are a denial of our trust in the living God who lovingly and wisely cares for us.**

God is witness between you and me

Jacob was not aware of Rachel's theft of Laban's idols and he angrily rebuked his father-in-law after the unsuccessful search for the stolen idols (36). He reminded him of the wretched and unjust treatment that he had received at his hands. He had toiled for fourteen years in exchange for his daughters and then six years for the flock that he now possessed. Had God not been with him, Laban would have sent him away empty-handed. God had seen all that he had suffered, and his toil, and had rebuked Laban (38–42).

Laban asked Jacob to make a covenant with him. This would seal peace between them (44,52). Jacob and his relatives set up a mound of stones which became known as *'Mizpah'*, meaning 'watch'. Laban showed a belated concern for his daughters fearing that once Jacob had returned to Canaan, he might mistreat them or take other wives. He warned Jacob that the Lord would watch between them saying, *'God is witness between you and me!'* (43–50). They also agreed to keep apart (52) and they ate together after Jacob had offered a sacrifice. Laban departed peacefully the next day after blessing his daughters and his grandchildren. Laban, though an idolater, recognised that *God is witness* to all we say and do. **If we were to remember this more often, we would refrain from unkind words and deeds. God sees our affliction (42), but he also sees when we are guilty of sin against others.**

Laban stands as a warning to those who have had personal dealings with God's people, or have had evidence of the Lord's work in their lives, but have never themselves trusted in God or repented of their sins. Laban had heard the testimony of Abraham's godly servant many years earlier (chapter 24). He had seen the blessing of God upon Jacob and yet he remained in his sin. What was his problem? He was a hardened money-grabber who lived for this world (15–16). If you are not a Christian, what is holding you back from following the Lord Jesus Christ?

It was not you who sent me here, but God

Joseph could not help but be deeply moved by the urgent, selfless plea from the 'new' Judah. He ordered his attendants to leave the room and broke into loud weeping. The brothers were dismayed and silent as Joseph revealed his identity. They had been heartless and wicked in their past treatment of him. He now spoke to them in Hebrew without his interpreter (cp. 42:23) and he enquired after Jacob (45:3). He freely forgave his terrified brothers, telling them that God had overruled all their evil deeds (5–9). He assured them, *'It was not you who sent me here, but God'* (8). **God had planned it all!** He had sent Joseph to Egypt and had made him lord of all the land (5,7–9). This did not lessen the guilt of his brothers but it must have helped Joseph forgive them.

It is a great source of comfort in bitter experiences to know that God is in control. He even uses hostile acts against us to further his purposes. The apostle Paul knew this when thrown into prison at Philippi (Acts 16:22–34). That foul dungeon rang with praise to God, and the jailer and his family were saved. While a prisoner at Rome Paul wrote, *'The things which happened to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel'* (Philippians 1:12). May we learn to see that God is with us in times of pain and perplexity.

Pharaoh and his court were pleased to hear of the coming of Joseph's brothers. He had such a high regard for Joseph that he urged him to bring his father and his brothers' households to Egypt where they would be given the best of all the land of Egypt. The brothers returned home with Egyptian carts in which to bring their wives and children into Egypt. They were also given changes of garments and donkeys loaded with provisions for the return journey. Joseph urged his brothers to avoid strife along the way to Canaan (16–24).

Jacob did not at first believe his sons' report that Joseph was alive. They went on to tell him of all that Joseph had said to them and showed him the Egyptian carts sent to carry him. The old man, now filled with hope, resolved to go to Egypt to see his beloved son (25–28).

Your servant became surety

Though Joseph was overcome with emotion when he met Benjamin (43:30), he still concealed his identity from his brothers. He wanted further proof of their change of character. Before the brothers set out on their journey to Canaan, he told the steward to put his silver cup into Benjamin's sack. This was a special cup and John Currid points out that such cups were used for divination (COMMENTARY, volume 2, pages 309–310). Soon after their departure, Joseph sent his steward after them to accuse them of theft and of repaying his goodness with evil. They were horrified and humbled when Joseph's cup was discovered in Benjamin's sack (1–13). Joseph led his brothers to believe that he could practise divination and this would have further troubled them (15–17).

