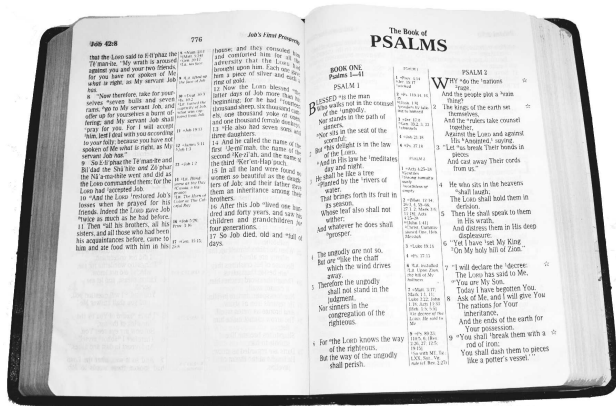


PILGRIM BIBLE NOTES

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

Rebekah's brother Laban ran to the well to meet the servant who had given his sister the gold nose ring and bracelets. He gave hospitality to the servant and the men who had travelled with him; the camels were also sheltered and fed (29–32). A meal was set before them, but before he would eat, the servant told them the reason for his visit (34). He told Rebekah's father Bethuel and brother Laban about God's blessing upon Abraham and the birth of Isaac to Sarah in her old age (35–36). He also told them how God had answered his own prayers (42–48). Bethuel and Laban saw that the proposed marriage of Rebekah to Isaac was of God (50–51). Abraham's servant worshipped God after seeing how the Lord had led him to meet Rebekah (26) and he again worshipped God when Bethuel and Laban agreed to allow Rebekah to marry Isaac (52).

They wanted Rebekah to remain with them for at least ten days 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.*' The man's single-mindedness is also seen in his insistence that he told Bethuel and Laban of the reason for 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. Rebekah readily consented to go with him and they blessed her before she departed (56–61). She had women servants with her, including the nurse who had cared for her from her birth. The death of her nurse is recorded in chapter 35, verse 8, where she is named as 'Deborah'.

This chapter is a thrilling account of 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).

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So he was comforted after his mother's death

Rebekah and her women servants left her people, riding on camels as they followed Abraham's servant (61). Isaac was meditating in the fields toward evening when he saw their arrival. When Rebekah saw Isaac, she dismounted from her camel and asked the servant, *'Who is this man walking in the field to meet us?'* (62–65). The man 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 also significant in that he 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)

Abraham ... was gathered to his people

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 allow 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. Isaac and Ishmael buried him 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 were 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 would have been aware of the promise of God that a great nation would descend from him (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 from 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 to receive a double portion of the inheritance (Deuteronomy 21:17) and to be the head of the family at his father's death. One day, Esau returned from a hunting trip very tired and hungry. We cannot believe his dramatic claim that he was about to die (32). Scheming Jacob refused to give him some of his red stew and *Esau despised his birthright* by selling it for some of that stew and a morsel of bread (29–34).

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).

Esau turned his back on his spiritual privileges and responsibilities and he is described as a '*profane person*' (that is 'godless' – Hebrews 12:16). He was willing to sacrifice the future to satisfy a craving in the present. Many a professing Christian has ruined his testimony and lost his joy because he has yielded to temptation. The devil makes sure that we do think of the consequences of sin when he dangles temptation before us. God has given us great blessings, but he has also given us great responsibilities. Let us be strong in the Lord and pursue holiness, *without which no one will see the Lord* (Hebrews 12:14).

There is one thing far worse than despising 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 (1–2). 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 (chapters 20 and 21). John 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, 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 (7).

The deception lasted for a long time (8) but one day Abimelech 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). God prospered Isaac in a time of famine and the Philistines envied him (13–14). We often fail in our witness but the Lord still blesses us and does not cast us off. **He is kind and wonderful in all his ways. Let us worship him and praise him.**

Rehoboth

Abraham had made a covenant of friendship with the Philistines of Gerar 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 to deter Isaac from settling among them, but Isaac dug them again. A good supply of water was essential for the well-being of the herds. The Philistines envied Isaac for his prosperity and their king asked him to go away from them (14–16). Isaac moved to the Valley of Gerar where his servants dug out another of his father's wells and found running water. 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'). He said, *'For now the LORD has made room for us, and we shall be made fruitful in the land'* (22).

Isaac later moved to Beersheba where the Lord appeared to him and 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?

Isaac, whose father had been careful to see that he married one of their own people, was forty when he married Rebekah (25:20). Forty year old Esau had no intention of pleasing his parents. He married two Hittite women and they brought grief to Isaac and Rebekah (34–35; cp. 27:46; *'made life bitter'* – English Standard Version).

