

Family Life with Abraham and Jacob

Studies in Genesis 12–50

David Gooding

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Abraham

The significance of the order of events as seen in the New Testament

I feel perhaps you need some word of explanation. In the coming Sunday evenings, we shall be discussing the life of Abraham, and on Thursday evenings the life of Jacob. The Thursday talks will be more informal, inviting your participation.

Tonight we start on the very ground floor, and we observe one of the most famous verses in the whole of the Old Testament—‘And he [Abraham] believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness’ (Gen 15:6)—and I would put over it the simple words, *justification by faith*.

We should then notice that from verse 7 onwards there follows the great covenant that God made with Abraham and with his seed, covenanting to give Abraham the possession of the land, as defined in the geographical terms of verses 18–21. Then in Genesis 17 the Lord appeared to Abraham when he was ninety-nine years old, and told him that he and his offspring were from now on to observe the rite of the circumcision of all male people in his family.

So then, Genesis 15: justification by faith and the covenant of the inheritance; Genesis 17: the rite of circumcision. These are two simple, obvious, elementary observations on the order of events in the book of Genesis.

The authority Paul attributes to the book of Genesis

Now let us read from the New Testament, so that we may listen to Paul the apostle making some deductions from this very matter of the order of the chapters of Genesis.

What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.’ (Rom 4:1–3)

These are very much quoted verses, and this evening I shall not be expounding the significance of justification by faith. I take it that we all understand exactly what that means.

Justification by faith

My first point, then, is the authority that Paul attributes to the book of Genesis. Paul is here discussing how a man or woman can be right with God; on what terms and on what

conditions. Is it by his work and merit, or is it by faith? To settle the matter by an authoritative pronouncement, Paul quotes Genesis 15:6.

‘What does the Scripture say?’ is for Paul the final court of appeal—that settles it, if Scripture says so. I call on our young folks to notice that. In these days we do well to observe the apostles’ attitude to holy Scripture. Not only to the New Testament, which they were used of God to write, but to the Old Testament. There can be no more important topic than this practical thing—how is a man or woman made right with God? I beg you to notice that this first point isn’t an obscure, impractical, useless theological matter. It concerns that which is more practical than anything else in our lives. If I get this wrong, I shall end forever in perdition.

How can I be sure, and on what authority can I know it?

‘You’ll know it because Genesis says so—that’s how you’ll know it,’ says Paul. Paul attributes authority not simply to one particular verse in Genesis, nor to the book as a whole; he attributes authority to the very order of events as recorded in Genesis.

Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin. (Rom 4:7–8)

That blessing is complete forgiveness; justification before God. Is this blessing then pronounced upon *the circumcision*, or upon *the uncircumcision* also? Abraham’s faith was reckoned for righteousness. How then was it reckoned—when he was in circumcision, or in uncircumcision?

Justification evidenced in the actual life of Abraham

Point number two: Genesis 15:6 lays down the principle that justification is by faith, and it cites this principle as evidenced in the actual life of Abraham. Let us notice that Paul isn’t using Genesis here as a type. He doesn’t say, ‘If you want a type to illustrate justification, use Abraham.’ Abraham isn’t a type; he’s an actual case. He was a man walking around on two legs, who literally got justified by God, and therefore is quoted, as the lawyers say, as a *precedent*, establishing for all time how you can be justified.

You know how it is in the courts of law. When a criminal comes up before the judge and is convicted by the jury of having done the crime, the judge is about to pass sentence when the criminal’s lawyer says,

‘With all due respect, you can’t do that.’

‘Why not?’ says the judge.

‘Your Honour, two centuries ago in the case of X versus Y, X committed the very same crime and they let him off.’

The learned counsel for defence knows his case law, and the case law establishes therefore that if in times past a person who did this crime, even though he was guilty, was let off, anyone who does it today, also guilty, must be let off.

So Abraham is a bit of case law, *a precedent establishing for all time the principle that a man is justified by faith, without works.*

Ah, but here comes a snag. For all I know, ladies and gentlemen, you are a whole lot of Gentiles and everybody knows that Abraham was a Hebrew. Abraham was circumcised, and all his male descendants to this very present day have observed the rite of circumcision, apart from certain exceptions in odd times in their history. Now here comes an interesting point. You are not circumcised Hebrews, Jews, Israelites—*can you cite Abraham as a precedent for you?*

Was Abraham justified before or after he was circumcised?

So now Paul bids us go back to Genesis once more, and raises the point himself. When Abraham was justified by faith, was it after he was circumcised or before he was circumcised? You say, ‘What does it matter?’ It matters everything, because if he was circumcised before he was justified by faith, then anybody could reasonably argue that to receive justification you must first be circumcised and then you must learn to believe. Whereas, of course, if he were justified by faith before he was circumcised it would establish the precedent that circumcision is not necessary for salvation. What is the truth of the matter? Now you will perceive what enormous importance is turning on the exact order of these events in Genesis.

Firstly, you could only argue like that if the Scripture were true to the fact and correct here in its chronological order.

Secondly, you can only argue so if, and only if, this Scripture and this order is divinely inspired, and therefore authoritative.

The great answer to the question is that *Abraham was justified by faith before he was circumcised*. Therefore, we who are Gentiles can rightly take his case as a precedent for our own. This principle of justification by faith is for Gentiles, uncircumcised though they are, as well as for Jews. So that completes point two.

Let’s read the intervening verses before we come to Paul’s third point.

How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised. (Rom 4:10–12)

Now see point three:

For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith. For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression. That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring—not only to the adherent of

the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all. (vv. 13–16)

The book of Genesis speaks of a promise

The promise we are now talking about is in particular the promise made to Abraham, ‘that he would be heir of the world’ (v. 13).

Now it’s difficult to convince Christians of this, or, at least, difficult to convince them enough to make them look happy! You would think you were delivering them a death sentence when you expounded it; at least so my experience tends to suggest.

Here is a promise that Abraham should be heir of the world, and Paul is about to argue that *this promise obtains also for all those who, like Abraham, are people of faith*. To Abraham and to Abraham’s seed—all believers in the Lord Jesus. Because they’ve been baptized into Christ, have put on Christ, and because they are Christ’s, they are Abraham’s seed, according to the promise. The promise is to Abraham and to all his seed, and if you are a believer, it is to you as well. The promise is that we should be heirs of the world. That is such an enormous boon and blessing, how could you rest in your bed tonight, unless you could feel yourself secure, and know that the inheritance likewise is secure to you?

How, and on what grounds, may I be certain of it?

Once more, we come for our answer to the order of the chapters of Genesis. Here’s the covenant that guaranteed the inheritance to Abraham and to his seed. Though the terms in that covenant seem to be limited geographically, it transpires that *God has determined in his bounty to increase the terms of benefits*.

You may do that with a covenant if you like. Your will is all signed, sealed and settled; the lawyer has got it down in black and white, but you can add to it if you like. There’s nothing to stop you being more generous.

So God has done, but now I want to know on what conditions. So here is the covenant, and here the conditions are spelled out. It is, in fact, *upon the basis of the covenant sacrifice*. But look at the same, simple, obvious fact. Not only was justification by faith granted to him before he was circumcised, but the covenant of the inheritance was also given to him before he was circumcised. That tells us not only that the covenant is available to us Gentiles, who likewise are uncircumcised; it tells us something more.

The implications of circumcision

Notice the term in verse 14, ‘For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs.’ ‘Why,’ you say, ‘does Paul suddenly go off talking about the law?’ Because circumcision carried with it certain very far reaching implications.

Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace. (Gal 5:2–4)

We learn from these verses that circumcision wasn't just an immaterial rite of no particular significance; just an innocent little custom that the Jews in their peculiarity observed. *Along with circumcision came the obligation for the Jew to keep God's law—the whole of it.*

So, if you were to preach that salvation is partly by faith, *but also by circumcision*, then what you would be saying is that salvation is by faith *and by keeping the whole law*. Circumcision is a little bit like a wedding ring. A wedding ring, be it gold or platinum, is a pleasant looking thing. It's supposed to have all sorts of symbolic nuances. An unending circle that has neither beginning nor end; like true love it goes on forever, and all these things. Once you put it on your finger, it isn't just a little ring that will make you look that bit prettier, it brings with it an obligation to be faithful unto death. In earlier years it used to bring an obligation to obey, so it's not just a little symbol, it carries implications.

Circumcision was not just a little symbol; it carried the obligation to keep the whole law. 'Now then,' says Paul, 'let's get this matter of justification straight. When did it happen to Abraham?' Well, before he was circumcised. Thank God for that, for it tells me that, not only is that same justification open to Gentiles as well as to Jews, justification is available to you simply by faith and not on the condition of keeping that law.

Secondly, it's not only justification that is a free gift from God, but so is this glorious inheritance; covenanted to us in that covenant sacrifice that is open to Gentiles too, who are uncircumcised. But more importantly, *it does not depend upon our keeping of the law.*

Justification by works

So we have started with some very simple observations. It's always a good thing to start on the ground floor, isn't it? The order of the chapters and of the events of Genesis is immeasurably important. Paul is prepared to stake his soul and yours on the authority of the order of those chapters.

You say perhaps to me, 'If justification and the inheritance are by faith, and not dependant on circumcision or on keeping the law, that's very good; but doesn't Scripture say that as well as being justified by faith you have to be justified by works?'

Well it does indeed. So let me read to you the *locus classicus* on that matter.

So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. But someone will say, 'You have faith and I have works.' Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness'—and he was called a friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. (Jas 2:17–24)

So now here we have it in plain black and white, from the pen of James himself, that a man is justified by works and not only by faith. How shall we reconcile the two propositions?

Well, they don't want any reconciling for they never fell out. But you will observe that James is not quoting from a different book from Paul. He is quoting from the same book, the book of Genesis, that Abraham was justified by works.

Abraham and the offering of Isaac

Whereabouts in Genesis does it say that Abraham was justified by works? Would it make any difference to you where the chapter is in Genesis? Suppose this business of offering his son had been in chapter 12, then we would scarcely have any right to be sure of salvation. But it isn't that way round, is it? Abraham was justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar, and that is chapter 22, years after his justification by faith. If it is true that justification by works is necessary, *it comes second in the order of experience*.

Then let me call your attention to the actual verb that James uses in those verses we have read. 'You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith *was completed by his works*' (v. 22). Did the works earn him salvation? They did nothing of the sort. What happened was that by works his faith *was made perfect*. The works are in relation to the faith; they perfect the faith.

Secondly 'the Scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"—and he was called a friend of God' (v. 23). So this Scripture in Genesis 15:6, that says he was justified by faith and it was reckoned to him for righteousness, was fulfilled here, when he was justified by his works.

So let's consider what that phrase may mean, 'his faith was completed'. What was the issue that God raised with Abraham in Genesis 15 over which he believed God? It was this: 'Abram,' says God, 'I'm going to give you a son. I'm going to give you a seed. Your heir shall not be your servant, this Damascene Eliezer, but your own son.' That was the gospel message preached to Abraham, and Abraham in that moment believed God. *It is faith that hears God's word and believes it, that makes a man right with God*.

So Abraham is going to have a son and the following chapters tell us on what terms. It was not by Abraham's own merit or strength, for now see the long, long story in Genesis. Here was God's promise that he should have a son, and Abraham believed it. But that son was not born until late on: the record of it is in chapter 21. All that while, until Abraham was a decrepit old man, God left him without fulfilling the promise. Humanly speaking, it was impossible for Abraham to generate new life; he was as good as dead. All the while God was teaching him that this son, this life, was going to be a miraculous gift from God, and Abraham believed God.

Evidence of faith

And so Paul exhorts us likewise. That's what faith is: believing in God, who gives us life by his own gracious, unmerited gift. When Jesus Christ was delivered over to death for our offenses, God raised him and gave him new life; and God gives us that new life along with Christ on the grounds of our repentance and faith.

Eventually Abraham believed God and he was given this gift of new life, his son Isaac.

'All by faith?' you say.

Yes.

‘What do you mean by faith?’

Well, faith in God.

‘Ah,’ you say, ‘it’s easy, isn’t it, to claim to be a believer? “I’m a believer; I believe God, I’m justified. I have the gift of eternal life.” How does anybody know whether your faith is genuine or not? How do your next door neighbours know whether it is genuine or not?’

Let’s listen to James, ‘Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.’ It’s no good saying I’ve got faith; anybody can say, ‘I’ve got faith.’ If you go diddling the income tax inspector and you say you’re justified by faith, what are your neighbours going to think of your claim? If they are going to be convinced of the reality of your faith, the only way is if that faith leads to works. Isn’t that so? And, incidentally, how is God going to know that your faith is genuine?

You say, ‘It’s easy for God. God can read my heart and he knows.’

He can read your heart, but God will want more than reading your heart, says James. God too will require some works that demonstrate that the faith is genuine. What kind of works?

Well, let’s consider Abraham’s test, and we come back to the fact that God gave him this new life as a gift, simply because he believed God. So, eventually, when Abraham was ready, God said to him.

‘Now Abraham, you’re a believer, aren’t you?’

‘Yes, Lord.’

‘That means you’re trusting me, doesn’t it, and not yourself?’

‘Yes, Lord.’

‘Your whole hope for the fulfilment of all the promises is in me, isn’t it Abraham?’

‘Yes, Lord.’

‘Not in anybody else?’

‘No, Lord.’

‘Not in Isaac? Look Abraham, we’ll settle the point. Give me back Isaac, because it’s me you believe, isn’t it? It’s me you trust, so give me back Isaac.’

What would he do? Now he is called upon by his works to show that he means what he said, when he said he believed God. Our Lord taught us to pray ‘lead us not into temptation’. He did not teach us that in vain. Sooner or later, in the ordinary things of life, there will come big crises where we shall be required to justify our faith by our works. That’s a big thing, isn’t it? It sounds frightening.

Might the test of faith be that I should be called upon to surrender all I have? It could be, though doubtless God’s tests will start with simpler lessons than that. Some dear folks are tested from the very start, aren’t they? Some in our church here were in Muslim countries not so long ago. Every Muslim man and woman knows that if they profess salvation in their hearts and tell nobody, things are okay; but let them confess Christ and get baptized and they risk life itself. How shall I say ‘I believe God’, if I’m not prepared to trust God when the test comes?

Abraham and Abimelech

One more little lesson about the context of Genesis. In chapter 22 Abraham offered his son Isaac upon the altar, and chapter 22 comes after chapter 21, of course. What I mean is, the

story here follows the story of Genesis 21, so what is the story of chapter 21 about? Well just let me remind you briefly that it tells us about the Philistines.