Judah had a murky history. He had been the ringleader in selling Joseph into slavery (37:26–27) and he had been quite heartless in his attitude to Tamar (chapter 38). It was a chastened and humbled Judah who eloquently pleaded with Joseph, offering himself as a slave instead of Benjamin (18–33). Tribulation had developed godly character (Romans 5:3–4) in the life of Joseph and it did the same for Judah. He had been heartless and uncaring, but now he was different. **He was a broken man, but he was also a better man.** He cared intensely for his young brother and for his father (34). Jacob was later to bless him with the words, '*Judah, you are he whom your brothers shall praise*' (49:8).

'*Your servant became surety*' (32; cp. 43:8–9). Judah had taken responsibility for his young brother and offered himself as a substitute. The Lord Jesus Christ came from the line of Judah. He was the great substitute, giving his life at Calvary to save sinners. He is our Surety and has freed us from the bondage of Satan and sin. Free indeed (John 8:36), but at what cost!

*Bearing shame and scoffing rude,
In my place condemned he stood;
Sealed my pardon with his blood:
Hallelujah! what a Saviour!*

(Philip P. Bliss)

I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies and of all the truth which you have shown your servant

Jacob had seen angels at Bethel when God promised to be with him and to protect him (28:15). On his return home he was met by the angels of God (1–2). This would have reminded him of God's promises. He needed this encouragement because he did not know whether Esau would seek to carry out his threat to kill him (27:41–42). Do you ever think about the ministry of angels. They are *ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation* (Hebrews 1:14). They encamp around us to keep us and to deliver us (Psalm 34:7; 91:11).

Jacob sent messengers ahead of him to tell Esau of his return home. He was very fearful when they returned to tell him that Esau was on his way with four hundred men. He divided those with him into two companies, so that one of those companies would be able to escape if Esau attacked. Jacob did what any believer should do when afraid. He turned to the Lord in prayer. These verses remind us of some important principles of prayer:

- Jacob reminded God of his promises to him (9). We too should plead the promises of God as they encourage us to be bold in prayer (eg. Luke 18:27; Philippians 4:19).
- He was humble and showed gratitude in his prayer. He had reminded Laban of his faithful service, but he said to God, '*I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies and of all the truth which you have shown your servant*' (10). God does not owe us anything. We owe all that we have to the mercy and faithfulness of God.
- He was not vague in his prayers as he made his needs known (11).

Jacob planned to make Esau more favourably disposed towards him by offering him a present (13–21). **He made his plans but he watered them with prayer. Are you prayerful in your planning?**

I will not let you go unless you bless me!

Jacob was anxious concerning his meeting with Esau and once he had escorted his family over the brook Jabbok we find him alone. *And a Man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day* (24). Who was the Man who wrestled with him until daybreak? He is described elsewhere as ‘God’ and as ‘the Angel’ (31:11,13; cp. Hosea 12:3–4). Whenever ‘the Angel of the LORD’ appeared to people in Old Testament times, they invariably testified that they had met with God. Jacob testifies, ‘I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved’ (30). Many Bible commentators, including John Calvin, believe that the Angel is the Lord Jesus Christ in a pre-incarnation appearance.

We often think of the struggle in prayer as being with Satan and the powers of darkness as they seek to hinder us and keep us from seeking the face of God (eg. Ephesians 6:12). It was the Lord who wrestled with Jacob in this instance and he eventually put his hip out of joint to stop him wrestling. Jacob could still cling however and he refused to let go. He said, ‘I will not let you go unless you bless me!’ (26). As he struggled with God, he wept as he pleaded for a blessing (Hosea 12:3–4). What determination and perseverance!

