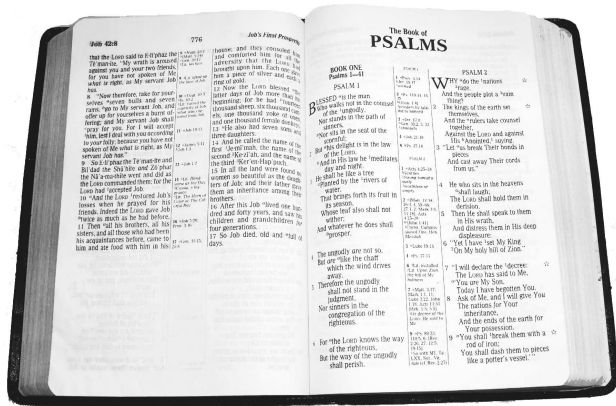


PILGRIM BIBLE NOTES

God's holy Word simply explained and applied



May 2021

Bible readings with from Genesis chapters 24 to 42

Do not hinder me, since the LORD has prospered my way

The servant was welcomed into Rebekah's home and he acknowledged the hand of God upon him as he recounted his story to her father Bethuel and brother Laban. He told them about God's blessing upon Abraham (35–36) and how the Lord had answered his own prayers (42–48). Bethuel and Laban saw that God was in the proposed marriage of Rebekah to Isaac (50–51). Abraham's servant was a godly man in whom he could trust. He worshipped God after seeing how the Lord had led him to meet Rebekah (26) and he again worshipped God when Bethuel and Laban agreed that Rebekah could marry Isaac (52).

They wanted Rebekah to remain with them for *a few days, at least ten* before she should depart (54–55). The servant was very single-minded in his mission and he begged them, '*Do not hinder me, since the LORD has prospered my way.*' Rebekah readily consented to go with him and they blessed her before she departed (56–61). The man's single-mindedness is also seen in his insistence that he told Bethuel and Laban of his mission before he sat down to eat (33). He would not be sidetracked from his task. If we wish to be useful in the service of the Lord, we too must be purposeful and trust God in all our work for him.

The whole of this chapter is a thrilling account of spiritual people being led and blessed by God. Are you about to make some important decision? Have you prayerfully thought things through with a desire to honour God? *In all your ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct your paths* (Proverbs 3:6).

*When we walk with the Lord
In the light of his word,
What a glory he sheds on our way!
While we do his good will,
He abides with us still
And with all who will trust and obey.*

(James H. Samnis)

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So he was comforted after his mother's death

Rebekah and her young women servants left her people, riding on camels as they followed Abraham's (61). Isaac was meditating in the fields toward evening when he saw the camels coming. When Rebekah saw Isaac she dismounted from her camel, having asked the servant who he was. The servant told her that he was his master he then gave Isaac a report of all the things that he had done.

Isaac took Rebekah to be his wife *and he loved her. So he was comforted after his mother's death* (67). Dale Ralph Davis raises a very important point: 'Isaac is not a mere cog in God's plan, but he is a hurting person for whom God cares. And why does he hurt? He misses his mother. He aches because of her death and absence ... So what does God do? He gives Isaac someone to love, a wife, Rebekah. And someone to love him back...Yahweh is the God of the big plan and of the individual need' (FAITH OF OUR FATHERS – EXPOSITIONS OF GENESIS 12 – 25, pages 157–158).

It is a wonderful comfort to know that God really loves us and cares for us. This is the great difference between real Christianity and other religions or false cults, which know nothing of a God who powerfully and lovingly cares for the individual. We are insignificant compared to his supreme greatness and sovereignty, but we are so significant that he also loves us and gave the Lord Jesus to die on the cross to save us from our sins. **Christian, are you struggling? Remember that God is kind and that he cares for you (see Isaiah 54:10).**

*Day by day, and with each passing moment,
Strength I find, to meet my trials here;
Trusting in my Father's wise bestowment,
I've no cause for worry or for fear.
He whose heart is kind beyond all measure
Gives unto each day what he deems best—
Lovingly, its part of pain and pleasure,
Mingling toil with peace and rest.*

(Lina Sandell-Berg)

Now Isaac pleaded with the LORD for his wife

Abraham lived for a further thirty-five years after the marriage of Isaac and Rebekah. He married again and his wife Keturah bore him six sons. He also had sons by his concubines and the Bible has little to say on these closing years of his life (1–6). There is no problem in a widower re-marrying, but for Abraham to have concubines was sinful. He had been ill-advised by Sarah to take Hagar as a concubine and his conscience no longer appeared to trouble him in his matter. We must never let our conscience or the sinful culture of the world around us be our guide if we are tempted to do anything that is contrary to the teaching of God's Word.