At that time Abimelech and Phicol the commander of his army said to Abraham, 'God is with you in all that you do. Now therefore swear to me here by God that you will not deal falsely with me or with my descendants or with my posterity, but as I have dealt kindly with you, so you will deal with me and with the land where you have sojourned.' And Abraham said, 'I will swear.' (Gen 21:22–24)

You will have noticed that there is one thing that sobers up a man and begins to bring that look of responsibility into his face. It's not altogether when he gets married, but it is when his first child is born. As the years go on, the responsibility increases. 'What's going to happen to my boy, should I be taken early in life and my boy is left? Will he be secure?'

We all seek security for our sons and Abimelech the Philistine was no exception. He had a son and he hoped one day his son would occupy the throne that he, Abimelech, occupied, and he sought for security. Here was this great nomad sheik, Abraham, with enough servants in his encampment to furnish a whole army and go on expeditions. Here he was, roaming around about with no allegiance to anybody apparently, and Abimelech began to get nervous. What would happen when Abimelech died? What might Abraham do to Abimelech's son? Raid his city and destroy the inhabitants, crush the son and take over?

Genesis 21 indicates that Abimelech thought it was wise to seek some security for his son, so he came and negotiated a covenant with Abraham. 'Swear now,' he said. So they did what they did in those ancient days when you made a covenant; they got various ewe lambs and things and had a sacrifice, and Abraham swore an oath, giving Abimelech all the security that Abraham knew how to give him. He swore by an oath, and they called the place Beersheba, 'the well of the oath'. Abimelech went home and slept as peacefully as a man can sleep, who depends for his security on the oath of another man.

Where is our security?

It's a hostile world, isn't it? Security forces have to look under their cars when they go out, to make sure there isn't a bomb there. Is the young understudy beginning to push hard for your job? Has he noticed your hair's gone grey and he's trying for your position? It's a competitive, cut throat old world, isn't it? Is somebody planning a supermarket right on the doorstep of your family business? What about your son? Where will you find security for this life, and where will you find security for eternity?

You say, 'The only way to do that is to amass as much as you can around you. Really fortify yourself; be the father of a half a dozen sturdy, strong sons, and when you're old and decrepit they'll be your safeguard. Be the father of a half a dozen pretty young girls and they'll happily get married; your sons-in-law will be a great security and your daughters will nurse you in your old age. Get a good insurance policy.'

I see; you want to gird yourself around with things and thus get security. I can show you a better source of security: the oath, not of a man, but the oath of almighty God, talking out of heaven to your very soul.

So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. (Heb 6:17–18)

God has given us security by his word and by his oath. We can see how vividly those two chapters come together, can't we? There was man's oath (ch. 21) and God's oath (ch. 22), 'By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD' (v. 16).

You say, 'I would like to hear God speak those words of assurance to my soul.'

Well you could hear it, friend.

'On what terms?'

I'll tell you where Abraham came to it. God called him one day and said, 'Abraham, whom exactly do you trust? Where is your faith placed for the future? Is it in man; in yourself, or in Isaac perhaps? Give me Isaac, for you'll never know security while your faith is in any other but God.' So Abraham made preparations to give Isaac to the Lord. He was an elderly man with all the possibility of a future gone, humanly speaking. Isaac was on the altar and only God left, but it was there that he found immovable and eternal security.

Thus will God test our faith. He is not trying to prove us wrong, being stingy and hoping we shall fail; he is leading us until our faith is strong enough and made perfect, so that it can bear the test and thus arrive at the ground of security, which is an actual practical faith in God, though all else be taken.

So chapter 22 follows chapter 21; and if in chapter 21 our hero swore the oath by the well at Beersheba, when he came back down the mountain in chapter 22, he went and lived at Beersheba (v. 19). Not by any accident; but because they are part and parcel of that same lesson—where shall we find security? This is obviously important, isn't it? Not only because of what Genesis actually says, but the order and the context in which it says it.

If that's true of those few chapters we've read, couldn't it be true in deeper things and more detailed considerations? This is what we shall be looking at in our studies.

Abraham

Paul's use of Genesis to authenticate the Christian Gospel

Our general theme in these studies is the chronology in the life of Abraham. We have looked at it from the point of view of the New Testament and it is no secret that the New Testament writers laid it down as fundamental to the Christian faith that the gospel they preached is based on and witnessed to by Old Testament scripture. For the apostles, Genesis, like all the other books of the Old Testament, came to us by the authority of God. Therefore, it must be used as the authoritative word of God, even over important matters of our personal salvation and the way we can be right with God.

In this study we shall consider how Paul uses the book of Genesis to authenticate the Christian gospel, and in particular the relationship of the Christian gospel to the Jewish law.

In our previous study we noticed that in the Epistle to the Romans Paul points out and emphasises that Abraham was justified by faith before he was circumcised; from which Paul deduces that we too can be justified by faith quite apart from any ritual, ceremony, or any work of the law.

Then we noticed also how the New Testament discusses in detail the question of *justification by faith* on the one hand, and *justification by works* on the other. As an illustration of justification by faith, the New Testament quotes the experience of Abraham when he believed God and it was counted to him for righteousness. When it discusses justification by works, it quotes the experience of Abraham when he offered up his son Isaac upon the altar. So we spent a little time enquiring exactly when these two things took place. We found of course that Abraham was justified by faith first, and that comes in Genesis 15. Then he was justified by works when he offered his son upon the altar, and that comes in Genesis 22.

Now in all those things we noticed that Paul was citing Genesis as case law, as legal precedent. Not as typology, but the actual history of an actual man; his literal experience with God and how that patriarch's experience in his day has created for all time a legal, historical precedent, valid and binding to this present time. So that when we look at Abraham's experience and how he was right with God, justified by faith and justified by works, we can take it as the example and precedent for our own experience.

Genesis used as prototype

Now I want to go further and we shall look again at how Paul uses the book of Genesis. This time we shall find that he uses it at another level. In addition to using it as precedent in case

law, he uses it also as *prototype*. To help us to see that, we shall read some passages from the New Testament.

To give a human example, brothers: even with a man-made covenant, no one annuls it or adds to it once it has been ratified. Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, 'And to offsprings', referring to many, but referring to one, 'And to your offspring', who is Christ. This is what I mean: the law, which came 430 years afterwards, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void. For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise. Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made, and it was put in place through angels by an intermediary. (Gal 3:15–19)

Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise. Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother. For it is written, 'Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear; break forth and cry aloud, you who are not in labour! For the children of the desolate one will be more than those of the one who has a husband.' Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now. But what does the Scripture say? 'Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman.' So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman. (4:21–31)

One further verse from the sister epistle, the Epistle to the Romans:

For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, 'Abba! Father!' (8:15)

In these passages that we have read together, doubtless there is much that must appear to be rather heavy legal theology. It must be evident to us at the same time that, however heavy and difficult the theology and legality of these things are, what Paul is contending for is nothing less than our basic spiritual freedom; 'For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery' (Gal 5:1). If in political things the cost of freedom is eternal vigilance, so *in spiritual things the key to freedom is to know the solid biblical foundation upon which that spiritual freedom is built.*

In our generation we do well to copy those of past centuries, who rediscovered their spiritual freedom and broke the bonds of slavish religion. Therefore, rejoice in these great statements of Christian freedom that are the Epistle to the Romans and the Epistle to the Galatians. We need to grasp their argumentation, so that, if the Lord does not come soon, we may pass on that spiritual freedom to our successors. In religion, as in politics, it is

exceedingly easy to let go of true faith and true freedom, and to slip again into the chains of natural religion. So then, it is about our freedom that Paul is talking, and as you see he backs it home with copious references to the book of Genesis.

Hagar and Ishmael

Let us notice then, first of all, this analogy of Hagar and Ishmael that he takes from chapter 16, and then from chapter 21 where Ishmael is cast out. Notice exactly what he is talking about. He says, 'For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise' (Gal. 3:18); but conversely, if the inheritance is of promise, it is no more of the law. What he's talking about is primarily the inheritance in Genesis 15 that God covenanted with Abraham and his offspring. First, he makes the very simple and serious point, that the great inheritance that was given to Abraham was given to him *before he was circumcised*; the story of his circumcision comes in chapter 17.

This promise of an inheritance was given to Abraham some four hundred years before the law of Moses. It was promised to Abraham and his seed; the promise ratified and guaranteed by a covenant given to him by God and recorded there, as I say, in Genesis 15. Therefore, the simple legal point stands; if God promised that covenant of inheritance and gave it to Abraham in Genesis 15, a law that comes four hundred and thirty years afterwards cannot add to the conditions of inheritance.

It is a simple point. If you have ordered Builder O'Reilly to build you a country cottage for fifty thousand pounds and you have signed the contract with him, and he's signed it and promised he will deliver the goods at such and such a date, if, when you go to collect the house and pay him the money, he suddenly says to you, 'Oh look, I'm sorry, it's going to cost you one hundred thousand pounds now', you will rightly protest that it said in the covenant, and he signed the agreement, that the house should cost fifty thousand pounds. He cannot therefore suddenly add on some more money to be paid. He must abide by the original agreement unless O'Reilly has been a bit crafty and put what they call a 'break clause' in the covenant, saying that the cost must be adjusted at the time.

So here is the simple thing Paul is saying. God made this covenant of inheritance with Abraham and his seed before circumcision, and before the law of Moses. Therefore, if we would inherit, our inheritance does not depend either on circumcision or keeping the law of Moses. For a Jew, brought up for many long years believing the law to be the word of God, as we believe it too, to hear Paul say that a man can be justified and enter into inheritance apart from the deeds of the law, that would sound a very shocking thing. So, to help his fellow Jews see the rightness of the gospel that he preaches, Paul refers him to the stories that now come after here in the book of Genesis.

In chapter 16 we read first of Hagar and Ishmael. The story is that God had made this promise to Abraham, that he was going to have a son and that son would inherit all the great inheritance. So I invite you to come with me and just rehearse in your memory the facts; then we can see their significance from the New Testament's point of view. Abraham and Sarah were obviously full of this tremendous thing. God had promised them a son and he had promised them an inheritance, but the weeks went by, and the months, and perhaps the years, and Sarah, Abraham's wife perceived that she was not in fact having any child. So,

according to Genesis 16, she came one day to Abraham with that winsome manner that Sarah always used when she was talking to Abraham.

‘Abraham dear, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children.’

‘Yes,’ said Abraham, ‘I see that.’

‘I was thinking, wouldn’t it be an idea if you took our slave girl?’

‘Which slave girl?’ said Abraham.

‘The one we collected when we were in Egypt. Hagar is her name. Wouldn’t it be an idea if you took her and got us a son through Hagar?’

Now of course, to all respectable Christian women, that sounds a horrific suggestion to come from the mouth of Sarah, but in those far off days it was quite a common thing for people to do that. In well to do families, if a man could afford to have a wife and I don’t know how many slave girls, it was a common legal thing that if the wife herself couldn’t produce a son and heir, then she would give her husband one of her slave girls. A child born from the slave girl would count as the mistress’s son and become the legal son and heir of her husband. It was a very common device and that’s why it occurred to Sarah to do what all the women would have done in her situation. That was the way the world coped with the problem.

It seemed the most natural thing to do, and thus they thought that the great promise of God would be fulfilled. God had promised an inheritance; he had promised them a son. The question at stake was, how would that promise be fulfilled? Well, as the saying goes, ‘God always helps those who help themselves.’ Don’t we have to do our bit, and all that? Sarah’s suggestion seemed eminently reasonable, judged by ordinary human standards.

We know that God wouldn’t have it. Why wouldn’t he have it? Read Genesis 16 again and notice its simple, naïve narrative. Listen to Sarah, ‘The LORD has prevented me from bearing children’ (v. 2). You might have thought that that would be the end of it then. But she said, ‘Behold now . . .’ Now what? You’re not going to suggest ways and means of getting round what the Lord has done, are you Sarah? ‘The Lord has prevented me, but I think we can get round that.’

Now you see in the ancient history the point immediately at stake. God had made a promise; God was going to give them a son. Actually, he was intending to give them a son miraculously, but for the moment Sarah’s faith wavers and she decides to get this son, not merely as a fulfilment of God’s promise in God’s way, by God’s free gift; she decides she will have to get it by her own ingenuity and human self-help.

But God wouldn’t have it. When God promised that he was going to give them a son, God intended to keep his promise. That son was going to be a free gift that didn’t require man’s own ingenuity and self-help.

The story goes on. Hagar was a slave girl; for all the story tells us, she was a very well behaved slave girl. But you know what human nature is, don’t you? When she saw that she had conceived, she began to put on airs and graces (16:4).

‘Go and fetch the water Hagar.’

‘No, I can’t. I’m carrying Abraham’s child. You go.’

So Sarah would have thought to herself, ‘Who does she think she is? Slave girl, that she is, giving herself airs and graces and not doing what I tell her to do.’

You can perhaps begin to visualise the situation that developed in the home as the slave girl felt she was superior to Sarah. Why superior? 'Well, Sarah's no good, is she? I am having Abraham's child.' By nature, Hagar is superior to Sarah. 'We'll have to send her going,' says Sarah to Abraham.

Abraham didn't want to do it, but then peace is a valuable thing in the home. So presently Hagar ran off because Sarah tried heavy handed tactics and tried to put her in her place. But Hagar wouldn't be put in her place, and instead of submitting to Sarah she ran off. Well, that was no time for a woman in her state to run off into a wilderness! God loved Hagar and her child to be, and was going to bless him, so he sent his angel to meet her and told her to go back to Abraham and to Sarah.

So, back Hagar went, and for the next many years lived in Abraham's home with Sarah. I don't think every Monday was happy, and now there was this added thing. Not only was there the personality clash between Hagar and Sarah, there was the matter of the character and personality of Hagar's child. This is before even he was born,

And the angel of the LORD said to her, 'Behold, you are pregnant and shall bear a son. You shall call his name Ishmael, because the LORD has listened to your affliction. He shall be a wild donkey of a man, his hand against everyone and everyone's hand against him, and he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen.' (16:11–12)

'A wild donkey of a man'; he never would get on with anybody really, on principle. I say again, can you imagine what life in Abraham's home was like, with Hagar the slave girl back, always getting a dig at Sarah, and Sarah struggling to keep on top? And now with a growing teenager, who was a wild donkey of a fellow. One might quote of him the words of Paul, talking of untamed and untameable human nature, 'For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot' (Rom 8:7). *The flesh* is as wild and unruly as a wild donkey. Thus it continued all down those intervening years.