The Lord changed Jacob’s name to ‘Israel’ which means ‘Prince with God’ (28). He had struggled with God and with men, and had prevailed. The Lord did not answer Jacob’s request, ‘Tell me your name, I pray’ (29), but Jacob realised that he had been speaking to God. He called the place ‘Peniel’ (which means ‘the face of God’) before limping on to meet Esau (29–32).

What is the significance of all this? Twenty years earlier Jacob had used deceit and subterfuge to obtain the blessing of Isaac. **We now find him depending on God alone for blessing. He did not need to resort to sinful practices to get on in life.** We must not be like the old Jacob who relied on his scheming more than he relied on God. Take hold of God, cling to him and persevere in prayer. He will certainly fulfil his promises and bring you through to the place of blessing.

May God Almighty give you mercy before the man

The continuing famine forced the return of Joseph’s brothers to Egypt to obtain further supplies of food. Judah now appears as the spokesman for the brothers, though Reuben is the first-born. John Currid points out that Reuben had lost his pre-eminent position because he had lain with one of his father’s concubines (49:4; cp. 35:2. – COMMENTARY ON GENESIS, volume 2, page 296).

Judah knew that they had to take Benjamin with them if they were to have an audience with the Egyptian governor. Jacob was very reluctant to allow this but Judah reminded him of the stark choice that faced them: Go to Egypt, taking Benjamin, or remain at home and die of starvation (5–8). Judah pledged himself as a surety for Benjamin to show his determination to bring Benjamin back to his father (9). Jacob told them to take a present for the Egyptian governor and he committed them all to the Lord’s care, saying, ‘*May God Almighty give you mercy before the man, that he may release your other brother and Benjamin*’ (14). His despair and fear is seen in his words, ‘*If I am bereaved, I am bereaved.*’ **When we are perplexed or uncertain, we need to commit our situation to God who is merciful and kind (cp. 2 Timothy 1:16).**

The brothers were afraid when summoned to the house of Joseph. They had protested that they were honest men (42:11) but Joseph knew that they had not been honest in the past (37:20). He put their claim to the test by secretly returning the purchase money to their sacks and they sought to repay it (21–23). God had been working in their lives for good. They were not allowed to return the money. Joseph’s steward said, ‘*Your God ... has given you treasure*’ (23).

They prostrated themselves before Joseph (26–28; cp. 37:9–11) and he enquired after Jacob. He was so overwhelmed with emotion when he saw Benjamin, that he went to his chamber and wept. When he had composed himself, he gave a feast for the men who were astonished when he seated them according to their age (33). Perhaps they thought that this man had great powers of divination.

All these things are against me

Joseph sent his brothers away with supplies to sustain them on their journey and he commanded that the money used to purchase the grain should be placed in their sacks. When one of them later opened his sack to feed his donkey, he was puzzled and afraid to find the bundle of money he had handed over to the Egyptians in the mouth of the sack (25–27). The troubled conscience of Joseph's brothers was again revealed by their reaction to this discovery. They were afraid, believing that this was a sign that God was punishing them for the way they had treated Joseph years earlier. They asked, *'What is this that God has done to us?' (28).*

Jacob was shocked to hear from his sons of the harsh Egyptian governor who was holding Simeon hostage. The demand that Benjamin be taken on the next trip to Egypt was too much for him to accept. He uttered in anguish, *'All these things are against me' (36).* The old man, wounded by bitter and bewildering experiences, had lost sight of the wisdom and goodness of God in his providence. *'All these things'* were not against him, but for him if only he had faith to see it. We know Romans 8:28, *All things work together for good to those who love God* in our heads, but it needs to be impressed on our hearts.