Abraham was careful to give gifts to his other sons and to send them away from Isaac on whom he bestowed all that he had. He was buried by Isaac and Ishmael in the grave which he had purchased for Sarah (5–10). The genealogy of Ishmael is recorded in verses 12 to 18.

We read that Abraham *'was gathered to his people'* (8). The same is said of Ishmael (17), Isaac (35:39), Jacob (49:33), Aaron (Numbers 20:24,26), and Moses (Numbers 27:13). Dale Ralph Davis points out, *'It is not the same as burial in an ancestral grave, because neither Abraham nor Aaron nor Moses were buried with their forefathers. Nor is it synonymous with burial, for verse 9 here seems to indicate that burial is distinct from it. (FAITH OF OUR FATHERS – EXPOSITIONS OF GENESIS 12 – 25, page 163)*. The statement implies that they have joined their ancestors in the realm of the dead. We do not cease to exist when we die. David says to the Lord in Psalm 139, verse 8, *'If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!'* (ESV). After death we are not only *'gathered to our people'* but we will also meet God. **Are you ready for that day?**

*For ever with the Lord!
Amen so let it be!
Life from the dead is in that word,
'Tis immortality!*

(James Montgomery)

Now Isaac pleaded with the LORD for his wife

God blessed Isaac (11), but not with children. He was forty years old when he married Rebekah and they had to wait until he was sixty before the birth of Jacob and Esau. The twenty years of childlessness had been a sore trial for the couple and Isaac did what every believer should do when troubled; he took the matter to God in prayer. – *Now Isaac pleaded with the LORD for his wife ... and the LORD granted his plea* (21). He was aware that God had promised that a great nation would descend from him (cp. 17:19), but God’s promise did not make him complacent. *He pleaded with the LORD*. When Rebekah was troubled by the struggling of the unborn twins in her womb, *she went to enquire of the LORD* (22). **Prayer was a way of life for Isaac and Rebekah. Is it a way of life for you?**

The Lord answered Rebekah’s enquiry by revealing that she was bearing twins from whom would descend two nations, the one being stronger than the other and that *the older would serve the younger* (21–23). The apostle Paul uses this incident as an illustration of the doctrine of election (Romans 9:10–13).

Jacob, The younger twin was born clutching at the heel of his brother Esau, struggling as if to prevent his brother being born first. The conflict between the twins that began in the womb was to continue. Jacob’s name means ‘one who takes the heel’ or ‘supplanter’. They were very different from each other in appearance and in personality. Esau was covered in hair and very red in complexion, but Jacob was smooth-skinned (cp. 27:11, 23; Hosea 12:3). Esau became a skilled hunter who delighted his father. Home-loving Jacob was his mother’s favourite (24–28).

*What a Friend we have in Jesus,
All our sins and griefs to bear!
What a privilege to carry
Everything to God in prayer!*

(Joseph M. Scriven)

Esau despised his birthright

Esau, being the first-born, possessed the birthright which entitled him to be the head of the family at his father's death and laid on him the responsibility for their spiritual welfare. One day, Esau returned from a hunting trip very weary and hungry. We cannot believe his dramatic claim that he was about to die (32). John Currid writes, 'In the Hebrew, Esau demands "red stuff, red stuff" — a reiteration like this is a powerful way of emphasising the object. Esau wants the stew and he wants it now! The Hebrew term for "red stuff" is *'ādōm*, and that is why Esau is named Edom. He receives this additional name because of this incident of gluttony and impatience. His name is "Red Stuff"!' (COMMENTARY ON GENESIS, volume 2, page 20).

Scheming Jacob refused to give him some of his lentil stew and *Esau despised his birthright* by selling it for some of that stew and a morsel of bread (29–34). Esau turned his back on his spiritual privileges and responsibilities and he is described as a '*profane person*' (that is 'godless' – Hebrews 12:16). Esau was willing to sacrifice the future to satisfy a craving in the present. Many a professing Christian has ruined his testimony and his enjoyment of God because he has yielded to temptation and fallen into sin. **The devil makes sure that we do not have an eye to the future when he dangles temptation before us.** The Lord has given us great blessings but he has also given us great responsibilities. Let us be strong in God and pursue holiness, *without which no one will see the Lord* (Hebrews 12:14).