The birth of Isaac

But let's pass the years and come to chapter 21, where we read that in the fullness of time God visited Sarah and she gave birth to Isaac, the promised seed born at last. Now notice how swiftly the narrative in Genesis continues. Let's look at the next story in the book. The promised seed was no sooner born, some three or four years later perhaps, when Sarah saw the older boy Ishmael laughing, mocking Isaac (v. 9). Once more she came to Abraham, 'Now this time Abraham, it won't do. You are to cast out this bondwoman and her son, for the son of the bondwoman shall not inherit along with the free. They are incompatible.'

It grieved Abraham to have to do it, but when he enquired of the Lord, the Lord came down on Sarah's side, and said, 'Whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for through Isaac shall your offspring be named' (v. 12). So goes the ancient story. God had sent Hagar back and ordained that Ishmael should be born in Abraham's house. Now at this point in history Ishmael is turned out and Isaac is seen to be the sole and solitary heir.

Let's come now to the subject matter of Genesis. We looked last week at what happens in the rest of chapter 21 and we need not repeat it now. It is the story of the Philistine, and the

covenant that the Philistine made with Abraham. See again how swiftly the narrative moves on. The promised seed having been born and the slave boy cast out, now, in chapter 22, the promised seed is taken by his father and offered in sacrifice upon mount Moriah. In chapter 23, Sarah herself dies and is buried. Then in chapter 24, Abraham seeks a bride for Isaac and finds her in Rebekah.

Why was Ishmael cast out?

So, we've looked at the story; but now to its application. There are those who would tell us that in Galatians 4 Paul is being very rabbinic and using Scripture in an unlawful fashion; this allegory of his is all arbitrary and not an argument to attach much weight to. It was one of Paul's days off, so to speak. Let's at least look at what Paul is saying. He is saying, first of all, that there was this bit of history: Ishmael was in the home and then he was cast out. Why? Well here comes the principle: 'the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman' (v. 30).

What lesson do I take from that? It directly concerns my inheritance in Christ, my initial justification by faith, forgiveness of sins, and all the blessings of God's Holy Spirit. At length, heaven itself and a place in the new Jerusalem, 'an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading' (1 Pet 1:4).

On what ground do you hope to enter your inheritance?

The issue is simply this: is it a free gift of promise, or is it something that I must work for? That's the issue. God has given it to us by promise, of course he has. There is for you 'an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven', but you're not yet there, are you? It's all right for you to tell me that you've been justified by faith. 'I was justified by faith,' you say, 'sixty-four years ago.' Well praise God for that. If you were justified by faith then, you're still justified by faith now. You're not in heaven yet, but the 'inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading' is kept in heaven for you.

It is a promise then, but what does God mean when he promises you the inheritance? Does he mean that there it is, but you'll have to merit it? Does he mean, there it is, but you mightn't actually get in and enjoy it? Think for a moment of that great inheritance and one of the many rooms in the Father's house (John 14:2). How seriously do you want to be there? You say, 'If I don't get there, I miss everything. If I don't enter into that inheritance at last, it would have been better for me that I had never been born, for the only alternative known to God or man or the devil to a place in the Father's house, is to be cast out into outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth in eternal frustration (Matt 8:12).

You hope to be in the Father's house. Then tell me, on what ground do you hope to come into the promise? I tell you this, with no less than eternal bliss at stake and its alternative of eternal perdition, if you thought that the fulfilment of that promise depended upon you and your efforts, it could turn you into a slave.

In the school I went to, we had a kind of a promise. It took the form that if we behaved in our prep, didn't blot our copy books, and got a reasonable mark for our sums, then at the end of the summer term some important person would come along and dish out a few prizes. The first three or four on the list in each form would be asked to solemnly walk up and get the

prize. Everybody else clapped. Now that phenomenon, I have to report to you, resulted in two different attitudes on the part of the majority of people. There were those who, fixing their eyes upon the promise of a prize at the end, worked like billy-o. They swotted at their Latin, did their English, physics, chemistry, and what have you. Even on Saturday mornings, they worked to get the prize: it was only a three-and-sixpenny book token at W. H. Smith. A good many more said, 'I haven't got a hope,' so it didn't turn them into slaves. They saw they had no hope whatsoever, so they didn't even try.

With the promise of an eternal inheritance, men and women divide like that. There are those who are slaves; they try to take it seriously and earn their place in the great inheritance beyond. It makes slaves of them.

I remember in the twilight of an Irish night, past twelve o'clock, talking to a woman who was climbing Croagh Patrick in her bare feet, trying to secure for her mother a place in the Father's house. Noble woman, if that's the way in; but what a slavery. Multitudes of others know that if heaven is by works they haven't a hope, so they give up before they start.

We need to know exactly what this term 'promise' means. It says, he's promised us eternal life, but what kind of a promise is it? Is it dependent on my effort, or is it a promise that depends solely upon his grace and word? *The difference is between slavery and freedom.*

If you think this story here sounds harsh, see the underlying principle involved. 'Cast out this slave woman with her son, for the son of this slave woman shall not be heir with my son Isaac' (Gen 21:10). Picking up the Old Testament story, Paul says, 'The Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother . . . So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman' (Gal 4:26, 31).

Come now to Paul's more allegorical part. In chapter 3 he faces the would-be arguer.

'Paul, look here, this is outrageous. When it comes to our inheritance, how can you bid us Jewish folks to put aside our faith in the keeping of God's law and trust only in Christ?'

To comfort their hearts, Paul says, 'Well now, what then is that law?' (see v. 19).

Yes of course God gave it, but now, if we investigate why God gave it, we shall see that it was not given so that we could keep it and earn our inheritance. Already we have seen the first argument. The inheritance was covenanted in Genesis 15; the law wasn't introduced until Sinai, four hundred and thirty years later. Having established the actual historical fact and the legal position, now Paul turns to the history and uses it as a prototype.

Look at it. We've come back to the chronology of the book of Genesis. Inheritance; promise; Sarah, independent of God, thought the promise was to be fulfilled by her own wisdom and effort. Hagar the slave girl brought into Abraham's home, sent there by God; sent back by God when she tried to escape until the promised seed came. With the coming of Isaac there came a change; Ishmael is cast out. That is historical fact and Paul attributes to it divine authority. He reads it not merely as historical fact, but as a divinely given prototype of what God's intention should eventually be.

The law of Moses is added

Start with Abraham again; come along to the time of Moses four hundred and thirty years later, and the law was added with all its bondage. The law continued upon Abraham's seed

throughout history until the promised seed came, Jesus Christ our Lord. Then the time had come also for a change in the law, and in that sense salvation by the law was put away.

That is what Paul is talking about; he's not making up stories out of his own head or spinning arbitrary allegory. He is using this time span and this event as a prototype of the larger pattern of history. The law was added 'until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made' (Gal 3:19).

If we have learned that clue, there's nothing to stop us just looking a little bit further into Genesis, its chronology and its value as prototype. The promised seed is born (and that points us at last to Christ). But see the very next story; the seed (and the Lord) is cast out. The father took the son, laid the wood upon his back, and together they walked up Moriah to offer him as a sacrifice to God. In our previous study we read this in its historical context, as an example of how a man is justified by works. We saw in it a supreme lesson of where we may find security in the oath of God, when we have learned to demonstrate that our faith is in God, and in God only.

Now we take it at another level. Consider the son that was sacrificed on that altar. Jewish Rabbis are in the habit of pointing out in the Talmud and Midrash that Isaac by this time was a grown young man and his father elderly. Therefore, had Isaac chosen, he might easily have resisted the declining strength of his aged father if, in his natural longing for life, he had rebelled against his father and refused to allow himself to be put upon the altar. The Rabbis call attention therefore to what they call 'the merit of Isaac our father'; that in humble, courageous obedience to God and his father, Isaac allowed himself to be offered upon that altar.

Perceive the relevance of Isaac's obedience to the things that we have been discussing. I am as ass-headed as any Ishmael ever was; born with fallen flesh, the principle of my nature, finding my efforts to keep God's holy law impossibly futile. 'For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot' (Rom 8:7). For me to try to earn heaven by keeping that holy law would be an indescribable and unfathomable slavery.

Where can I find my inheritance, therefore? Not through my obedience. 'The law came in to increase the trespass,' says Paul (Rom 5:20). God gave his holy law, not that people should keep it and thus be saved, but that they should discover by means of that law the incorrigible nature of their fallen hearts. Until we find what sin has really done to us, how rebellious and incorrigible our flesh is, we might make the mistake of thinking that, given a little diligence, we could perhaps suppress our worst deeds and thoughts, and make ourselves respectable enough to earn a place in our Father's home on high. What a delusion it would be.

God gave the law so that we should understand it with our minds, try to keep it, and then prove how incorrigible our nature is and that we can't keep it. 'Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ' (Gal 3:24 KJV). 'The law came in to increase the trespass,' says Paul (Rom 5:20).

Remember the slave girl who got uppish and the wild donkey of her son in Abraham's home? If he hadn't found out before, Abraham then discovered what the result of self-effort is, and where it leads. Ah, but look at it in the next story. It tells of Isaac's obedience unto death.

For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. (Rom 5:19)

I shall be in heaven at last, in a mansion in the Father's house, not by any merit of my own obedience, wretched sinner and rebel that I am, but by the obedience of the one who made me righteous.

Though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Phil 2:6–8)

It is not by accident that the picture of the son being offered, is a picture of that son's obedience unto death.

A bride for Isaac

Our study is nearly over, but just look on ahead to chapter 24. You know it so well I need only call your attention to it and it will send you home happy.

Ishmael, the son of the slave, was in the home until the promised seed came. The law was operative until Christ, the promised seed, God's Son, came and was offered. By his obedience we are sanctified. Then Abraham saw the necessity of a bride for his son, and secured her through the good offices and faithful services of his servant [Eliezer]. You see the point at once, don't you? All I want to point out to you is this little thing about the text of Genesis. After that famous story of the offering of Isaac upon the altar, Abraham returns to Beersheba. Then there comes a few verses, 'Now after these things it was told to Abraham, "Behold, Milcah also has borne children to your brother Nahor"' (22:20–24).

Just like dear Irish folks who have gone to America and, when it comes to Thanksgiving or some such other great occasion, the talk will turn to grandmother and great-aunts that still live in the old country, so it was on this occasion.

After returning from that traumatic experience on Moriah, somebody asked Abraham, 'Have you heard recently what's been happening to Milcah and Nahor?'

'No,' says Abraham, 'has there been news from my far country?'

'Yes, children have been born.'

'I suppose that's natural,' said Abraham.

'Yes, and among them there is a girl by the name of Rebekah.'

I don't know whether it was that night or two months later, but Abraham was perhaps sitting in his tent, and he said to himself, 'Isaac, dear man, is getting on; it's about time he was married. Where shall we get a wife from?'

He scratched his head and stroked his patriarchal beard, 'Where would you get a wife for Isaac? There are some girls around here, I suppose, but they are Philistines. Somebody was telling me the other day about my relatives down there in Ur of Chaldees. There's a Rebekah, they said. Could you expect a girl to come all this long way?'

‘Of course, I did,’ said Abraham. ‘When I lived down there I was a pagan old Gentile; I wouldn’t like a pagan old Gentile for Isaac. Do you think though,’ says Abraham to himself, ‘that God would do again what he did with me? God appeared to me when I lived among that very same family, Milcah and Nahor and company, way back there in Ur, and he brought me out of the Gentiles. Would he do the same again, and bring a Gentile girl to become a bride for my son? I don’t know,’ says Abraham, ‘it’s worth having a go.’

So he sent his servant, and you have the story in chapter 24. The servant preached it in glowing colours—it’s an extraordinary story. ‘God has blessed my master with everything his hands could hold and his heart could long for. He has one son, and has given to him all that he has. The proposition is, Rebekah, would you care to be the wife of my master’s son?’ (vv. 34–49).

She heard the story and decided to leave the Gentiles to go to be the bride of a man she had never seen, yet having not seen she loved. Though she still didn’t see him, as every foot of the camels went that little bit further, she rejoiced with joy already tinged with the glory that should be. She had got an earring or two already, and they were tremendous, and a coat or two, and they were glorious. If this was *the earnest*, the guarantee of the inheritance, what would the inheritance itself be? If these were the gifts, what would the giver be?

You know how to make the application of the story, don’t you? It’s the fact that there once we were, a lot of old Gentiles. The God of glory appeared to Abraham our father, and called him out. He lived as a patriarch in the land of promise until the seed was born, and the seed was offered. His descendants eventually again came into the land; they were put under the law until the seed was born and the son was offered.

Then what happened? Why, there broke out another great movement of the Gentiles, and it hasn’t stopped yet. Vast multi-millions of Gentiles doing what Abraham once did, for the God of glory has appeared to them too. It started at Pentecost, and God has brought them out from the Gentiles to be a bride for Abraham’s seed, God’s Son.

We’ve now gone back in history; whether you accept this as a prototype or not, this is history. Abraham came out from the Gentiles those thousands of years ago and the Jewish nation was born. Since Pentecost, and since the death and resurrection of Jesus, multi-millions of Gentiles have repeated what Abraham did. They’ve learned to love a man they’ve never seen, and believing in him have come out of the Gentiles and are on their way to glory to meet the loved one of their hearts.

If you hold a five pound note up to the light you’ll see the watermark and you’ll know it’s genuine. If you hold the Old Testament up to the light you will see the divinely inspired watermark within the pages of its narrative and you can tell that salvation is true.

Jacob

God's promise of blessing fulfilled

There remains a great deal of detail in the stories about Abraham that we haven't so far discussed, but we move on now to consider the section of Genesis that intervenes between the end of the story of Abraham and the story of Jacob and his twelve sons. That at least will give us a bird's eye view of the second half of the book of Genesis, the three great sections that fill the second half of that first book of the Bible.

Just let me remind you of the major contents. It starts off in chapter 25 verse 12 with a list of the names of the sons of Ishmael, and then it will tell us about Isaac in the land.

Esau and Jacob

First of all, it tells us a story about life in Isaac's family; the story about the conception and the antenatal experience of Isaac's wife Rebekah, and then the eventual birth of her twin sons, Esau and Jacob. You'll remember when she went to inquire of the Lord about these children before they were born, God announced to her that she should have twins and the elder should serve the younger (vv. 22–23). This is an interesting instance of the sovereignty of God, as Paul was later to comment:

(For *the children* being not yet born, neither having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of him that calleth). (Rom 9:11 KJV)

God thus intervened in his sovereignty. Nonetheless it is an interesting story of human struggle; the children struggled within Rachel before they were born.