Have you been thinking or complaining that everything is against you? Beware of such an attitude, it will drag you down! Encourage yourself in these words from Isaiah 50:10: *Who among you fears the LORD? Who obeys the voice of his Servant (the Lord Jesus)? Who walks in darkness and has no light? Let him trust in the name of the LORD and rely upon his God.*

*Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust him for his grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face*

(William Cowper)

God has dealt graciously with me

Jacob could hardly have hoped for a better meeting with Esau. He had planned to send everyone ahead of himself to prepare the way for this meeting but he now went ahead of his family to meet his brother (3). The way he arranged his family to present them to Esau is significant. The two handmaids with their children are first, then Leah with her children, and last of all Rachel and Joseph (1–2). Currid points out that Rachel would have had the best chance of escape if there were hostility.

Jacob ceremoniously bowed seven times before Esau and the brothers embraced in a tearful reunion. Jacob introduced his family as those whom God had graciously given to him (4–7). He then urged a reluctant Esau to accept his present telling him of his relief at the kind reception given to him. He said, *'God has dealt graciously with me' (10–11).* Here was a different Jacob. He had stolen Esau's blessing, but he was now able to give his brother a blessing because God had been so good to him! Esau accepted the present as a token of their reconciliation. **There is also an often neglected principle here:** God had *dealt graciously* with Jacob and had forgiven him for the wrong that he did to his brother, but it was good and proper that he made amends with Esau. **If we have wronged anyone, we must not only seek God's forgiveness, but theirs also. Making amends with some kind deed or present helps to cement the reconciliation.**

Jacob led Esau to believe that he would follow him to Seir (or Edom), but that he would follow at a slower pace because of the children with him and the animals with their young (12–15). It is obvious that Jacob had no intention of doing this. He did not travel south to Edom but he went instead west to Succoth (17). Jacob had no excuse for such behaviour. He should have told his brother that God had told him to return to Canaan and that he was not able to go to Edom. He went on from Succoth to Shechem, where he purchased some land. Jacob built an altar to the Lord at Shechem (18–20) but he would have cause to regret staying there.

You have troubled me by making me obnoxious

Jacob's daughter Dinah (30:21) was about 15 years of age at the time of the sordid events recorded in this chapter. Hamor the ruler of Shechem named his son after the town. This son fell madly in love with Dinah and in his passion he raped her and imprisoned her in his home (2–3,26). Shechem asked his father to obtain Dinah for him to be his wife. When Jacob heard that his daughter had been raped, he *held his peace* until his sons came in from caring for their livestock (1–5). They were grieved and furious when they heard what had befallen their young sister. Shechem had done *a disgraceful thing* (6–7).

Hamor came to see Jacob and his sons seeking the hand of Dinah in marriage to Shechem. He also proposed closer ties with Jacob and his people by means of intermarriage and trade. Shechem expressed his willingness to give any dowry possible for Dinah. Jacob's sons had other ideas when they made their demand that every male of Shechem must submit to the rite of circumcision. Hamor and Shechem persuaded their men to agree to this demand, promising that they would then acquire the property and livestock of Jacob and his family (8–24).

While the men of Shechem were in pain as they recovered from their circumcision, Simeon and Levi came upon them and slaughtered them. They took Dinah from Shechem's house and with their brothers they plundered the city (25–29). A distressed Jacob said to them, '*You have troubled me by making me obnoxious among the inhabitants of the land*' (30). He was to be troubled by this incident for the rest of his life. When he blessed his sons before he died, he said of Simeon and Levi, '*Instruments of cruelty are in their habitation*' (49:5).

Jacob failed to display leadership in this disgraceful affair. He did not show the outrage that his sons had when he heard about the rape and detention of Dinah. He knew that there must be no intermarriage with the Canaanites and he should have refused to allow the proposed marriage of Dinah to Shechem.(cp. 28:1). **When we disobey the will of God, trouble will surely follow.**

Then Joseph remembered the dreams

Jacob sent his sons, but not Benjamin, to Egypt to purchase grain because of the famine in Canaan (1–5). When Joseph's brothers arrived in Egypt they bowed down before Joseph. He recognised them but they did not recognise him (6–7). He would have been dressed as an Egyptian ruler and it had been more than twenty years since they had seen him (cp. 37:2; 41:46, 53).