I shall seem to be a deceiver to him

Isaac became blind when he was old and 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 God we invite trouble into our lives. We should always remember Proverbs 3, verses 5 and 6, *‘Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding’*

Rebekah overheard Isaac making his plans with Esau and she hastened to involve Jacob in a scheme of deception to obtain the blessing. She told Jacob to kill two choice goat’s kids and kill them; she would then prepare a meal for Isaac. Her behaviour was inexcusable and she should have waited on God and trusted him to work out his purposes for Jacob who had serious misgivings. He was more troubled at the possibility that Isaac would recognise his deception 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 clothed Jacob in Esau’s best garments, fixed the skins of the kids to his 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, saying that he was (21–24). Jacob was to pay dearly for his sin, being forced to leave his loved-ones and worse was to follow. The Bible 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 shocked and *trembled exceedingly* when he discovered what had happened (30–33). An angry and bitter Esau said that Jacob’s deceit 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!’* (34–36).

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 had despised his birthright and 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; cp. 26:34–35; 28:8). There is only one way to know God’s blessing in our lives; we must obey God’s Word.

Esau was burning with hatred for Jacob and intended to kill him after his father’s death. It is obvious that Esau made known to someone his intention to kill Jacob because Rebekah heard of it. She urged Jacob to leave home to go and stay with her brother Laban in Haran in order to escape his brother’s fury and revenge (41–43). She had to find a pretext for her plan to send Jacob to Haran and she told Isaac that she wanted Jacob to marry a wife from her own people because of the sorrow that Esau’s ungodly wives had brought to her (46).

Rebekah 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 is no evidence that Rebekah ever again saw Jacob. 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 (1–4). Notice that Jacob is named ahead of Esau (5). Esau heard his father instructing Jacob that he must not marry a Canaanite. *Esau saw that Isaac had blessed Jacob and that Jacob had obeyed his father.* He also *saw* that his marriage to Canaanite women displeased Isaac. He hoped that by marrying a daughter of Ishmael (who was descended from Abraham) he would please Isaac, but adding to the wives he already had did not make things any better (6–9).

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). He rested during his journey and laid his head on a stone at sunset. The Lord appeared to him in a dream in which he saw a stairway to heaven on which angels were ascending and descending. God repeated the covenant promises made to Abraham and Isaac (22:17–18; 26:3–5). He told Jacob, *'Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go'* (13–15).

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 of this more often! Do we feel that we are on the threshold of heaven when we meet to worship with God's people (cp. Hebrews 12:22–24, 28–29)? Jacob took the rock on which he had laid his head and set it up as sacred pillar. *He called the name of that place 'Bethel'* which means 'House of God' (18–19).

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 we rob God of our tithes and offerings (Malachi 3:8–10), we impoverish his work and deprive ourselves of the many blessings that he so freely gives to those who are bountiful. *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 we see this in the way that the Lord led him to meet Rachel. When he arrived in Padan Aram, he came to a well where some shepherds were waiting to water their flocks. When he discovered that they were from Haran, he asked them if they knew *Laban the son* ('the descendant' of *Nahor*' (5). They told Jacob that they did know him and as he spoke with them, Rachel, who was a shepherdess, arrived to water her sheep.

The shepherds told Jacob that the young woman was the 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 stayed as month (14). 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 (COMMENTARY ON GENESIS, Volume 2, page 80), but Rachel was very beautiful in her whole appearance (17, 30).

Jacob 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 Leah the elder sister. 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.

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

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 at the end of that week and then serve Laban a further seven years. This appeased Jacob and he submitted to the wretched and degrading situation which Laban had forced upon him. John Currid points out that the Hebrew translated '*Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah*' (30) is better rendered '*Jacob loved Rachel rather than Leah.*' Can you imagine the heartache and misery of Leah? Jacob had never intended to marry her and he showed her no love

Leah rightly felt unwanted and unloved but God is very gracious: *When the LORD saw that Leah was unloved, he opened her womb* (31; The Hebrew word translated '*unloved*' means '*hated*'). The Lord compensated Leah, giving her the joy of bearing children and she acknowledged his goodness to her (32–33,35; 30:17–20). God called Moses, a descendant of Leah's son Levi, to lead his people out of Egyptian bondage. He gave Moses the Ten Commandments and the law. The priests of Israel, who were responsible for leading the worship of the people and instructing them in the law of the Lord, were chosen from the Levites. The Lord Jesus came from the tribe of Judah. 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).