What a world this is, isn't it? Full of keen and sometimes ruthless competition, as you businessmen know too well. It starts extraordinarily early, as infants in the kindergarten are made aware of the struggle to try and be the best and win life's prizes. Dear me, where should we be if there weren't such a thing as the kindly sovereign will of God that overrules all human struggles for our good? What a sorry universe it would be if behind and above all these struggles there were nothing but the mindless mechanisms of chance.

Thank God, cut throat competition doesn't have the last word. We live in a universe that is ultimately personal, coming from a Creator who reserves his sovereign right to exercise his sovereignty and choose amongst men and distribute his blessings ultimately as he pleases for our good, if we can learn to content ourselves and rejoice in his sovereign will.

The first part of the story we are considering is one of greed and profanity; greed on Jacob's part and profanity upon Esau's. The result was that Esau sold his birthright for a bowl of lentil stew (vv. 29–34).

Having told us about the family life of Isaac, we move on to see Isaac among the Gentiles; and once more God's sovereignty in maintaining Isaac in the land of Canaan in spite of the rigorous and ruthless competition that the Philistines showed towards him. You may remember this is the part that tells us that no sooner had Isaac's servants dug a well in this or that place, but along came the Philistines and took the well away.

Be careful if you've got a bright idea in your factory. Get it patented very quickly or some 'Philistine' might come and steal your idea and make the money you should have made. It is a competitive old world, isn't it?

Yet God maintained Isaac among the Gentiles, in spite of all his fear and the envy and strife of the Philistines. It was in such an experience that God showed him the reality of his covenant. God had said to Isaac,

Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you and will bless you for to you and to your offspring
I will give all these lands, and I will establish the oath that I swore to Abraham your father.
(26:3)

God intended to fulfil his sworn covenant, and if it meant that, to stay in the land, Isaac needed corn and cattle and wells for water, God in his faithfulness would see that Isaac had enough (v. 12). If Isaac sought the kingdom of God these things should be added.

Isaac's blessing—Jacob runs away

Then there comes the great central section, beginning with the story of the blessing (ch. 27). Isaac proposed to bless his sons, and would have blessed Esau, but Rebekah helped Jacob to steal the blessing from his aged and now nearly blind father. In consequence Jacob had to run away and eventually went down to his relatives, Laban and company, and lived amongst them. He worked for Laban's two wives, Leah and Rachel, and then amassed some capital to support his wives and children. When strife broke out in the family, Jacob had to come back again. We notice the sorry state of affairs; by stealing the blessing, Jacob enraged Esau and had to run away, and by behaving as he did in his business life down amongst Laban and his relatives, he incurred their jealousy and anger and once more he had to run away. There being nowhere else to run, he had to run back to Palestine and once more face Esau.

Jacob back in the land

In section four we have a part of Genesis where Jacob is now back again in the land. So his life started off in the land with Isaac, then he ran away and lived amongst the Gentiles for twenty-one years or so. He was obliged to come back, and now here he is again, back in the land, a much chastened Jacob.

Notice that in the course of section three, as he ran away from home, God appeared to him at Bethel and gave him that famous vision of God's government and sovereignty; the vision of the house of God (28:10–19).

Then again, when he was on his way back God appeared to him; the angel of the Lord wrestled with him at Peniel and gave Jacob once more an experience of the living God, and of his government (32:22–32).

So, a much chastened Jacob comes back into the land, his name now changed to Israel (v. 28). But you would be premature to think that, because Jacob himself had these vivid experiences of God, all his family were necessarily converted because they were back in the land.

Simeon, Levi and the Shechemites

We read, first of all, of their experience among the Gentiles, and in particular how the prince of Shechem raped Dinah, one of Jacob's daughters (ch. 34). Two of her brothers, Simeon and Levi, deceived the Shechemites into making a bargain with them, and they did it in the name of religion. They said they would consent to the marriage if all the males of Shechem were circumcised in the manner of the Israelite religion. Then, when the operation had been performed, these two brothers took advantage of the weakness of the Shechemites and slaughtered all of them, with the inevitable result: "Then Jacob said to Simeon and Levi, "You have brought trouble on me by making me stink to the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites and the Perizzites"" (v. 30).

As I said, it would be premature to think that, just because Jacob has had these big experiences and now he's back in the land, the whole of his family is necessarily converted.

Of course, as we think about these things, our minds run forward in time. Israel, who in ages past were in their land and then, like Jacob, had to get out of it, have lived for centuries among the Gentiles. Here and there they made themselves a lot of money and capital, until the Gentiles have at times turned against them, enraged because they see so many banks in the high street owned by Jews, so many factories and so many industries. In the end the Jews have had to flee back to their land—where else could they go? In desperation they have gone back, but it would be premature to think or suggest that because they've gone back they're all converted. Alas, since they've gone back, they too have committed such outrages that has made the name of Israel to be disgraced among the Gentiles. The nation is not yet converted to God.

Indeed, after these two sons of Jacob had committed this outrageous crime—in the name of religion, if you please, because they were God's special people and had the sign of circumcision—God summoned Jacob and his family to repentance. Lo and behold, as they came before God and began to search their lives and their homes, they discovered that their families were bung full of idols. Yes, these old scallywags, who'd gone around preaching deceitfully their circumcision to the Shechemites, were serving the same idols and the same false gods, with the same ideals and the same ambitions as the Gentiles around them. How easy it is to mouth religion and go through with religious ceremonies, and still have the same standards, ambitions, ideals and goals as the men of the world. God brought them through discipline here, aimed at bringing the nation to repentance.

Rachel

Now finally for Jacob, a little story of his family life. Upon their repentance God appeared to him again and reassured Jacob of his faithfulness, his covenant and his blessing; 'I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply,' said God (35:9–15). Jacob proceeded to do that. Hadn't God given him the promise? So he was going to be fruitful and multiply.

Presently his favourite wife Rachel was with child. I wonder, did Jacob dance for joy? 'How marvellous of God. He's going to bless me after all, and dear Rachel is going to have another child. Marvellous! I've always wondered why God didn't allow me more children by Rachel. Leah has had endless children, but Rachel only had one, Joseph. But now God is going to be marvellously good and bless me.' But Rachel died in childbirth.

You say, 'What on earth does God mean? Telling a man to be fruitful and then letting that happen—is that a blessing?'

How easily we talk of God's blessings when things appear to go well. Sometimes the bigger blessing is when things appear to go wrong.

Reuben's sin

As if old Jacob didn't have enough sorrow in his family, what with those boys slaughtering the Shechemites, and now Rachel gone home, but around about that time he heard one day that 'Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father's concubine' (35:22). You say, 'Is this really the story of a man whom God promised to bless? What on earth is *blessing*?'

God's promises to Abraham

So let's try to put this particular part of Genesis into its context and just remind ourselves of our earlier study on Abraham. When Abraham came out of Ur of Chaldees God promised him a number of things.

Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonours you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.' (Gen 12:1–3)

Then presently God said,

This man [Abraham's servant, Eliezer] shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir. And he brought him outside and said, 'Look towards heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them . . . So shall your offspring be.' (15:4–5)

Finally,

In your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed. (22:18)

True to his word, God fulfilled those promises. He will fulfil them one of these days in a far bigger way, but he fulfilled them at their first level in those far off days.

So, in chapters 11–15 Abraham came into the land and God said to him, ‘Now Abraham, this is the land I’m going to give you. Though you’ll have to be a stranger in it for many years and centuries, yet this is the land; here it is.’ In chapter 15 he covenants the land to Abraham and to his seed. Then chapters 16–25 are the story of the birth of the promised seed. We have thought about that section and its chronology and why the whole process took so long.

In chapters 36–50, that final promise (22:18) was fulfilled at its first stage when God sent Joseph and ultimately all his family down to Egypt. Joseph proved to be the key that saved Egypt and all the little surrounding nations from starvation, so it had come true that in Abraham and in his offspring all the nations were blessed. That is obvious to any careful reader.

That leaves us with chapters 25–35. What are they about? Well, they are not about the land so much, nor yet the production of the offspring, but now the fulfilment of God’s promise that he would bless Abraham before he made him and his offspring a blessing to the nations.

The topic of Blessing

We therefore have to focus our minds tonight on this topic of blessing. The term now begins to occur very frequently in this part of Genesis. God said to Isaac, ‘Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you and will bless you’ (26:3). ‘And Isaac sowed in that land and reaped in the same year a hundredfold. The LORD blessed him’ (v. 12). ‘And the LORD appeared to him the same night and said, “I am the God of Abraham your father. Fear not, for I am with you and will bless you . . .’ (v. 24). Even the Philistines had to observe that the Lord was with Isaac; ‘You are now the blessed of the LORD’ (v. 29).

So, this section is going to be about blessing; God is going to fulfil his promise and bless them. Of course it’s obvious, you won’t need me to point it out, that this whole middle part of Genesis is the famous story of the blessing of Esau and Jacob.

Then again, to cite just one other example for the moment, when Jacob was on his way back and in a panic of fear at having to meet Esau, the angel of the Lord wrestled with him on that dark night (32:24). As Jacob in his desperation clung to the angel, he said, “I will not let you go unless you bless me” . . . And there he blessed him’ (vv. 26, 29). It lies on the surface therefore, that this part of Genesis has to do with this topic of blessing.

That’s a topic we all know a lot about, isn’t it? I know you do because I’ve heard you talking about it. ‘Oh, we had a blessed time . . . we prayed that God would bless us . . . there was blessing the other night in the meeting.’ Let me be a sheer Philistine for the moment and ask you what on earth do you mean by *blessing*? What is blessing?

I can tell you what it was in those early days for Isaac. For instance, he sowed in the land that year and the Lord blessed him and he reaped a whole harvest—a field full of God’s blessing.

‘Oh,’ you say, ‘that’s rather a lowly concept of blessing. I wouldn’t think of the blessing of the Lord like that.’

You don’t? Well, Isaac did.

‘No,’ you say, ‘blessing to me is a much more exalted thing. For instance, like Ephesians says, “[God] has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places” —that’s what I mean by blessing. Real, spiritual blessing.’ (Eph 1:3.)

Marvellous. I’m glad that’s your sense of proportion; but who is it that makes your corn grow, or your bank balance grow? Isn’t that a blessing? A roof over your head and a settee to sit on—where did you get them?

‘You go to business to get those things. And let me give some advice, young man, when you get out into business now, it’s a cutthroat world and you’d better look out for number one!’

Oh, I see.

‘Well that’s how everybody else does.’

So that’s how you get the houses and the settees—and blessing is the spiritual things? I’m sure it’s right and proper for us in this age to attach much more importance to our spiritual blessings than we do to other kinds of blessing, but, you know, if ever we’re going to have spiritual blessings we shall have to start off as little children with a lot of physical blessings—and as adults as well. If God doesn’t bless us with enough food and clothes we won’t survive enough to learn our spiritual lessons and trust the Saviour and enter into those spiritual blessings, shall we? So for us too, the Lord’s blessing concerns itself first with physical things, and then of course with the greater spiritual blessings.

Yes, but even for those ancient Israelites at the level of their physical blessings—corn and sheep and camels—thank God there was from time to time a sense that, in the getting of these physical benefits, there was required of them a certain faith in God and obedience to him. Without that faith in God and without that obedience these material benefits very often lose that sense of richness that surrounds the humblest of gifts, when we perceive it comes to us as a gift from God. The most comfortable beds to sleep on are not necessarily the Sleeppeeze or Slumberland mattresses. In the end, the most comfortable bed to sleep on is the bed that God gives you when you dare trust and obey him.

Varied attitudes to blessing

We’re going to look at some of the attitudes to blessing that we find in these stories. Like all preachers have a right to be, I must be arbitrary and just select some of the stories because we haven’t the time to cover them all.

Esau

By the providence of God, he was born first in his family and therefore he had the birthright. In the ancient world, birthright gave a man certain privileges. It also gave him a double portion of inheritance; so birthrights were things that you could put a commercial value on. You could even sell them if you wanted to. It was, in part, a commercial thing. Of course, it did include some other facets; the spiritual privilege of being the head of the next generation, and so forth, and so on.

With any son of Abraham or Isaac, the position of firstborn carried an immeasurable privilege. God had promised that, in Abraham and his offspring, not only would all the

nations of the earth be blessed, but he had said to Abraham, ‘Kings shall come from you’ (35:11). It was the patriarchal belief that the great promises of God—sovereignty, reigning, being kings—reached out into the future and not only to a little patch of corn or a little well down the road that the Philistines would quarrel over. There lay a tremendous future of glory. If that was true, the firstborn would then carry the chief honour, position and glory. It was always the firstborn. You say, ‘What an incalculable blessing.’

I’ll tell you what Esau thought about it. He was keen on hunting; he would have enjoyed running marathons and things of that order, all manly sports, of course. He came in one day and he was very faint. I suppose he hadn’t taken anything with him to eat on the hunt. As he came near the tent he smelt a most delightful smell, like the famous ‘Bisto kids’ are supposed to have done! Jacob was making some stew—it had a few beans in it, or something, to make it red. He didn’t run marathons, except when he was in trouble! He was a homely type and knew all about cooking.

‘Give me some of that red stew,’ said Esau.

Jacob might have been a plain, quiet man, but he had an eye to business.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘it’s good stuff, but unfortunately the price of beans has gone up recently. You really can’t afford to give things away in this world, Esau.’

‘Alright,’ says Esau, ‘I’ll pay for it. What do you want?’

‘Well, there’s that birthright of yours—.’

‘Birthright—all that stuff that old Abraham used to talk about? God appeared to him, you know, and he was justified or something or other—isn’t that what Grandfather used to say? And that one day a king, Messiah, was going to come. You don’t believe all that stuff, do you Jacob? I mean, this is the modern world.’

Jacob says, ‘Yes, I do believe that.’

‘Oh, you haven’t got over your childhood myths yet? If you want the birthright, it’s no use to me. What’s the good of a birthright when your stomach’s empty? You can’t live on birthrights, Jacob; you can’t live on promises. They don’t fill your stomach. Give me the stew, and you can have the birthright’ (see 25:29–34).

For a bowl of stew, and for present, immediate satisfaction, he sold the glory and the future. Didn’t I tell you that, even though it’s ordinary material things, to enter the blessings of God will require faith? It will force choice upon us and it will test our comparative sense of value. Esau decided to go for immediate satisfaction, and satisfaction at a very lowly level. Many people have done it since.

Because of his choice about the red stew, they called Esau ‘Edom’, the red one. The most famous Edomite was Herod, the Idumaeen.¹ When the wise men came knocking on Herod’s palace door, they said they had come seeking the king of the Jews—‘Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?’ (Matt 2:2).