There is one thing far worse to despise than a birthright such as Esau had. It is to despise the riches of God's goodness (Romans 2:4). We are all sinners and not one of us deserve God's mercy and kindness. The Lord is good to all those who call upon him (Romans 10:12) and those who reject his offer of mercy, forgiveness and cleansing from sin, the blessing of peace with God, the kingdom of God, eternal life, and a glorious future are far, far more foolish than Esau! **If you are not a Christian, be sure that you do not repeat Esau's folly.**

And the LORD blessed him

Famine drove Isaac to Gerar in the land of the Philistines where the Lord appeared to him and told him not to go down to Egypt. The names of kings in those days were often used by their successors and it is unlikely that the Abimelech here is the same man with whom Abraham had dealings. Currid points out that the Hebrew for the name in this chapter is slightly different.

God appeared to Isaac and gave him the same promises that he had given to Abraham his father (3–5; cp. 12:2–3; 15:5; 17:19). Though Isaac lived to be 180 years old, the Bible has less to say about him than about Abraham (175 years old), Jacob (147 years old) or Joseph (110 years old). Isaac was a godly man like his father, but like his father he was also guilty of the sin of deception. He too, pretended that his wife was his sister, because he feared that Rebekah would be taken from him and that he would be killed.

One day Abimelech, king of Gerar, saw Isaac caressing Rebekah and he realised that she must be his wife. He rebuked Isaac and warned his people that anyone who touched Isaac or Rebekah would be put to death (11–12). The king was a pagan but he was fearful of one of his people becoming (unwittingly) guilty of adultery (10). We live in evil times when sexual immorality is considered by many to be perfectly acceptable. Even more alarming is the evidence that this wicked thinking has influenced the behaviour of some professing Christians.

Isaac must have felt profoundly ashamed of his sin of deception but God was very gracious to him! We read: *And the LORD blessed him* (12). Isaac prospered so greatly that Philistines envied him (13–14). You may have failed God and you know that you cannot excuse yourself. Come to the Lord, confess your sin, repent of it and forsake it. The Lord will not cast you off but he will restore you and he will bless you as you seek to honour him in your life. **How kind, how wonderful, how good is the Lord! Let us worship him and praise him.**

Rehoboth

Abraham had made a covenant of friendship with the Philistines even though some of them had seized a well of water which belonged to him (21:22–26). After Abraham's death they stopped up his wells but Isaac dug them again and called them by the names given to them by his father. The Philistines envied Isaac for his prosperity and their king asked him to go away from them (13–16). Isaac moved to the Valley of Gerar where his servants dug out another of his father's wells. The Philistine herdsmen claimed this well and the next well that Isaac dug. He called them '*Esek*' and '*Sitnah*' (meaning 'contention' and 'hostility'). There was no quarrel over the next well which Isaac called '*Rehoboth*' (which means 'enlargement' or 'spaciousness'). When he named the new well, he said, '*For now the LORD has made room for us, and we shall be made fruitful in the land*' (22). You may have wondered why some chapels are called 'Rehoboth'. Those who planted these churches expected God to make their witness fruitful.

Isaac later moved to Beersheba where the Lord again appeared to him. God encouraged him not to fear, reassuring him that he was with him and would bless him. *He built an altar there and called on the name of the LORD* and his servants dug yet another well (23–25). Abimelech came to visit Isaac to make his peace with him. He realised that God was with him and that Isaac's increasing power could pose a real threat. Isaac had a feast prepared for them and they made a covenant.

On the same day his servants told him that they had found water in the well that they had dug (26–33). **God blessed Isaac who had shown remarkable restraint in the face of repeated provocation.** God honoured him for his self-denying conduct and his adversaries had to admit, '*We have certainly seen that the LORD is with you*' (28). How do you react when others annoy you or provoke you? God's blessing did not keep heartache away from Isaac whose father had been careful to see that he married one of their own people. Esau by contrast married two Hittite women and they brought grief to Isaac and Rebekah ('*made life bitter*' – English Standard Version; 34–35; cp. 27:46).

I shall seem to be a deceiver to him

When Isaac was old and blind he was determined to give his blessing to Esau, despite the grief that he had brought to Rebekah and himself (26:34–35). This blessing was important because the son receiving it ruled over his brothers (see verse 29). Isaac and Rebekah knew that God had decreed that Esau would serve Jacob (25:23). Isaac was wrong to go against the revealed will of God in his plan to bless Esau. When we disobey the Word of God we invite trouble into our lives. We should always keep in mind the admonition, *‘Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding’* (Proverbs 3:5–6).