When Joseph saw his brothers, he *remembered the dreams which he had dreamed about them* (9). They had hated him and taunted him about those dreams which God had given to him (37:8,20), but he now saw them fulfilled. Scoffers may taunt us but there will be a happy day when we will rejoice to see the fulfilment of God's promises and remember the times that we clung to them and were encouraged by them. Let us rejoice in the exceedingly great and precious promises of God (2 Peter 1:4).

Joseph's brothers were deeply troubled by his apparent hostility toward them and by his accusation that they were spies. They protested that they were honest men, which was hardly true when their past record is considered. They spoke of their brother Benjamin who remained in Canaan and of another brother (Joseph) who was dead (9–13). They were horrified when Joseph demanded that they return to him with Benjamin and they remembered their wicked deeds, little realising that Joseph understood their conversation (18–23). Why did Joseph appear to treat his brothers so harshly? He wanted to see evidence of improvement in their character. Reuben had shown more sympathy to Joseph when the brothers had seized him and he had displayed a tender conscience (22). Joseph's actions were not born of malice; he wept after he heard the words of Reuben (24). He held Simeon in prison as a hostage, probably because he knew that this brother was a cruel man (34:25–29; 49:5–7). Time is not able to remove guilt. **A guilty conscience torments, but God has provided the remedy** – the blood of the Lord Jesus through which sinners are justified and have peace with God (Romans 5:1,9).

God has caused me to be fruitful in the land of my affliction

What an amazing change of circumstances in Joseph's life! He began the day as a prisoner and ended it as a powerful ruler, second only to Pharaoh. Joseph was seventeen when sold into slavery (37:2); he had endured thirteen years of hardship and suffering and was thirty when Pharaoh raised him to high office in Egypt (46). He gave him his ring on which was the royal seal; this signified that Joseph had royal authority over the nation of Egypt. Joseph's father had given him a special tunic of many colours which his brothers had stripped from him (37:23). Pharaoh now clothed Joseph in fine linen and put a gold necklace around his neck (42). John Currid points out that the gold chain 'symbolises the bestowing of great reward and favour upon the recipient' (COMMENTARY ON GENESIS, volume 2, page 269).

Pharaoh also gave Joseph a new name – Zaphnath-Paaneah, which means 'God speaks and he lives'. The seven years of plenty came as Joseph had prophesied and he organised the storage of the huge surplus of grain. His authority in Egypt was consolidated when the years of famine came and he was left to organise the sale and distribution of the grain (47–57).

The names that Joseph gave to his sons are significant:

- 'Manasseh' which means 'making forgetful'. God had made him forget all the toil and tribulation that he had suffered at the hands of his brothers (51).
- 'Ephraim' means 'fruitfulness'. Joseph said, '*For God has caused me to be fruitful in the land of my affliction*' (52). The Lord had not only made him great in Egypt, but also godly and stable in his character. *Tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character* (Romans 5:3–4). That is the secret! Godly character and fruitfulness in God's service do not come through seeking 'second blessings'. They are moulded in the school of trial and tribulation. **If we want God to use us, we must expect affliction and trial. He will cause us to be fruitful in the land of our affliction.**

God, who answered me in the day of my distress

The Lord told Jacob to return to Bethel after the dreadful events at Shechem. The Lord told him that he was to build an altar there, reminding him he had appeared to him at Bethel when he fled from Esau (1). It would appear that his sons took idols in the plunder of Shechem (34:29). Jacob ordered them to get rid of these idols and to purify themselves as he was going to build an altar to the Lord (2–3). Jacob buried the idols and his sons' earrings under the terebinth tree at Shechem and left them behind (4). The earrings may have been engraved with images of foreign gods.

We cannot worship God acceptably with impure hearts or if we are entertaining any 'idols' in our lives. Our idols may not be images of stone or wood, but of money, pleasure, power-seeking or covetousness (cp. Colossians 3:5) which usurp the place of God in our lives. We must do what Jacob did and bury our idols!