There are Christians who would identify with Leah in feeling unloved by their spouse and some have been deserted by them. The Bible says, '*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. **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 saying, ‘*Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of your womb?*’ (2). She then gave her maid Bilhah to Jacob so that she could bear children for her (4–7). The unhappy relationship between the two sisters is obvious from Rachel’s words after the birth of Bilhah’s second son, especially as Leah had stopped childbearing. ‘Naphthali’ means ‘my wrestling’; 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) which brought happiness to Leah (‘Gad’ means ‘Fortune’; ‘Asher’ means ‘Happy’). Leah’s bitterness towards Rachel can be 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 which had a beautiful fragrance (Song of Solomon 7:13). Ancient superstition held that mandrakes 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 She said, ‘*Now my husband will dwell with me*’ (‘will honour me’; 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 us so much that he gave his Son to save us (Romans 5:8; 8:32). **Let us 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 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 writes, '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 Jacob and had prospered his work. **Are you a blessing to your employer? The Lord expects us to have a good testimony at our place of work (Colossians 3:22–24).** Laban pleaded with Jacob to stay on and to name his wages but Jacob did not trust the man who had deceived him many times (28; cp. 31:7).

Laban knew that he owed Jacob some payment for the years of faithful service and he asked Jacob what he should give to 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 manner). 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 who took them three days' journey away. Jacob was left with the unmarked animals which he was to shepherd for Laban, with little hope of building up his own flock.

John Currid points out that Jacob's system for marking the flocks had no real value; it was the Lord who gave him success in breeding the speckled and spotted sheep. God is sovereign over all his creation and he gave Jacob all the strong animals. Jacob then left 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 towards 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 told him (3–5).

Do you encounter opposition in your home or place of work? Let Jacob be an encouragement to you. Though Laban had cheated him and was now hostile 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 repeatedly changed Jacob's wages. 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, but God had thwarted him (6–10). 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). Let us remember to work *heartily, as to the Lord, and not to men* (Colossians 3:23) and he will bless us.

The Lord spoke to Jacob in a dream and told him that he had seen all that Laban was doing to him (11–12). He reminded Jacob of the vow that he had 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 vows that we make to him; let us be sure to keep them. The word '*Bethel*' reminded Jacob that the Lord had given him some very precious promises which he had kept.

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 by Laban who had squandered their dowry, and they freely supported Jacob in his plan to return to Canaan (14–16). 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, do you obey him?**

Why did you steal my gods?

Jacob fled secretly from Padan Aram to return to Canaan (17–21). 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 easily be hidden away. 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 probably lied to her father to cover up her theft (34–35).

Laban was told on the third day that Jacob and his family had fled 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 (22–23). John Currid points out that ‘the number seven here is certainly a figure signifying a considerable length of time ... From Haran to the region of Gilead is approximately 350 miles (as the crow flies)’ – (COMMENTARY ON GENESIS, volume 2, page 112).

The Lord appeared Laban in a dream warning him not to harm Jacob (24). Laban was quite hypocritical in his words to Jacob. Would he really have given him the kind of farewell that he suggested (26–28)? Laban told Jacob of his dream but reproached him for the theft of his idols. Jacob protested his innocence, not knowing that Rachel had stolen them (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 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 has seen my affliction and the labour of my hands

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 Laban of the wretched and unjust treatment that he had received at his hands. He had toiled for fourteen years for his daughters and then six years for the flock that he now possessed. Whenever any of Laban's flock had been torn by wild animals or had been stolen, Jacob had to bear the loss (this was not required of shepherds). Had God not been with him, Laban would have sent him away empty-handed. Jacob said, '*God has seen my affliction and the labour of my hands, and rebuked you last night*' (38–42). **Jacob had learned godliness and patience in the school of affliction (cp. Psalm 119:67).**

Laban and Jacob made a covenant which 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!*' (49–50). The mound of stones also marked out the agreed territorial boundary (52). Jacob's territory would be to the west from Gilead and that of Laban to the east of Gilead. Jacob swore on oath *by the fear of his Father Isaac* (that is 'by God'; 53). Jacob offered a sacrifice and they ate together. Laban departed the next day after blessing his daughters and his grandchildren (54–55).