Rebekah overheard Isaac making his plans with Esau and she hastened to involve Jacob in a scheme of deception to obtain the blessing. Their behaviour was inexcusable and they should have waited on God and trusted him to work out his wise purposes for Jacob. We must never use sinful means to justify the end. Jacob had serious misgivings but was more troubled at the possibility of being found out rather than being guilty of the sin of deceit. He said to his mother, *‘Perhaps my father will feel me, and I shall seem to be a deceiver to him; and I shall bring a curse on myself and not a blessing’* (12).

Rebekah fixed goat skins to Jacob’s hands and neck and gave him savoury food to take to Isaac (15–17). Isaac was suspicious when Jacob arrived to receive the blessing. He recognised Jacob’s voice, but was deceived when feeling Jacob’s smooth hands that were covered in the skins. He asked Jacob, *‘Are you really my son Esau?’* and Jacob lied to say that he was (21–24).

Jacob was to pay dearly for his sin, being forced to leave the home he loved and worse was to follow. God’s Word warns us, *‘Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap’* (Galatians 6:7). Jacob the deceiver was himself to become the victim of cruel deception – in marriage (29:25); in work (31:7,41) and by his own sons (37:20,31–35). **Let us be careful of what we sow. If we resort to sinful scheming, we too will reap a bitter harvest.**

Have you only one blessing, my father?

Jacob had hardly left his father when Esau returned from his hunting. Isaac was greatly troubled when he discovered what had happened and an angry and bitter Esau reflected that Jacob's behaviour was true to his name. *'Is he not rightly named Jacob? For he has supplanted me these two times. He took away my birthright, and now look, he has taken away my blessing!'* (30–36).

Isaac could no longer give the intended blessing to Esau who wept with anguish and cried out, *'Have you only one blessing, my father?'* (37–38). Esau by his past carelessness in disposing of his birthright had forfeited his entitlement to the blessing, but Isaac gave him a blessing of sorts. We have seen that Esau had also grieved his parents by marrying ungodly women (46; compare 26:34–35; 28:8). There is only one way to blessing. We must obey God's Word.

Esau was burning with hatred for Jacob and he said in his heart that he would kill him after his father's death. It is obvious that Esau made known the thoughts of his heart because Rebekah heard that he planned to kill Jacob once Isaac died. She urged Jacob to leave home in order to escape his brother's fury and revenge (41–42). She also told Isaac of her desire to see Jacob marry a wife from her own people because of the sorrow that Esau's ungodly wives had brought to the family (46).

She thought that Jacob would only be away from home for a short time until his brother's anger subsided. She would then be able to send word for him to return home (43–45). The short time became twenty years (31:41) and there isn't any evidence that Rebekah ever saw Jacob again. Rebekah learned the hard way that it is foolish to resort to ungodly scheming to achieve our desires. Are you growing impatient or discouraged? Beware of disobedience to God because it will bring you much sorrow and regret. **Trust in the Lord who is absolutely sovereign and commit your way to him (Psalm 37:4–5,7).**

How awesome is this place!

Isaac readily agreed with Rebekah's wish to send Jacob away to find a wife from her own family and he blessed Jacob before sending him on his journey (1–5). Esau realised that his marriage to Canaanite women had upset his parents and heard his father instructing Jacob that he must not marry a Canaanite. He hoped that by marrying a daughter of Ishmael (who was descended from Abraham) he would please Isaac, but it was too late to reverse his previous folly (8–9).

Jacob not only left home to find an acceptable wife (1–2, 6–7) but also to escape Esau's wrath and revenge (27:42–43). The Lord appeared to him in a dream and repeated the covenant promises made to Abraham and to Isaac. He told Jacob, *'Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go'* (14–15; cp. 22:17–18; 26:3–5). Jacob did not deserve such kindness from God, but the Lord is full of grace. One of our great privileges as Christians is knowing that God is with us and that he watches over us (Hebrews 13:5–6).

True spiritual experience brings with it a reverent fear of the Lord.

Jacob exclaimed, *'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven'* (17). Oh, that we reminded ourselves more often of this whenever we worship the Lord. Do we feel that we are on the threshold of heaven when we come to the house of God? (cp. Hebrews 12:22–24, 28–29). Jacob *called the name of that place 'Bethel'* which means 'House of God' (19).

Jacob made a vow that if the Lord would be with him to keep him and provide for him, then he would serve him and give him a tenth of all that God gave him (22). Should Christians tithe (give a tenth of their income) to God? If Jacob tithed as a token of his love to the Lord, dare we give less? (cp. Malachi 3:8–10). If we rob God of our tithes and offerings, we impoverish his work and deprive ourselves of the many blessings that he so freely gives to those who are bountiful. **Is the Lord waiting for you to prove him in this matter?** *God loves a cheerful giver* (2 Corinthians 9:7).