‘What’s that?’ said Herod.

‘King of the Jews,’ they said.

‘You don’t believe those prophecies that these little sects in Judaism still hold about the literal messiah who’s going to come one day and be king, do you? No sensible politician

¹ From Idumaea, southeast of Judea between the Dead Sea and the Gulf of Aqaba, which during the time of the Old Testament had been known as the land of Edom.

believes that. I'm king here. You can have all your promises and hopes for a coming messiah, but I intend to be the king now. And, just in case there should be anything in those promises, I'll kill all the baby boys two years and under. That'll show there's nothing in them.'

There were kings in Edom before there were kings in Israel, comments Genesis (36:31). Herod intended to reign now and not believe in God's promises for the future.

To go from Herod to genuine believers is a big jump, isn't it? Paul had to tell the Corinthians, 'You know, you Corinthians, you puzzle me. It seems to me that you want to reign as kings now, while we apostles are made the offscouring of the earth. We go often with an empty stomach, are beaten and bruised and have no certain dwelling place. Would to God that you reigned already, for that would mean that the Saviour had come and we would reign with you' (1 Cor 4:8–15). The Corinthians were impatient to have their stomachs full now; they couldn't abide a little suffering for the Saviour's sake and then reign with him when he comes.

Sooner or later the choice will come to us all, will it not? 'Beware!' says the writer to the Hebrews to those that had professed salvation.

See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no 'root of bitterness' springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled; that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. (Heb 12:15–16)

We cannot lose our salvation; every believer will be with Christ when Christ comes to reign. What position will I have, and how big the blessing then? It is possible to sell what could have been mine in that glory—an exalted position in the government of Christ—because I'm not prepared to go occasionally with an empty stomach and to make a sacrifice for Christ's sake, believing his word and his promise. I demand to have my blessing now. But we can't always have everything; we have to choose.

Isaac

What about Isaac? I wouldn't really like him to hear what I'm about to say, but I don't think he would mind—he's not such a big figure as Abraham, is he? Abraham was a great pioneer of faith, a man of vigour and determination. When God appeared to him in Ur of Chaldees, Abraham came out. His father Terah settled half way, but eventually Abraham went on the whole way. He travelled up and down the land and claimed the promises of God, content to live as a pilgrim, victorious in his faith. It can be difficult to follow on after a man like that, and Isaac doesn't get anywhere near the coverage in Scripture that Abraham gets.

I've felt like that myself, that's how I know. Before I came to Belfast, in the generation before many of us, there were tremendous giants and pioneers. You've told me about them. They went around preaching the gospel, hundreds of folks got saved and churches were formed all over the place. Yes, it was tremendous. But it's difficult to follow men like that, isn't it? Perhaps you haven't found it so; I have.

Isaac had a hard task. Said God, 'Isaac, I want you to dwell in the land and maintain the vision that I gave to Abraham, your father.' Over the years it had got decidedly difficult, for when Abraham was gone the Philistines made themselves awkward. Just going on and

maintaining the vision was a difficult enough thing, without pioneering any further. Full marks for Isaac that he actually kept in the land, faithful to God's promise, even though it was exceedingly difficult sometimes to get enough water to drink and food to eat. But he believed it was the pathway of blessing.

What about us? Perhaps you're a pioneer—I can't confess to being one myself. What stirring days they were when Luther and Wesley were raised up of God, and Whitfield in the great Evangelical Awakening when thousands got converted. It must have been great stuff living then; it was all so new and they were living on the surge tide. Then came the generations behind—and what happened? It's very difficult to maintain the evangelistic vision of a Wesley, isn't it? Without criticism, I know of churches calling themselves after that dear man's name that have given up the whole concept of evangelisation and the necessity of conversion. Those marvellous days when the old independents, the old Baptists and the old Congregationalists, discovered the principles of church government and organisation in God's word. What marvellous freedoms they won for us by daring to stand at the cost of prison and prosecution, and death for some of them, for the right of believers to meet according to God's holy word without the trammels or the tyrannies of great ecclesiastical structures. Then we come on behind, to find sometimes that enthusiasm for keeping the New Testament doctrines of the church have somehow evaporated. Instead of maintaining them, people let them go; no longer convinced that the way to blessing is to obey God in these matters too.

Full marks for Isaac, who dared to believe God that the way to blessing was to trust and obey; so he dwelt in the land and proved God. In spite of all the opposition, God made room for him. He sowed and he reaped and the Lord blessed him.

If we can commend him for that, I don't know that we can commend him for what follows. We come at last to the great story of the blessing by Isaac of his two sons. I must be careful what I say, for the New Testament says, 'By faith Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau' (Heb 11:20). I mustn't speak therefore, as if the man had no faith; he did. Certainly, as Hebrews points out, he had faith in the coming future; but who can read the story of how he was tricked into blessing Jacob and feel that all was absolutely well?

Emotions and sensations

So that we might see the thing in a helpful framework, I'm going to diverge for five minutes, and then come back to the topic. However far I may now roam, I haven't forgotten that I'm meant to be expounding Genesis!

I wonder if you have found with me that there is a certain sequence in our experience of the blessing of God. Let's think about it ourselves at the higher levels of spiritual blessing and start with the Word of God—some promise, some statement of God's holy Word.

We are called upon to believe it and then obey, and when we believe God's word it results in blessing. With the blessing there comes a reaction on our part. If the blessing concerned is a harvest of corn, like it was with Isaac, then of course our reaction would be physical satisfaction as we eat it. Not uncommonly with that kind of reaction there also comes a sensation.

Go back to Isaac for just a minute. God said, ‘Isaac, stay in the land and I will bless you’ (26:3). It was hard going, but he believed God and had faith in his word and he stayed in the land. As a result, God blessed the harvest and he reaped a hundredfold that year (v. 12). Can you imagine what follows? I can, I think. They collected the corn and Rebekah cooked it into pavlova and other such things, as people of that day would do, plus a little venison that Esau got and Isaac loved. You wouldn’t necessarily think that that was a kind of a spiritual reaction, when he said he loved it (27:4). I rather think he was talking about—how shall I describe it—that marvellous sensation that goes a-tickling through you when you’re hungry and there’s a luscious beefsteak. It doesn’t just satisfy your hunger and fill you with protein and those other funny things that keep you going, but in the mercy of God, along with the blessing of the beefsteak or the Kellogg’s cornflakes, there comes physical satisfaction. What a lovely God he is. Of course that’s the main thing—that’s what it’s for; but on top of the physical satisfaction there is a sensation, and if you don’t enjoy pavlova I’m sorry for you!

Let’s take it higher. We read the word of God at the spiritual level. Some such word as, ‘To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins’ (Acts 10:43). That’s the word of God; we believe it and we get the blessing.

‘What is the blessing?’ you say.

Forgiveness. Such a marvellous blessing, who shall describe it? The blessing is forgiveness.

Then, very often, there comes a reaction. It may not be so violent as King David’s, but now and again we get the reaction of gratitude to the Lord. In our joy at forgiveness we might say with David, ‘Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered’ (Ps 32:1). I tell you what, God in his magnificence not only gives us to know the reaction of gratitude and joy at the level of our emotions, I have seen some believers so overjoyed at having forgiveness that there has followed a very curious sensation—they’ve wept for joy. God loves even our spiritual blessings to overflow in emotion, and then indeed lead to sensation. God is no utilitarian God.

Then we find another Scripture—perhaps in Romans 1–3 or Ephesians 5, and it convicts us of sin. We believe it and that brings us a blessing too.

‘What blessing is that?’

Repentance. Facing ourselves, having the illusion stripped away and seeing reality as it is; how nasty sometimes it can be, and taking the first step of release that is repentance. What a blessing it is. There’s a reaction of sorrow very often, real godly sorrow for sin. That’s a blessing indeed, for those who sorrow like that shall be comforted. It’s one of the early steps towards glory.

When God thus speaks and we believe, get blessing and are brought to repentance, and the reaction is sorrow, sometimes that emotion again will lead over to sensation, won’t it? People in their sorrow will shed some tears.

You say, ‘What a funny thing.’

It is, isn’t it? For some people, when they’re so full of joy, it overflows in the sensation of tears; and when they’re full of sorrow, it overflows in the sensation of tears. These sensations are funny things, aren’t they?

You say, ‘What are you talking about?’

Let me just observe that, and in a minute I shall be back to Isaac. Sometimes, have you ever known it for a person to come to Christ, hear his word, repent and believe, and receive the blessing of forgiveness and the gift of eternal life, and the result is all full of joy and gratitude to the Lord and wonderful experiences? He says, 'I'm walking on air,' or something like that. 'The sky above is deeper blue.'

There might even be some other sensations; not merely walking on air, or tears or something. Like the hymnwriter, they can say, 'I felt my heart with deep contrition melt.' You know, the sensation. That's lovely, but then I suspect many of us will recognise what I'm now about to say from our own experience. Presently the sensation fades, and the joy fades, and then what do we do? We try to work up the sensation and the joy again, but we have to ask,

Where is the blessedness I knew,
When first I saw the Lord?
Where is the soul refreshing view
Of Jesus and His Word?²

Well it's gone, my brother, of course it has. Ah, but you want the nice feeling, and people get worried because the feeling's gone, the sensation is gone.

We tell the young convert, 'Look here, you'll have to learn a thing or two. They were lovely emotions and they were lovely sensations, but you mustn't put your faith in them, you know. You mustn't let your life be guided by them; you've got to start here, with the word of God. Let the sensations go, let the reactions go and come back to God's word, to some new promise, something fresh to believe, and repeat the process.'

Sooner or later—and sometimes it's later—if we do believe God's word and obey it, there will come further and more blessing. And maybe God, in his goodness, will lead to further emotions and sensations, but don't put the cart before the horse and begin to put your faith in these things and try to work it up. That would be pseudo, and lead you out eventually into an emotional unreality and an emotional desert. The only safe place for blessing is to put your faith in God's word.

Isaac trusted his senses rather than God

So now we're back on track at last. Isaac is going to bless his sons. 'Isaac, you've a word from God about this, haven't you?' I can't bring myself to believe that Isaac didn't know what God had told Rebekah. Should he not have sought the Lord's face, like his wife had sought the Lord's face? Should he not have said, 'Lord, what am I to do about this word, "the elder shall serve the younger"?''

Oh, I know parents have their preferences. So did Joseph, when Jacob reversed the order of the children and blessed the younger first. But there was God's word and Isaac seems not to have taken it into consideration. What would he do now? Says he to Esau, 'Esau, go out and get me some venison. You know, the sort that my soul loves' (27:1–4). There he sits, poor

² William Cowper (1731–1800), 'O for a closer walk with God'.

old boy, licking his lips at the thought of it—lovely venison, with rich gravy and chips, beautiful!

‘Dress it just as I like it cooked and when I’ve got that I’ll bless you.’ So he’s going to work up his mood, is he? You’ve got to be in the mood to bless, haven’t you? He’s going to work it up via a lovely venison steak.

You say, ‘What’s wrong with it?’

There’s nothing wrong with it. Do you suppose that the taste of a venison steak is a good ground for blessing a young man on? If you’re not going to go by the word of God, what will you go by? Isaac decided to go by his senses. He had five, like most of us have. One of those senses wasn’t much use, for his eyes were old and dim and he couldn’t see, so it wasn’t any good trusting them. When Jacob came in dressed up like Esau, he couldn’t see him, but he listened.

He said, ‘Hello?’ The voice is the voice of Jacob.

‘Who are you,’ his father said.

The reply came, ‘I am Esau.’

‘That’s funny, because you don’t sound like Esau.’

He couldn’t trust his sight, and he decided not to trust his hearing. That would have guided him more safely. Will the other three senses guide him?

‘Lovely venison,’ he says, ‘I love how Esau cooks it. It tastes beautiful.’

So he’s going by his taste. Poor old boy, that deceived him too. It wasn’t venison at all; just a bit of Spam cooked up. Rachel told Jacob how to do it.

Just to check, he says, ‘Come here a bit, let me feel you. Good solid, brawny arms; aren’t they hairy?’

Alas, how we do love to go by feeling, don’t we? By touch—things we can handle. They seem to us to be real and solid. So the sensation of taste let him down, and the sensation of touch deceived him.

Pathos of all pathos, he said, ‘Come here, my boy, and let me smell you. Oh, you smell just like Esau.’ If that was his concept of blessing, it wouldn’t be mine. Esau, just come in from hunting—smelling him? On the basis of the sensations of hearing, taste, touch and smell, he blessed the man who was before him, and was deceived.

You say, ‘God overruled it.’

He did indeed. Would that we had the time to follow the story, but it is well known, so we shan’t stay with it any longer. But we can apply it to ourselves. I wonder if, all out of character, I might adopt the role of Solomon and talk to my younger brothers and sisters about spiritual matters now.

What is ‘blessing’?

How do you judge it and how would you get it? Sometimes, like the grumpy old uncle that I am, I imagine I see a process that says, ‘Let’s have less of the word of God and let’s go in for worship.’ What would you mean by that? If you mean that, through God’s word being freshly applied to your heart, you have come to see the colossal blessing you have in Christ, and naturally you want to overflow and tell the Lord your joy. Because you have forgiveness

and eternal life, because you've just sensed what is the hope of his calling, you naturally want to overflow into joy; well then that's marvellous.

You could listen, receive, and never give back in terms of thanksgiving and worship, couldn't you? But it would likewise be a sorry mistake if it meant that when we sing together lustily we get such exalted feelings and feel so good that we prefer to cut out God's word, so that we might cultivate emotion and sensation. For if we lose the great fount of blessing that is God and his word and his promise—believed, obeyed, constantly preached and constantly applied—our emotions and sensations will deceive us, as they deceived Isaac. For these are the results of blessing, not its basis.

That's a curious lesson, but, who knows, God's Spirit may use it in a timely way. In our youth, we have to decide our futures and naturally we wish to have the maximum enjoyment and the maximum blessing. Let us profit from Isaac's mistake and determine that we shall put God's word and God's promise first, dare to believe it and dare to obey it. If, for the moment, it leaves us hungry and feeling like Esau, we shall say, 'Nevertheless, God's promise is true; I'm going to believe it. His command is right; I'm going to do it. I'll trust God to give me the consequent blessing when he pleases.' If his blessing comes and it leads to joy and lovely sensations, let us thank God for it.

We're not meant to be concrete pillars but human beings who enjoy the things that are given us of God. May God help us as we plan life and as we plan our churches and our spiritual disciplines, to get the maximum blessing, lest we are deceived and merely try to work up sensations, instead of starting with God's word, believing and obeying it, and trusting the Lord to give us blessing, and, if he pleases, sensation as well.