Laban stands as a warning to those who have seen evidence of the Lord's work in the lives of God's people, 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. He was a hardened money-grabber who lived for his own selfish ends (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 to Canaan he was met by the angels of God and when he saw them, he said, ‘*This is God’s camp*’ and called the name Mahanaim which means ‘Two camps’ (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 humbled himself in his message to Esau, describing himself as Esau’s ‘*servant*’ (3–4). 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 were to attack (6–8). 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 (‘steadfast love’) 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 appease Esau by offering him a very substantial 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 he sent his family over the brook Jabbok. He was now alone *and a Man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day* (22–24). 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 testified, ‘*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 struggle in prayer as Satan and the powers of darkness seek to hinder us and keep us from seeking the face of God (eg. Ephesians 6:12). Jacob was wrestling with the Lord in this instance who eventually put his hip out of joint to stop him wrestling. Jacob was still able to 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 to obtain the blessing of Isaac. **He now depended on God alone for blessing.** We too must cling to God and persevere in prayer. He will certainly fulfil his promises and bring us through to the place of blessing.

*Restraining prayer, we cease to fight;
Prayer makes the Christian’s armour bright,
And Satan trembles when he sees,
The weakest saint upon his knees.* (William Cowper)

God has dealt graciously with me

Jacob went ahead of his family to meet his brother. The way that he arranged his family for the meeting with Esau is significant. The two handmaids with their children were first, followed by Leah with her children, and last of all Rachel and Joseph (1–2). John Currid points out that Rachel would have had the best chance of escape if there were hostility (COMMENTARY ON GENESIS, volume 2, pages 140–141).

As Jacob approached Esau, his brother *ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept* (4). Jacob bowed seven times before Esau (an act of submission) and humbly identified himself as ‘*your servant*’. He introduced his family as those whom God had graciously given to him (4–7). He then urged Esau to accept his present telling him of his relief at the kind welcome 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. 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 complete the reconciliation.**

Jacob led Esau to believe that he would follow him to Seir (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 west to Succoth (17). Jacob had progressed in his sanctification but he had no excuse for this deceit. He should have told Esau 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 old at the time of the sordid events recorded in this chapter. Surprisingly, she went without any escort to visit the women of Shechem and she 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 and they demanded that every male of Shechem who went out to the gate of the city must submit to being circumcised; these were the able-bodied men (24). 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 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 that he had appeared to him at Bethel when he fled from Esau (1). It seems that his sons had taken idols in the plunder from Shechem (34:29). Jacob ordered them to get rid of these idols and to purify themselves before they journeyed to Bethel (2–3). The idols that Rachel had stolen from her father (31:15) would have been included. Jacob buried the idols and his sons' earrings under the terebinth tree at Shechem (4). The earrings may have been engraved with images of foreign gods.

We cannot worship God acceptably with impure hearts or if we have any 'idols' in our lives. Our idols may not be images of stone or wood, but of money, pleasure-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). God again appeared to Jacob and blessed him after he had built the altar at Bethel. 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 on 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 (Bethlehem) but just 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 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). As he lay dying, Jacob cursed Reuben: ‘*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).

Genesis chapter 36 contains an extensive list of the descendants of Esau and records the establishment of Edom as their country.
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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 *brought a bad report of them to his father* (1–2). Jacob's favourite son was Joseph, son of Rachel who he had dearly loved. He probably spoiled Joseph more than ever after the death of Rachel. This favouritism led to Joseph's brothers hating and resenting him (3–4). He was immature enough to relate 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 their strong resentment (19). We shall be seeing that dreams and a God-given ability to interpret them played a very significant part in Joseph's life.

They plotted to kill Joseph when he arrived on an errand from his father and *they cast him into some pit*. Reuben was the exception and he planned to deliver Joseph from the pit (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. In telling Jacob their story, they cruelly referred to Joseph as '*your son*' (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 save his people from famine (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 interrupts the story of Joseph to show the origin of the three families of Judah (cp. Numbers 26:20). Judah took Hirah, a Canaanite as his close friend and it was probably Hirah who encouraged him to marry a Canaanite woman. Judah would have known that he was wrong to marry a Canaanite and it led to grief and disaster. His first two sons, Er and Onan, were slain by the Lord because of their wickedness (1–10). We need to be careful that we do not take as our best friends those who like Hirah, will draw us away from the Lord (1 Corinthians 15:33).

When a man died childless in those times, it was the custom for the next brother to marry his widow to raise up children by her. This practice, known as ‘levirate marriage’, was to be established in the law of Moses (Deuteronomy 25:5–10). God killed Onan for his contempt of Tamar, his brother Er’s widow. Judah told her to remain a widow, promising her that his son Shelah would be given to her in marriage, as soon as he was old enough (11). Tamar was no longer free to marry anyone else but Judah failed to keep his promise and this drove her to a desperate course of action. She disguised herself as a prostitute and Judah, not recognising her because she had veiled her face, had sexual intercourse with her from which she became pregnant (12–18).