God protected Jacob and his family from those who may have sought revenge for the slaughter of the males of Shechem. **The terror of God was upon the cities that were all around them, and they did not pursue the sons of Jacob** (5; cp. 34:30). After he had built the altar at Bethel, God again appeared to him and blessed him. He reminded Jacob of the new name '*Israel*' that he had given to him at Peniel (9–10; cp. 32:28). He said, '*I am God Almighty*' ('El Shaddai'), the name he used when he made covenant promises to Abraham. He now repeated those promises to Jacob (11–12; cp. 17:1–8). Jacob set up a stone pillar and poured out a drink offering upon it and then oil (13–15).

Jacob testified to his household of the Lord's goodness to him: '*Let us arise and go up to Bethel; and I will make an altar there to God, who answered me in the day of my distress and who has been with me in the way which I have gone*' (3). **Are you feeling distressed or discouraged? Come now to God in prayer. He will answer you in your distress! He will be with you wherever you go but be sure that there aren't any 'idols' in your baggage.**

And Israel heard about it

Jacob and his family left Bethel to go to Ephrath (or Bethlehem) but before the end of their journey Rachel went into a very difficult labour from which she died. The midwife comforted the dying woman telling her that she was giving birth to a son. She had prayed after the birth of Joseph, ‘*May the LORD add to me another son*’ (ESV – 30:24). God had heard her prayer. She called the child Ben-Oni which means ‘the son of my sorrow’ but Jacob called him Benjamin which means ‘the son of my right hand’ (16–19).

After he had buried Rachel, Jacob continued his journey and encamped beyond the tower of Eder (21). While there Reuben violated Bilhah, one of his father’s concubines, Rachel’s handmaid, and the mother of Dan and Naphtali. John Currid points out that this was not just an act of lust, but it ensured that Bilhah would be unable to usurp the place of his mother, Leah, as Jacob’s chief wife. The act may also have been a challenge to Jacob’s authority. In those times the eldest son in heathen families inherited his father’s concubines (cp. 2 Samuel 16:22). Reuben was probably asserting his claim to be the heir of Jacob, but it was because of this wicked act *his birthright was given to the sons of Joseph* (1 Chronicles 5:1). See COMMENTARY ON GENESIS, volume 2, pages 170–171). *And Israel heard about it* (22). Jacob appeared not to respond to Reuben’s vile deed, but he cursed Reuben for it as he lay dying: ‘*Unstable as water, you shall not excel*’ (49:3–4). **Reuben sought to gain the pre-eminence and he ended up losing it.**

Jacob then lost his father, Isaac (27–29). This was a great period of trial and suffering for him. John Currid comments, ‘But unlike the unbeliever, no matter how severe the affliction, there is one thing the believer can count on: suffering will never destroy the child of God. It cannot and will not claim victory over the godly (Romans 8:35–39).’

Chapter 36 contains an extensive list of the descendants of Esau and records the establishment of Edom as their country.

A man in whom is the Spirit of God

There are times when life seems to be very cruel. Joseph had pleaded with the chief butler to seek his release, but he was forgotten (40:14–15, 23). While the chief butler cannot be excused for his ingratitude and forgetfulness, we must remember that God’s ways are not our ways. He was in control of all these events and his timing is always perfect. The Lord was preparing the way for Pharaoh to be calling on Joseph for help rather than for Joseph to be seeking favours from the king.

Joseph was remembered two years later when God sent the two dreams which troubled Pharaoh and baffled the magicians and the wise men of Egypt (1–13). The chief butler was in the right place at the right time. He was able to tell his troubled king about a young Hebrew man in the prison who was able to interpret dreams, and who had accurately interpreted his dream and that of the chief baker after they had been sent to prison. The king then summoned Joseph to the palace to interpret his dream. Joseph shaved and changed his clothing, putting off his prison garments. In just a few hours God turned his life around. Are you feeling impatient in some trial which appears to be unending? Do you feel forgotten? Men may forget you, but God will never forget you. He will work out his purpose in your life.