Introduction to the Story of Jacob

Without further ado we begin now our studies in the final chapters of the book of Genesis, beginning from chapter 37, though really we ought to begin, as we shall see presently, in chapter 36. This is commonly regarded as the story of Joseph, and we shall have a lot to say about Joseph, but these chapters are actually the story of Jacob. That's one of the first things we shall have to notice.

For the moment let's say that the stories are about Joseph. The question will arise, how are we to interpret them? One of the first things we shall have to notice is that, when we are dealing with an ancient historical book like this—a book of narrative—we can expound and study the word of God at different levels. We need to bear this in mind all throughout our studies.

Level 1: The story of Joseph at a practical level

One level at which we can apply these stories is the practical and moral level. I shall not be saying much about that level in the course of these talks. Joseph was tempted by very real temptation; at that level there is no need to call in the help of typology to understand what the book is saying. It speaks directly and very vividly to our hearts that Joseph was direly tempted in the course of his daily work. There were certain things that strengthened Joseph in those days and helped him to stand against the pressure of temptation.

Pointing us of course to the lesson that is immediately applicable to us, who likewise, from time to time, get tempted. As Paul would say it, a little bit sardonically perhaps, 'Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man'—if you were tempted, you too might be overtaken in a fault (1 Cor 10:12–13). So Joseph's story speaks to us immediately at the practical level.

Joseph's brothers dealt very wickedly with him, involving him in years of suffering that he never deserved. Eventually God put him in a position where he had his brothers in his power, to do as he pleased with them. Many a man would have been moved to take his revenge and spitefully punish his brothers, but Joseph was merciful and kind to them. He got the moral and spiritual strength to forgive them. He said to them, 'You meant it to me for harm.' But then, looking behind and above all life's circumstances, Joseph could see the hand of God in it, 'God meant it to me for good; and seeing God has turned it to good I don't need to get my own back on you for the evil things you did to me' (Gen 50:20).

These are the practical lessons that come to us from the story of Joseph and at that level we shall doubtless have some questions to ask later on. The way, for instance, Joseph treated the Egyptians when he took over their land and enslaved the people to the Pharaoh. We shall have to ask the farmers present, or anyone who knows anything about farming, if they think that's a very good way to deal with people, and if the state should run the whole nation.

Level 2: The story of Joseph in its context

Anyway, there's another level at which we could look at the story of Joseph, and that's the level of its context in Genesis. What I mean is this. The story of Joseph is much loved and very well-known and many people have talked about it, but would it make any difference to you in what book of the Bible the story of Joseph came? Suppose, when you opened your Bibles, you found that the story of Joseph had flitted and was now to be found in Leviticus, would it matter to you where it was found? Suppose it was found at the beginning; suppose it was found at the end of the Old Testament—would it make any difference? Is it a kind of a self-contained story, or is it the finale to a thrilling book?

Sometimes people read a series of articles, or watch enactments of famous stories and they know the time they're on every week. They follow all the episodes, but they're bright enough to know that the story isn't finished yet. They don't want to miss the last episode because, if you don't get the last episode, that makes a nonsense of the whole story, doesn't it?

What is the story of Joseph? Is it just a self-contained story, or is it the last episode that you need to know about in order to grasp what the book of Genesis is about as a whole? Would you ever find yourself saying, 'Don't stop me from getting out to Apsley tonight, because I've heard the earlier parts of the story and I want to get the final story of Genesis'?

Level 3: The story of Joseph as a prototype of the Lord Jesus

Then of course there's another level. Whether you approve or not, generations of believers have done it, and they'll go on doing it until the Lord comes. They read the story as a prototype that points us to the Lord Jesus. Believers have seen all sorts of lessons in the story of Joseph, and they regard him as a type of the Lord Jesus. Strictly speaking, you'd be better calling him a *prototype*, rather than a *type*, because types are things that God had engineered. Like the tabernacle, for instance; from start to finish all the details were planned to be a type. Whereas, in the first place, the story of Joseph is history; Joseph was a failing mortal like the rest of us. But then, at another level, it is also a prototype of the Lord Jesus. You will know what prototypes are.

When Henry Ford was going to build some cars he first built a prototype, and a curious old banger it was. It had the basic ideas about it—four wheels, two at the front and two at the back, a steering wheel, and I think it had an engine under the bonnet. There were similarities between that prototype and the real, deluxe edition of the modern Ford car. Anybody could see the similarities, but the prototype wasn't anywhere near so good as the present advanced model. There were also all sorts of differences and contrasts, and you wouldn't say, 'Well, the prototype is like the type, but here the prototype breaks down.' It never broke up! You see,

the real thing nowadays is meant to be different from the prototype. It's much better and infinitely superior.

In that way, Joseph is not only a big slice of history in the past, he is a prototype. Of course, in our Lord Jesus you will see far more glories and utter perfection; whereas Joseph was only a humble, first level, prototype.

The story of Joseph in its context

Our sessions are going to be hard work, so let's start at level two and try to restrain ourselves from going too quickly to level three, and even back to the immediate lessons from level one. They'll come in due time, so let's have a go at reading the story of Joseph at level two, in the context of the book of Genesis.

It's no secret, if you want to understand a story, one way is to see how it begins, and then flip over the pages and find how it ends. Some people are inveterate like that, you know; they can't start a book at the beginning, they always start at the end. When they get the weekly magazine they start at the end and go backwards, and in a book they start the story but they want to know how it will end, then they fill in the middle bits.

A bird's eye view of Genesis

Let's do that with the book of Genesis. How does it start and how does it end? Well, it starts with a man, made in the image of God, told to till the ground and have dominion (1:26).

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.' (vv. 27–28)

What an exalted position it was that God had in his mind for his creature. He made him, as Psalm 8:5 says, 'a little lower than the heavenly beings', but set him over the works of his hands, to be God's viceroy on this planet. Then we read that the Lord God planted a garden in Eden (Gen 2:8), which incidentally shows that the rest of the planet wasn't garden. It was rather chaotic outside, I suspect; but when he made our planet, God himself planted a bit of it as garden.

He put the man inside there and said, 'Now Adam, get on with it—you till the garden, you make something of it.' Had he been sensible, I suppose man would have come out of the garden and developed the rest of the world, and made something of our planet. How exciting to be living in those times with Adam and Eve—every morning there was something new.

You wake up on Tuesday and Eve says to Adam, 'Adam, do you know, I've been thinking. Where do you suppose that river goes? Wouldn't it be nice one day to follow it and find out where it goes?'

'Yes,' says God, 'there's some gold down that river' (see 2:11).

Of course Adam didn't yet know what to do with gold, like we know now. But he'd learn to mine the gold and make something of it. What a marvellous task that was for man. He

wasn't some slave; he was God's viceroy with a whole planet to develop for God, and in particular to see to the tilling of the ground.

We know the sorry story; that man fell. He found out he was naked and God had to cover his nakedness with animal skins, the best thing available at the time. God said that the earth would now bring forth thorns and thistles, the whole thing would be a laborious and difficult slavery.

That's the beginning of the story, but, after all the long chapters in the middle, how does the book end? It ends with a man called Joseph.

'What kind of man was he?' you say. 'Was he a king?'

No.

'Was he a politician?'

Not really.

'What was he then?'

He was an administrator.

'What did he administer?'

Agriculture.

'How did he become so famous?'

The story is simple. Egypt was the breadbasket of the ancient world, with its rich soil and overflowing river and highly developed civilisation. Then there came years of famine, when the very breadbasket of the world was going to be nearly empty and Egypt threatened with economic disaster because of failure seven years running of their harvest.

How would you save Egypt in this economic problem, and how would you save all the little nations that were dependant on Egypt for their food supply? Pharaoh and his wise men had no concept of the danger that was facing them, nor any notion how to cope with their economic problems, when along comes Joseph and he takes over the running of the land. He takes over the administration of the corn, and he solves their problems and saves the land from disaster. When he came out with his scheme for the next years, and they saw the wisdom of it, Joseph was clothed with the robes of state. When you think about it, what a nice end that is to the book of Genesis.

This is the story of our planet; God made man and put him in charge of it and God has done a lot by way of development. We mustn't be too gloomy; man has done marvellous things with this planet. What lessons we've learned in agriculture, in science, and so many things. But what a mess we're making of it; what trouble we're getting ourselves into, with the nations all afraid of each other. They've now, if you please, discovered the very secret that makes the atoms tick, and there's the grave danger of them blasting the whole planet out of space into nothingness. And how difficult it is to solve the economic problems. As we speak now [in 1984], there are many thousands dropping dead for hunger in our planet.³ There are butter mountains, and wine mountains, and milk mountains, and acres of oranges piled up in the States, feet deep on the ground and going rotten, while thousands perish with hunger. Internationally, they can't think how to cope with the problems. When God rises up to begin to judge and the plagues come, terrible famines are going to face this world at the end of this

³ In 1984 the worst famine to hit Ethiopia in a century led to more than 400,000 deaths.

age (see Matt 24:7; Rev 6:8). Someone will say, 'Is the planet going to become unworkable? What hope have we?' It didn't start that way.

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him? Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honour. You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet. (Ps 8:3–6)

Yes, mankind fell, but God has not abandoned his original purpose.

Now in putting everything in subjection to him, he left nothing outside his control. At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him. But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honour because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for every [thing]. (Heb 2:8–9)

One day he's coming again and he shall lead nature and our planet to the realisation of her goal, 'The creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption' (Rom 8:21). God's great man is coming, his name we know: it is Jesus Christ our Lord.

Genesis is a book of beginnings

Genesis is a very hopeful book. Let's take another slant on it, shall we? Just at this stage, we are at the story of Joseph and how it fits into its context in the book of Genesis. Well, let's take a little bit sharper focus and we shall remember that Genesis 1–8 tells the story of the world from the creation to the destruction by the flood. Then it starts up again, and from chapter 9 it tells the story of the renewed earth, beginning with the story of the Gentiles and their great cities.

Like Nimrod a mighty hunter before the LORD. The beginning of his kingdom was Babel, Erech, Accad, and Calneh, in the land of Shinar. From that land he went into Assyria and built Nineveh, Rehoboth-Ir, Calah, and Resen between Nineveh and Calah; that is the great city. (10:9–12)

Eventually among those Gentiles, in a place called Ur, there was a man called Terah, and he had a son and his name at that stage was Abram (11:27). God called Abram out of the Gentiles. The 'God of glory' appeared to him and brought him out of those abominable idolatries that were beginning to take root and spread in the Gentile world, and set him on his pilgrimage (see Acts 7:2–8). You will remember that God promised Abraham at least four things when he brought him out: a land that should be his; offspring that eventually should be like the stars of the heaven; Abram himself would be a blessing; and through him and his offspring, all the nations of the world would be blessed.

So far, very good. In chapters 12–15 God brought him into the land and Abraham spent his life as a pilgrim in that land of promise. Though he wouldn't be allowed to possess it now,

he was told that he was to walk up and down in the land (13:14–17). He would see it, inspect it, not possess it yet, but one day he would.

Then from chapters 16–24 we have the great story of the seed, the great promised offspring that God had promised to Abraham; all the mistakes Abraham made in trying to produce him; then how in the end God did his great miracle and Isaac was born; Isaac was offered on the altar; and then Isaac was married.

‘Chapters 25 to 35,’ you say, ‘what’s that all about?’

That’s the story of Isaac and partly the story of Jacob. Let me remind you of some of the big things that happened. This is the bit of Genesis where Jacob, at the instigation of his mother, dressed himself up in animal skins and put on a crackpot voice, cooked up some tasty meat and took it to his poor old father Isaac. ‘Now bless me,’ he said, and he stole the blessing. Well, we should all be keen to get blessing, shouldn’t we, but whether stealing it is the right way to go about it, I’m not so sure.

Genesis is a book of blessings

You shouldn’t be surprised at that, should you? What did God promise Abraham? That he would bless Abraham and his people: he would give him a land, a seed, and multiply his offspring.

You say, ‘There were four things that God promised him. He promised him a land, a seed; he promised to make him and his offspring a blessing; and then, fourthly, he said, “In your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed”’ (22:18).

That’s right, of course. So, not wanting to leave us without the final story, the book brings in the Gentiles once more—the Egyptians (37:36). They go back among the Gentiles and Abraham’s seed is made a blessing to them. They were the means of saving the whole of Egypt and all the dependant nations from stark starvation.

You say, ‘Wait a minute, that’s not quite right. When God promised Abraham that in him and in his seed should all the nations of the world be blessed, it was the blessing that comes to us Gentiles through Christ. That was what he meant.’

Yes, of course he did. You will go in for this prototypical stuff, won’t you? I was trying to expound the text, but you want the typology and I can’t stop you!

It is perfectly true; Galatians tells us that, when God said to Abraham, ‘In you shall all the nations be blessed’ (3:8), God was looking on eventually to the coming of one, Jesus Christ our Lord, and through Christ shall all the nations of the world be blessed (v. 16). We are happy to be part of that offspring.

For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise. (vv. 26–29)

A blessing to the Gentiles

Of course that’s true, but notice it’s true at this earlier level. Abraham was called out of the Gentiles in order that he might eventually be made a blessing to the Gentiles; and he became

that before the book of Genesis ends. But, even as I say that, I can't shut out from my ears the voices of those that have exhorted me many times, 'Brother, be practical.' So let's be practical!

There are three levels of this book, aren't there? We've been expounding the story of Joseph in its context of Abraham being brought out of the Gentiles and made a pilgrim; the promise that one day he and his seed shall be a blessing to the Gentiles; and so it is fulfilled and they are made a blessing to a Gentiles. Then it is a picture to us; a prototype of what God intended through our Lord Jesus Christ, the seed of Abraham. How may we be practical here? In his famous speech before the Sanhedrin, Stephen began his speech like this,

Brothers and fathers, hear me. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, and said to him, 'Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.' (Acts 7:2–3)

A few chapters later Luke records Saul of Tarsus driving up the Damascus road one day, when a light from heaven shone upon him. Saul was converted, and we are told that God has chosen him as an instrument to carry his name before the Gentiles (9:15). Interesting, isn't it? The God of glory appeared to Abraham, called him out of the Gentiles and made a pilgrim of him. The light from heaven shone upon Saul of Tarsus, a true Jew if ever there was one; the result was that it sent him back to the Gentiles as a missionary. You were born among the Gentiles, weren't you? Has the God of glory appeared to you? Did he call you *out of the Gentiles*, or are you still a Gentile?