Judah was furious to discover that Tamar had become pregnant through prostitution. He would have had her burned alive 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. When she showed them to Judah, he 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 when everything was going wrong for him. He was a slave and then in prison, but *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 has said, *'I will never leave you nor forsake you'* (Hebrews 13:5). However, having the presence of God does not spare us from temptation or from suffering.

Joseph was handsome in form and appearance (6); the same is said of his mother Rachel (29:17). 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 (9–10). One day when there was no one else in the house, she grabbed him but he fled outside leaving his garment in her hand (12). Joseph's example teaches us never to linger with temptation. Notice the difference between Joseph, and Judah, who needed no persuasion to fall into sexual sin (38:16).

Potiphar's wife spoke to the men of the house and used Joseph's garment as evidence that he has assaulted her. She referred to Joseph as, *'This Hebrew'*, knowing that they would have resented Potiphar appointing a foreigner to supervise them (11–15). The outcome was most distressing for Joseph, who was falsely accused of the very sin that he had so steadfastly avoided. Potiphar threw him into prison, but *the LORD was with him, and whatever he did, the LORD made it prosper* (20–23). Joseph was to be elevated to the palace through his experience in prison. **Satan unwittingly furthered 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.* (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 chief butler and chief baker and he put them into prison. The captain of the guard (probably Potiphar; cp 37:36; 39:1) appointed 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 for which they were unable to find an interpretation. Seeing that they were downcast, Joseph asked them, ‘*Why do you look so sad today?*’ (6–8). He then interpreted their dreams which indicated a happy outcome within three days for the butler and a terrible end for the baker (9–19). Joseph asked the butler to remember him when he was back in the palace and to seek justice for him, but the butler forgot him (23). The Lord had not forgotten Joseph but was wisely and lovingly working out his purposes in his life. He was to prove that *tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance character; and character, hope* (Romans 5:3–4).

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

Joseph had pleaded with the chief butler to seek his release from prison, but he was forgotten (40:14–15, 23). The chief butler cannot be excused for his ingratitude and forgetfulness but we must remember that God was in control of all these events and that his timing is always perfect. The Lord was preparing the way for Pharaoh to seek the help of Joseph rather than Joseph needing to seek favours from him.

Joseph was remembered two years later when God gave Pharaoh two dreams which troubled him and baffled his magicians and wise men (1–8). 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 put in prison. Pharaoh then summoned Joseph to the palace to interpret his dream. Joseph shaved and changed his clothing, putting off his prison garments (9–14). 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 Pharaoh 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 (25–32).

Pharaoh recognised that this Hebrew 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 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 he was sold into slavery (37:2). He had endured thirteen years of hardship and suffering and he was thirty when Pharaoh promoted 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 he organised the sale and distribution of the grain during the years of famine (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 inflicted on him by 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). 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, but he will cause us to be fruitful in our affliction.**

Then Joseph remembered the dreams

Jacob told his sons to stop looking at each other in helplessness and go to Egypt to purchase grain because of the famine in Canaan. He kept Benjamin at home, *'lest some calamity befall him'* (1–5). When Joseph's brothers arrived in Egypt, he recognised them but they did not recognise him (6–7). He was dressed as an Egyptian ruler, spoke Egyptian and used an interpreter (23), and it had been more than twenty years since they had seen him (cp. 37:2; 41:46, 53).

When Joseph saw his brothers bowing before him, 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. *He acted as a stranger to them and spoke roughly to them* (7). He accused them of spying *the nakedness* (unprotected) *parts of the land*. They protested that they were honest men, which was hardly true when their past record is considered. They spoke of their brother Benjamin and of another brother (Joseph) who was dead (9–13).

Joseph insisted that they were spies and put them in prison for three days (14–17). When he demanded that they return to him with Benjamin they remembered their wicked deeds, little realising that Joseph understood their conversation (18–23). Why did Joseph treat his brothers so harshly? He wanted to see some evidence of improvement in their character. Reuben had shown more sympathy to him when the brothers had seized him and he had displayed a tender conscience (22).

Joseph was not behaving with malice towards his brothers and he turned away and 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 in addition to the grain that they had purchased. He also 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 when he found in the mouth of the sack the bundle of money he had handed over to the Egyptians (25–27). The troubled conscience of Joseph's brothers was again revealed by their reaction to this discovery. They were afraid and 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's providence. *'All these things'* were not against him, but for him if only he could see it. We know that *all things work together for good to those who love God* (Romans 8:28), but it needs to be impressed on our hearts.

Have you been thinking or complaining that everything is against you? Remember that God is **for** you and 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)