We cannot help but be impressed by Joseph’s poise and confidence as he spoke to Pharaoh. He was not ashamed to own his Lord in a heathen palace. He gave God the glory for his ability to interpret the dreams (16,25,28,32). Joseph told the king that the dreams had the same interpretation. God had given two dreams because he had established the events prophesied and would soon bring them to pass.

Pharaoh recognised that this Hebrew was different; he was *a man in whom is the Spirit of God* (38). Pharaoh worshipped many gods but he was forced to acknowledge the true and living God (39). When God’s hand is upon a man or woman, even unbelievers take notice (cp. Acts 4:13; 6:10). **Are unbelievers able to see the fruit of the Holy Spirit in your life (cp. Galatians 5:22–23)?**

Why do you look so sad today?

One of the most difficult lessons to learn in the Christian life is to accept the wisdom of God's providence when everything appears to be going wrong for us. Many of the greatest triumphs of faith have come out of adverse circumstances and difficulties. Daniel was mightily used by God after being taken to Babylon as a captive. We do not find Joseph bemoaning his 'fate' or indulging in self-pity while he was in prison. He had learned the vital lesson that if it were God's will for him to be in that prison then there was no better place in all the world for him to be.

Pharaoh had been offended by his butler and baker and he put them into prison. The captain of the guard (Potiphar?) ordered Joseph to serve them (1–4). The 'chance' meeting with these two men was to set in motion a train of events through which the Lord would raise Joseph to esteem and greatness. **When God is with us, there are no 'chance' happenings in our lives.** Both men were troubled by dreams which they were unable to interpret. Seeing that they were downcast, Joseph asked them, '*Why do you look so sad today?*' (6–8). Joseph interpreted their dreams which indicated a happy outcome within three days for the butler and a terrible end for the baker (9–19). The butler promised Joseph that he would seek justice for him, but he failed to remember his promise (23). We know that God was wisely and lovingly working out his purposes in the life of Joseph. *Tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance character; and character, hope* (Romans 5:3–4). Are you looking sad today? Hope in God, *casting all your care upon him, for he cares for you* (Psalm 42:5,11; 1 Peter 5:7).

James Philip makes a very telling comment on this chapter: 'The story of Joseph began with a man intent upon interpreting his own dreams, and preoccupied with his own interests, but now he is interpreting the dreams of others. Nothing could be more significant. He has been freed from the tyranny of self-centred living, and it is worth a dozen imprisonments and humiliations to know such an emancipation' (HOLYROOD BIBLE NOTES).

Into a pit

Seventeen-year old Joseph helped the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah (Dan, Naphtali, Gad and Asher; 30:3–7, 9–12) in their work as shepherds. He gossiped about them to his father and if they were aware of this, it would not have endeared him to them. Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah, and Joseph, son of Rachel, was his favourite son. He probably spoiled Joseph more than ever after the death of Rachel. This favouritism led to Joseph's brothers hating and resenting him (1–4). We shall be seeing that dreams and a God-given ability to interpret them played a very significant part in Joseph's life. He was immature enough to relate the two dreams concerning his future greatness to his hostile brothers. *They hated him even more* and Jacob rebuked him (5–9). *His brothers envied him, but his father kept the matter in mind* (10–11). Their nickname for Joseph, '*this dreamer*', is an indication of the strong resentment of his brothers (19).

They plotted to kill Joseph when he arrived on an errand from his father. Reuben was the exception and he planned to deliver his young brother from the pit into which they had cast him (20–22). His plan was thwarted while he was away, when the others sold Joseph into slavery (28–30). Jacob had killed *two choice kids of the goats* to deceive Isaac (27:9) and now his own sons killed *a kid of the goats* to deceive him into believing that Joseph had been torn to pieces by a wild animal (31–33). Jacob was shattered with grief and God, whom he had seen face to face (32:30), was silent. **God had wise purposes for Jacob and for Joseph, and he was to bring much blessing out of this trial.**

Things seemed to go horribly wrong for Joseph. He was thrown *into a pit* (24) and then taken to Egypt as a slave! His comfortable, pampered world was swept away in an instant, but the Lord had planned it all to refine his character and to bring a great deliverance to his people (50:20). **God's dealings are often very painful as he refines us to fit us for his service (Job 23:10).** When our circumstances do not seem to make sense, we need to encourage ourselves in the Lord and in his word (Jeremiah 29:11–13).