Our Lord warned us about it. He said, 'When you pray, don't pray like the Gentiles pray—"Do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do"' (Matt 6:7). How do you pray? Like a Gentile?

'Don't go to work like an old Gentile,' says Christ.

Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. (vv. 31–33)

How do Gentiles go to work? When they go to work they seek clothes and food and things.

You say, 'Well that's what I do when I go to work.'

So you're an old Gentile then? Hasn't the God of glory appeared to you? If the God of glory has appeared to you, like he appeared to Abraham, the result will be that he will take you out of the Gentiles—make you different from the Gentiles. Listen to Paul,

Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practise every kind of impurity. (Eph 4:17–19)

The only way to stop us being Gentiles, take us out of the Gentiles and make us true pilgrims, is for us to see, like Abraham saw, the glory of the God of glory.

'I've learned that,' you say. 'I separated from the world a long while ago and I've been treading the path of separation ever since.'

God be praised!

'I'm a pilgrim on my way to heaven, and that's that,' you say.

No, it isn't quite *that*, is it? God called Abraham out of the Gentiles *so that in him and in his seed the Gentiles might be blessed*; and before Genesis comes to the end of its story God has sent the whole lot back to the Gentiles. Not to behave like Gentiles, of course, but to be a blessing to them.

God did it at the level of history; he brought Abraham out of the Gentiles and started the Jewish race so that they would be a testimony for God as pilgrims in this world. He got hold of Saul of Tarsus; the glory of God appeared to him too and he sent him back to the Gentiles. What for? To be a blessing to the Gentiles.

Thank God that Saul of Tarsus, proud Pharisee that he was, responded and went. He didn't say, 'Now I'm going to tread the path of separation. As for those impossible Gentile Irishmen, away out there in the middle of the Atlantic, I shan't have anything to do with them.' No, true pilgrim that Saul of Tarsus was, the man felt his responsibility as a believer to go back to the Gentiles with the glorious message of the gospel, and he became a missionary.

So, if you want it at the practical level, this story of Joseph is going to tell us of the other end of the scale. Abraham came out from the Gentiles to be distinct, separate; a witness to the true God and a protest against all Gentile idolatry. But eventually he was taught and trained so that his offspring might go back among the Gentiles to be a witness for God throughout the land.

We may never be Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries anywhere; certainly not in Egypt. Nor will we rise to high places, but then some of Joseph's brothers didn't either. They managed to be cattlemen—I could come in there, perhaps; I have worked on a farm—but what a testimony they were in Egypt when at last they got there.

So, we've been trying to expound the story in its context. Next time we shall have to do some hard work and take not the context of the whole book, but chapters 37–50, and see what we can make of them as a whole. We all like to take this favourite chapter and that favourite chapter, and draw our lessons from them. It is a perfectly good thing to do, but if we're going to study the word of God in its fullness we shall have to do a bit more than just take an isolated favourite chapter here or there; we shall have to take the story as a whole.

Outline of the Story of Jacob

At the end of our last study I warned you that we should now have to do some hard work. We remember two biblical exhortations and statements. One is by the Apostle Paul, 'If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat' (2 Thess 3:10)—that applies to the physical realm and we have learnt the truth of it by hard experience. Then we remember that our Lord applied the same rule to the spiritual realm, 'Do not labour for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life' (John 6:27).

We are all good Christian men and women and so we give thanks for our daily bread, even though we've worked hard for it. We recognise that it is God who has given us our bread and butter; but that doesn't mean it falls down out of heaven on to our plates, already processed, cellophane wrapped, and all we have to do is to take the wrapper off and eat it. God gives it, but we have to work for it; and so it is with our spiritual bread. God gives it, of course, but then we have to work for it.

There are, as you know, all kinds of meals. There are those quick snacks: you go into the pantry and lift a tin of sardines, open the lid and there in half a second you have the meal already prepared; another half minute and it's eaten, and what a lot of time it saves you so that you can do other, more important things.

Then there are those other gorgeous meals, home-made plum puddings and things, and you would be mistaken to suppose that you can have a 'quick snack' plum pudding. Of course you can't. You have to start months before, with orange peel and sugar and who knows what, and you've got to stir it and mix it and let it stand, and coax it and persuade it and talk nicely to it, and get out the Kenwood mixer and things. You can spend hours on this heap of stuff, and it still isn't ready to eat. If anybody was so silly as to try and eat it, he would suffer indigestion forthwith and conclude that Christmas puddings were horrible things. No, you've got to work hard for days on end, and only at the end will you get something to satisfy your hunger and your taste.

Thus it is with Scripture. We can come for quick snacks, but there are other kinds of meals, and if we would appreciate the deeper things of God we must be prepared to work hard and not demand instant results; working in faith, that if we honestly work hard at his word, God will in the end honour our faith and show us the great treasures of his word. If we don't work at this level, then we will not eat.

Joseph

We're now going to do some hard work and study the story of Joseph from the final part of the book of Genesis. It is comparatively easy of course, and not unprofitable, to take the interesting stories here and there from those last chapters of Genesis and apply them to our lives. Then to conveniently forget about the more difficult stories, pass them over, wonder why they're there, but never find out. This time we're going to try and look, not only at the well-known parts but the less well known parts, and take the whole of the word of God as it stands, and get it into our minds. Then, in subsequent weeks perhaps, by God's grace, the Holy Spirit will be able to show us the significance of these things. He'll have a job to show us the significance of them until we've got them well and truly into our minds.

Let's take a look at the large final passages of the book of Genesis. You'd be wise to keep your eye on Scripture, lest I do some cheating—make sure that the little summaries I give you are really true to what Scripture has got to say and let's get the facts right.

I want to start in chapter 36. At the end of chapter 35 we read that Isaac has died; he 'breathed his last, and he died and was gathered to his people, old and full of days. And his sons Esau and Jacob buried him' (35:29).

With the death of Isaac, the fifth section of Genesis comes to its end; just like the fourth section had come to its end with the death of Abraham and the section before that with the death of Noah.

So now we start a new part of the book of Genesis, 'These are the generations of Esau' (36:1). We are told of his various wives and the children he begat, and an interesting little remark, 'He went into a land away from his brother Jacob' (v. 6). Esau fills the rest of the chapter, and we notice that from time to time we're told about his eminent citizens, dukes and princes; 'These are the kings who reigned in the land of Edom, before any king reigned over the Israelites' (v. 31).

When you're thinking of Esau, you think of dukes, princes and kings. Herod was the most famous political king who descended from Esau. Herod the Great was an Idumaeon, which simply means a descendant of Esau, an Edomite, and he was king when Christ was born. Edom had kings before Israel had kings, and Herod was king before Christ was king. That's an interesting thing, but we leave it there for the moment.

Now chapter 37 begins. In contrast to Esau, who went into a land away from his brother Jacob, Jacob stays put in the land; 'Jacob lived in the land of his father's sojournings, in the land of Canaan' (v. 1). So the story begins, and then goes on to tell us, 'These are the generations of Jacob, Joseph being seventeen years old . . .' (v. 2).

Joseph and his coat

Let's remind ourselves of the bits and pieces in the story of Joseph. First, his dreams; then how he was sold and his brothers took his coat and tore it and dipped it in blood, then they brought the coat to their father—the false evidence.

And they sent the robe of many colours and brought it to their father and said, ‘This we have found; *please identify whether it is your son’s robe or not.*’ And he identified it and said, ‘*It is my son’s robe. A fierce animal has devoured him. Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces.*’ Then Jacob tore his garments and put sackcloth on his loins and mourned for his son for many days. All his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted and said, ‘No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning.’ Thus his father wept for him. (vv. 32–35)

False evidence, false deduction. Joseph wasn’t dead, but poor old Jacob had been supplied with this coat, torn and dipped in blood. It looked so much like it, he appeared to recognise it and discern it as Joseph’s coat. He did his best to read the evidence, but came to the wrong deduction and tremendous sorrow. There we shall have to leave Joseph for the moment, because he was taken down to Egypt.

Judah and Tamar

Chapter 38 goes on to an absolutely different story. Instead of Joseph, it is Judah. It’s a very curious story, because if Joseph went down to Egypt, Judah goes down from his brothers to an Adullamite.

What a curious story it is; not generally read in public and to be handled with all due delicacy. It is in God’s word, so we mustn’t pretend to be holier than God. It is a lurid story about a harlot, but she wasn’t really a harlot. She put on false clothes, dressed up to pretend she was a sacred cult prostitute, such as in that part of the world in those ancient times.

At harvest time there would be a whole array of ceremonies in honour of the god of corn and wine, celebrated by the Canaanites in that part of Palestine. Judah, if you please, had gone down to live amongst the Canaanites. In honour of the god of fertility there would be these women around about the place, supposedly in religious devotion. They were not dressed as ordinary women of the streets, but as if they were some religious, cultic figures. It was a horrible confusion, of course.

Judah went to Tamar, and she wanted a pledge. There was Judah at the sheep shearing. He was feeling rich, and like a grandee he had got on his coat, his staff and his signet. It was probably a *cylinder seal*, not a signet on his hand so much; you had to be pretty posh and up in the world to have your own cylinder seal. It was hanging on a cord around his neck. He was a wealthy man with money to spare, going out on the town for the night. This woman said, ‘I want your signet and your cord and the staff that is in your hand as a pledge.’

There follows the rest of the story. When the woman was found to be expecting a child, Judah was told, ‘Your daughter-in-law has been immoral’ (v. 24). He said, ‘Bring her out and let her be burned.’ Then Tamar, who was his daughter-in-law, sent the signet and the staff, and said, ‘Please identify whose these are.’ Oh, *discern now—look at the evidence*. Whatever is that story about? It’ll make us scratch our heads, won’t it?

Joseph in Egypt

Anyway, there it is in Scripture, and having told us that long story we come to chapters 39–41 and continue the story of Joseph. Now he’s in Egypt, and there’s the story of Potiphar’s wife.

When Joseph tried to run away, she got hold of his cloak and kept it. First she showed it to the servants and spun her yarn, and then of course she showed the evidence to her husband (vv. 14–16). *Seeing the evidence, Potiphar made a false deduction.* It did look overwhelming, but the deduction he made was wrong.

Now we are in chapter 40. Joseph went down to prison, and there the butler and the baker had dreams and Joseph interpreted them. Then in chapter 41—you remember the story: Pharaoh had dreams and Joseph was summoned out of the prison to interpret them. Joseph suggested a course of action for saving Egypt from the famine that was about to descend upon them, whereupon Pharaoh was so impressed, just look what he did.

And Pharaoh said to Joseph, ‘See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt.’ Then Pharaoh took his signet ring from his hand and put it on Joseph’s hand, and clothed him in garments of fine linen and put a gold chain about his neck. (vv.41–42)

There are lots of other details in those stories, and you may conclude presently that I’ve left out the most important ones, but let’s carry on.

The three expeditions to Egypt to buy grain

‘Jacob learned that there was grain for sale in Egypt’ (42:1). We started off with Jacob, and, now that we’ve come to the end of that sequence of stories, we come to him again. The famine is beginning to hit hard in Canaan and Jacob sends his sons on that first expedition to get grain. As it comes to its climax, Joseph keeps Simeon behind in prison and sends the rest of the brothers back. ‘Now look here, you’re a lot of old spies. Now I’m going to prove you. You say you’ve got a father and you’ve got a younger brother at home? If you’re genuine men, I want you to go back and bring your younger brother to me. Unless you come down again and bring your young brother with you, you are not going to get any more grain, and I’m going to take Simeon and put him in prison, and keep him here *as a pledge* and a hostage so that you’ll come back again and bring your young brother.’ ‘And he took Simeon from them and bound him before their eyes’ (v. 24).

So the brothers come back to their father, and they’re really upset. Now the climax begins to sound like it’s Jacob’s story again, doesn’t it?

And Jacob their father said to them, ‘You have bereaved me of my children: Joseph is no more, and Simeon is no more, and now you would take Benjamin. All this has come against me.’ Then Reuben said to his father, ‘Kill my two sons if I do not bring him back to you. Put him in my hands, and I will bring him back to you.’ But he said, ‘My son shall not go down with you, for his brother is dead, and he is the only one left. If harm should happen to him on the journey that you are to make, you would bring down my grey hairs with sorrow to Sheol.’ (vv. 36–38)

When they’ve completely run out of food Jacob sends them on the second expedition (43:1–2). You know the long, long story, and I’m not going to repeat the details now. Let’s cut a few corners a bit, but it too came to its climax. They were all sent home with their sacks and Joseph had had his cup put in Benjamin’s sack (44:1–2). When they were on the road, Joseph

sent his officer after them, and said, 'What do you think you're doing? How is it you've treated my lord like this. Who is it that has stolen his cup? Why have you stolen it?'

The brothers said, 'Nobody here has stolen his cup.'

They said, 'You have.'

'Well,' they said, 'search the lot, and if the cup is found in anybody's sack then let him pay the penalty.'

Of course the cup was found in Benjamin's sack, so all the brothers went back and Judah pleaded with Joseph. The climax of this story is that Judah pleads to be allowed to be substitute. Why does he want to be substitute? It was for Jacob's sake—lest he should die of sorrow. He's telling Joseph what happened.

And when our father said, 'Go again, buy us a little food', we said, 'We cannot go down. If our youngest brother goes with us, then we will go down. For we cannot see the man's face unless our youngest brother is with us.' Then your servant my father said to us, 'You know that my wife bore me two sons. One left me, and I said, Surely he has been torn to pieces, and I have never seen him since. If you take this one also from me, and harm happens to him, you will bring down my grey hairs in evil to Sheol.' Now therefore, as soon as I come to your servant my father, and the boy is not with us, then, as his life is bound up in the boy's life, as soon as he sees that the boy is not with us, he will die, and your servants will bring down the grey hairs of your servant our father with sorrow to Sheol. (vv. 25–31)

Eventually they go on the third expedition and now there's the very big climax of the story; Joseph makes himself known to his brothers (45:4). What touching scenes are there and we'll have to think about them on another occasion.

Jacob goes down to Egypt

When he's made himself known to them Joseph sends for his father. Pharaoh helps and sends wagons to bring all the family down to Egypt and at last the story comes to its end.

So they went up out of Egypt and came to the land of Canaan to their father Jacob. And they told him, 'Joseph is still alive, and he is ruler over all the land of Egypt.' And his heart became numb, for he did not believe them. But when they told him all the words of Joseph, which he had said to them, and *when he saw the wagons* that Joseph had sent to carry him, the spirit of their father Jacob revived. And Israel said, 'It is enough; Joseph my son is still alive. I will go and see him before I die.' (45:25–28)

Evidence and discernment

They had come with their stories before, hadn't they? There was a coat and *the evidence had seemed to be overwhelming*, for when Jacob had seen the coat he said, 'Well there's nothing for it; my poor Joseph has been torn to pieces and eaten by some wild animal, and I shall go down to the grave in sorrow.'