Why then have you deceived me?

God had promised to be with Jacob (28:15) and Jacob soon found this to be true in the way that the Lord led him to Rachel. When he arrived in Padan Aram, he stopped at a well and met some shepherds who were waiting to water their flocks. When he discovered that they were from Haran, he asked them if they knew *Laban the son of Nahor* ('the descendant of Nahor'; 5).

As he spoke to them, Rachel, who was a shepherdess, arrived to water her sheep. The shepherds told Jacob that the young woman was the younger daughter of Laban and on her arrival Jacob rolled the stone from the mouth of the well and gave water to her sheep. He wept with joy as he introduced himself to Rachel and embraced her. God had led him to the very well where Rachel watered her sheep! **There are no 'chance' happenings in the life of a child of God.** He leads and directs us in all our ways, in joy and in sorrow.

Jacob was welcomed into Laban's home and spent a month working for him. He fell in love with Rachel and offered to serve Laban for seven years for her hand in marriage. Laban readily agreed but at the end of the seven years he tricked Jacob into marrying her elder sister, Leah. Jacob reproached Laban saying, '*Why then have you deceived me?*' (25). Jacob who had deceived his own father when his eyes were veiled with blindness (27:35) was now deceived by his own father-in-law into taking a bride whom he could not distinguish from her sister because she was veiled.

Laban asked Jacob to fulfil Leah's week (27; – that is the seven days of marriage festivities, cp. Judges 14:12). If Jacob did this, he would be allowed to marry Rachel quietly without ceremony at the end of the week and then serve Laban a further seven years. Jacob was appeased by this promise and submitted to the wretched and degrading situation which Laban had forced upon him. **Jacob was reaping what he had sown! He discovered that though the Lord freely forgives our sins, we may still suffer the consequences of those sins.**

When the LORD saw that Leah was unloved

Leah had *delicate* eyes (17); this may indicate a soreness of her eyes which disfigured her. John Currid understands this differently, pointing out that the Hebrew word indicates that Leah had pretty eyes, but Rachel was beautiful in her whole appearance. Jacob's affection and love was centred on Rachel who was very beautiful (17,30). Can you imagine the heartache and misery of Leah? Jacob had never intended to marry her and he showed her little affection or care. She rightly felt unwanted and unloved. The Lord is very gracious and good. He loved Leah! *When the LORD saw that Leah was unloved, he opened her womb* (31; Hebrew word translated 'unloved' = 'hated'). John Calvin comments, 'Moses here shows that Jacob's extravagant love was corrected by the Lord' (COMMENTARY ON GENESIS, Banner of Truth reprint, page 134). John Currid adds, 'Leah deserves honour from her husband. And if he will not give it to her, then Yahweh will bestow glory on her because it is from her progeny that the chosen seed (ie. the Messiah) will come' (COMMENTARY ON GENESIS, volume 2, page 87).

A grateful Leah acknowledged the Lord's goodness to her in giving her children (32–33,35; 30:17–20). Her unhappiness in marriage certainly brought her closer to the Lord and she found happiness in her children (30:20). We must not imagine that unhappy marriages are only found among non-Christians. There are Christians who would identify with Leah in feeling unloved by their spouse and some have even been deserted by them. The Bible is quite clear – *Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave himself for it* (Ephesians 5:25). We have no excuses for disobeying God's Word. Husbands must always remember their promise to love their wives that they made in the presence of God at their wedding, **Satan is working hard to destroy Christian marriages. Let us be determined not give him any opportunity to do so with us.**

If you are no longer loved by your husband (or wife), remember that the Lord sees that you are unloved. He loves you with an eternal, unchanging love. Trust in him through your tears.

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 in not giving her a child (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 seen 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 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?**

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 (20–23). 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?

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.

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. She went without any escort to visit the women of Shechem and ran into trouble. Hamor the ruler of Shechem named his son after the town. This son took Dinah and in his passion he raped her and imprisoned her in his home (2–3,26). He 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 demanded 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 two sons had concerning the rape of Dinah. He wanted to have peace at the expense of doing what is right 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.**

God, who answered me in the day of my distress

Following the dreadful events at Shechem, the Lord told Jacob to return to Bethel and 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 get rid 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, 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 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).’ COMMENTARY ON GENESIS, volume 2, page 173).

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

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 but he gossiped about them to his father. 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). In telling Jacob their story, they cruelly referred to Joseph as '*your son.*' 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)

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).

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)?**

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.**

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 and 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).

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)