She has been more righteous than I

This chapter stands alone from the main story to show the origin of the three families of Judah (cp. Numbers 26:20). Judah left his brothers and went to enjoy the company of Hirah, a Canaanite from Adullam, who probably encouraged him into marriage with a Canaanite woman. Judah would have known this was wrong and it was to bring him much unhappiness. His first two sons were slain by the Lord on account of their wickedness (1–10). We know that a believer must not marry an unbeliever (2 Corinthians 6:14). We must also be careful that we do not take as our best friends those who will draw us away from the Lord (1 Corinthians 15:33).

When a man died childless, it was the custom for the next brother to marry the widow to raise up children by her. This practice (called ‘levirate marriage’) was to be established in the law of Moses (Deuteronomy 25:5–10). God killed Onan for his contempt of his brother’s widow Tamar. Judah told her to remain a widow, promising her that his son Shelah would be given to her as her husband when he was old enough to marry (11). Tamar was no longer free to marry anyone else. Judah did not keep his promise and this drove Tamar to a desperate course of action to shame Judah. She disguised herself as a prostitute and Judah fell into the sin of sexual immorality (12–18; notice that he was with his friend Hirah at the time of this incident).

Judah was furious to discover that Tamar had become pregnant through prostitution. He would have had her burned for a sin in which he had been involved. She had taken his signet and cord, and his staff as a pledge for payment when he had sinned with her. Judah could not deny his own guilt and confessed, ‘*She has been more righteous than I*’ (26). **We must beware of hypocrisy when judging others. We may be guilty of greater sins (cp. 2 Samuel 12:1–13; Matthew 7:1–15).** Tamar and her twin sons are found in the genealogy of the Lord Jesus (Matthew 1:3). The human descent of Christ is traced through David’s line to Perez. God chose this line which had such an unholy beginning. How glorious his grace!

The LORD was with Joseph

Joseph maintained a great testimony, even in adversity. He was a slave and a prisoner, but the Lord was with him all the time. We read that *the LORD was with Joseph*, and this could be seen by those who did not know God (2–3). The same words are also found in verses 21 and 23. Every Christian has the promise that God is with him. The Lord himself has said, ‘*I will never leave you nor forsake you*’ (Hebrews 13:5). You will notice from today’s reading that having the presence of God does not spare us from temptation, from suffering, or from passing through adverse circumstances.

When God is with us, Satan is never far away. The devil used Potiphar’s wife in one attempt after another to seduce Joseph who refused to sin against his master and against God (9). Notice how different he was from Judah who needed no persuasion to fall into sexual sin (38:16). Joseph had a ‘God-consciousness’ about his life and he behaved wisely. He avoided the wicked woman as much as possible to escape temptation (10). When she took hold of him, he fled outside (12). Joseph’s example teaches us never to linger with temptation.

The outcome was most distressing for Joseph who was falsely accused of the very sin that he had so steadfastly avoided. He was thrown into prison, but he knew that God was with him and had a work for him to do there. The Lord overruled Satan’s wicked lies. His faithful servant was to be elevated to the palace through his experience in prison. **Satan unwittingly furthers God’s purposes. To God be all the glory!**

*Rejoice, believer, in the Lord,
Who makes your cause his own;
The hope that’s built upon his word
Can ne’er be overthrown.*

*Though sometimes unperceived by sense,
Faith sees him always near,
A Guide, a Glory, a Defence;
Then what have you to fear?*

(John Newton)