Now these lads come with this other story, that Joseph is still alive. *Then they produce the evidence*; these mighty great Mercedes-Benz wagons. This time, when the poor old boy sees

the evidence which Joseph had sent to carry him, the spirit of Jacob their father revived. How near he had come to the grave by the sheer shock and the sorrow of it all. When he saw the evidence, he said, 'It is enough; Joseph my son is still alive. I will go and see him before I die' (v. 28).

What a story that's been. You know, we've been given to think that this last part of Genesis was the story of Joseph, but it isn't really the story of Joseph, is it? It's the story of Jacob. Jacob had dwelt in the land, and nothing would budge him. Esau might go off, but Jacob dwelt in the land. Then the brothers hated Joseph; they sold him and brought the evidence to Jacob. When asked to *discern and read the evidence*, Jacob decided that Joseph had been killed.

Joseph went down to Egypt, down into the prison and then he was exalted—that's a big story. When the famine came, Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt and sent his sons after it. What muddles they got into, until at last you come to the climax and *the false evidence is undone by the true evidence*. Jacob discovers, to his amazement and joy, that Joseph is still alive, and sees the incontrovertible evidence. He knows that he's going to see Joseph before he dies, and off he goes down into Egypt. So that's the tremendous climax to this part of the great story of Jacob.

We have come to chapter 46. So what happens now? Let's have a look and see how it starts. 'So Israel took his journey', that is, down to Egypt (v. 1). Jacob is called 'Israel' here. First of all he comes down to Beersheba, 'the well of the oath', and God appears to him, saying, 'I myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you up again' (v. 4). It's followed by the names of his sons and children, and then it tells us that Jacob had sent Judah ahead of him to Joseph to show the way (vv. 8–28).

That has brought us to chapter 47. The climax of it all, if you please, is that Jacob blesses Pharaoh. Just think of it! 'It is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior' (Heb 7:7). We're coming to some almighty climaxes now. After all his wanderings and sorrows Jacob is introduced into the presence of the Pharaoh, and he doesn't wait for his majesty to stretch out his hand. He should let Pharaoh offer to shake hands with him, but Jacob doesn't. He comes into the presence of the greatest monarch in all the earth, raises his own hands and puts them on Pharaoh's head. Jacob blesses Pharaoh, the less being blessed by the greater (v. 7). Jacob, at the supreme pinnacle of his career, is now blessing Pharaoh.

On what grounds and why did Jacob take it upon himself to bless Pharaoh? That's a big story. When God promised originally, 'I will bless you and make your name great,' Jacob hadn't realised the extent of it. When he was pushing those deals with Esau, pulling a fast one on Laban, and stacking up a little nutmeg to bribe a few officials, he hadn't got a clue in his head as to the real greatness that God was preparing for him. When he came to it at last, what a climax it was.

We all have our little ideas of the promises of God, haven't we? When at last we see them fulfilled, we shall scarcely be able to take in the almost indescribable dignity that God has in store for us, and the greatness of it.

That you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power

towards us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. (Eph 1:18–23)

Do you know that one of these days you'll rule angels? You'll be with him over them all. That makes some of those things we get up to nowadays look a bit silly and insignificant, doesn't it?

Thus Israel settled in the land of Egypt, in the land of Goshen. And they gained possessions in it, and were fruitful and multiplied greatly. And Jacob lived in the land of Egypt for seventeen years. So the days of Jacob, the years of his life, were 147 years. (vv. 27–28)

Jacob dies

Continuing with the story of Jacob, here he comes down to live in Egypt and various things are told us of what he did down there. First, he takes an oath of Joseph, 'Do not bury me in Egypt, but let me lie with my fathers' (vv. 29–30). In chapters 48 and 49 he pronounces the blessings on Ephraim and Manasseh and on his own twelve sons—Judah and Joseph getting the biggest mention. Then, finally, Jacob dies. He is taken to Canaan and buried there by Joseph and his servants, and Joseph's brothers. There's not much more of Genesis left. When it has stopped talking about Jacob, there isn't much more to be said. This is the last section of Jacob's story.

We have now come to chapter 50 and the stories are: Joseph returns to Egypt; Joseph and his brothers; Joseph dies. You say, 'Go on, tell us what it's all about.' Well no, this is where I would like you to do some homework. It's been like one of the early stages in cooking, where we've been collecting the currants and the flour and the orange peel and the sugar and the mixing bowl. We've now got them all laid out, ready to begin.

I'll just spend a few minutes pointing out what I've said now many times. When we look at this story, it is the story of Jacob; the story of a father and his children. But the last section of Genesis is different from the other sections.

Fathers and sons

In the story about Abraham, Abraham had two sons, Ishmael and Isaac; Ishmael had to be put aside and the line ran through Isaac. Isaac had two sons, Esau and Jacob; Esau had to be put aside and the line ran through Jacob. When you come at last to Jacob's story, Jacob didn't have just two sons, he had twelve sons; so it wasn't the question of one being put aside and the line going through the other one. Jacob had twelve sons; they were all heads of the tribes of what eventually became the nation of Israel.

Now we've entered a very interesting thing; from being single patriarchs with a single line going through, we've arrived at Jacob, whom God has transformed into Israel, head of the nation. He has twelve sons; they're going to be the fathers of the twelve tribes and Jacob

remains as the father of the nation. We've traced the story of those boys and their early experiences, how they were going to be welded into a nation, and how they would get on with each other. What heartaches they caused their father, as in those early stages God began to deal with them and weld them together as a nation that would be unique in all the nations of the earth and rule and reign for God.

What a story it has been; all that Israel went through because of their different movements and currents and opinions and ambitions. At one stage internal strife threatened to destroy the nation completely, but eventually God brought them through and welded them together. Jacob, who dwelt in the land, took the momentous decision and came down at last to Egypt. But then, of course, he was returned to Canaan.

It's the story of Jacob; but as you look at the first beginnings of the nation of Israel, if you find it has all sorts of prophetic insights into the future, that's not my fault; it's the fault of Genesis.

So that will provide you with a little homework. I wonder would you be prepared to study that first section, and see what you make of it. That curious story about Judah and Tamar—what is it there for? What's it got to do with anything?

Can you see any similarities between the various stories? In other words, are they a connected set of stories? What's all this business about dreams, and clothes, and calling on people to recognise evidence? What is it all about? I should be ever so grateful if you would read the stories again and ask yourself these questions.

Jacob Dwelt in the Land

In our study of these chapters at the end of the book of Genesis we have discovered, among other things, that the story is the story of Jacob, and of his sons. We observed therefore that, at the beginning of each of the major parts of this final movement, we are introduced to Jacob.

1. 'Jacob lived in the land of his father's sojournings, in the land of Canaan' (37:1).
2. 'When Jacob learned that there was grain for sale in Egypt, he said to his sons, "Why do you look at one another?" And he said, "Behold, I have heard that there is grain for sale in Egypt. Go down and buy grain for us there, that we may live and not die"' (42:1-2).
3. 'So Israel took his journey with all that he had and came to Beersheba, and offered sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac' (46:1).
4. 'And Jacob lived in the land of Egypt for seventeen years. So the days of Jacob, the years of his life, were 147 years' (47:28).

So Jacob died in Egypt and was taken back to Canaan.

Thus his sons did for him as he had commanded them, for his sons carried him to the land of Canaan and buried him in the cave of the field at Machpelah, to the east of Mamre, which Abraham bought with the field from Ephron the Hittite to possess as a burying place. (50:12-13)

At the end of our previous session I suggested that we all went home and did some homework in the course of the week, and I'm all ears to hear the results of that homework this evening. We told ourselves that we were going to look at these early stories, particularly this curious story about Judah, and ask if there was some point for us in it. We noticed superficially the similarities between the stories.

A question of evidence

In story A (ch. 37), Joseph is sold and the brothers dip his coat in the blood of an animal and bring it back to their father. They ask their father to examine it, and to know from the evidence if it is really his son Joseph's coat. The poor old boy sees the coat and sees the blood, and comes to his conclusion—on what we know is quite false evidence and a false conclusion—that Joseph his son is torn in pieces.

In story B (ch. 38), Judah goes down and eventually Tamar asks of Judah a pledge, and takes from him his staff and his signet. When subsequently he orders that she shall be

brought out and burned, she sends in the pledge to Judah and asks him to ‘discern whose are these, the signet, and bracelets, and staff’ (v. 25 KJV). He was convicted of his sin: ‘She is more righteous than I’ (v. 26). So once more we have the question of evidence.

In story C (ch. 39), Potiphar’s wife seizes Joseph’s coat and when he runs out of the house she calls in her servants, telling them her version of the story. ‘Then she laid up his garment by her until [Potiphar] came home’ (v. 16). Perhaps the servants were bright enough to see through it, who knows, but she told her story to them first, so that they should corroborate it when the master came home. She showed them Joseph’s coat and told them what deduction to make, and when her husband came home she showed him the coat and pitched her yarn to him. Whether he believed it or not, he made out he did and Joseph found himself in prison. So again, very much a question of evidence.

Contrasts between the beginning and the ending of the Jacob-Joseph story

Here is Jacob with Joseph’s coat, coming to the conclusion from the planted false evidence that Joseph is torn in pieces. But at the final climax, when he sees the evidence—the wagons that Pharaoh has sent to bring him down to Egypt, good, solid, four-wheeled wagons, plus the bullocks to draw them—his heart revives, and he cries with tremendous joy, ‘Joseph my son is still alive. I will go and see him before I die’ (45:28).

Jacob and his sons and the nation of Israel

Now let me just sum up a little bit more what we have found so far, so that we can put our observations into context. This part of Genesis then is the story of Jacob. That won’t rob us of the fact that it tells us a lot about Joseph, the one whom we love so much; but, strictly speaking, it’s the story of Jacob—the story of Jacob and his sons. Or, if you like, *Israel* and his sons, the Israelites, for Jacob is Israel now.

With the beginning of this part of Genesis there comes a change. The other two stories we were studying talk of the patriarchs. Abraham had two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. Ishmael had to be turned away and the line went through Isaac. Isaac had two sons, Esau and Jacob. Esau had to be rejected, and the line went through Jacob. You won’t get that here. It’s no longer a question of the patriarch Jacob having two sons; the one has to be rejected and the line goes from the other. We’re finished with that. Now all Jacob’s sons are to be retained and they form the basis of the infant nation of Israel. They bear the name *Israelites*, not Jacobites. Joseph is mentioned, but so is Judah and the others. When we come finally to the last story, we shall read of the blessings of the prophecies related to all the twelve sons that go out and make the whole nation—all the sons of Jacob.

So, to summarize, what we are primarily interested in is Jacob and his sons, the beginning of the infant nation of Israel and its development. First, in the immediate; then, in the shorter term; and then in the long distance future, as these things shed their prophetic light along the centuries.

You say, ‘What do you mean?’

Ephraim and Manasseh

We have the story of Jacob and his sons; then the story of Judah and his sons; and again, the story of Joseph's sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. When Joseph brought his sons in to his ailing father, Jacob said to Joseph,

And now your two sons, who were born to you in the land of Egypt before I came to you in Egypt, are mine; Ephraim and Manasseh shall be mine, as Reuben and Simeon are. (48:5)

When Ephraim and Manasseh are introduced to their grandfather, he says, 'Who are these?' Then Joseph said to his father, 'They are my sons, whom God has given me here. And he said, "Bring them to me, please, that I may bless them"' (vv. 8–9).

Israel has said a very significant thing; 'Very good, Joseph, I know they're your sons, but they're going to become as my sons. They're going to be raised, so to speak, one generation higher than they really are. So that Ephraim and Manasseh will count as Jacob's sons, and not Joseph's sons. That is, they shall become part of the twelve tribes. We know of course in subsequent history that was so. When you read of the tribes of Israel, you will read of Reuben, Simeon and Levi, Judah, Zebulun, Issachar, Dan, Gad, Asher, Naphtali, Joseph and Benjamin; but among the twelve you will read Ephraim and Manasseh. They weren't really sons of Jacob, they were sons of Joseph; but they were raised up to become heads of two of the tribes in Israel.

That is a significant thing, and notice next how interesting this early history is. You can't help finding it interesting because you know so much about subsequent history, of course. When Israel came to be settled in the land it was often to be found in two major divisions called *Judah* and *Ephraim*. Judah comprised the two tribes, Judah and Benjamin, and they occupied the south. Ephraim was a name put over not only the tribe of Ephraim, but over all the ten tribes. So those were the two divisions in the nation, Ephraim and Judah.

Therefore, this Ephraim, who was really Joseph's son and not Jacob's, was elevated to be a head of the tribe, and in subsequent history he was elevated still further. He becomes the chief tribe among the ten tribes, who are subsequently called Ephraim and Judah. I have to tell you that in Jacob's family the sons didn't always get on very well with each other. From time to time they fell out. I know you won't spread it abroad, because you have a family of your own! Later on, in the book of Chronicles we read how they came to fisticuffs and fought against each other. Then there was a colossal split; Ephraim separated from Judah and it led to a lot of sorrow. Ephraim was eventually carted off by the Assyrians to Assyria. Judah, by contrast, was taken by the Babylonians to Babylon.

In later years one of the prophets envisaged what the millennium would be like. If I were to ask you, 'What is your concept of the millennium?' what would you say?

Perhaps, 'It's a tremendous time of peace and plenty.'

You surely know that the millennium could come now, if that were true. Would you like to single out anything particular above all others that would mark the millennium? When Isaiah comes to characterise it, he says,

The jealousy of Ephraim shall depart, and those who harass Judah shall be cut off; Ephraim shall not be jealous of Judah, and Judah shall not harass Ephraim. (Isa 11:13)

That will be next to heaven, when eventually they learn to live in peace; and the prophet got his staff that was broken in two, between Ephraim and Judah, and the staff was to be joined together again (see Ezek 37). Here we have the beginnings of it, but what can we make out of it all? Why did dear old Jacob cross his hands and bless Ephraim rather than Manasseh (Gen 48:14)? While we are thinking about that, let's notice another significant thing.

Lessons we have learned in Genesis

We found in our earlier studies that what is true of the whole of Genesis is true of this last section. You can read its lessons at various levels—practical, moral and spiritual. For instance, lessons on how to meet temptation, how to escape it and come through unscathed; lessons on forgiveness; lessons on faithfulness in stewardship, the way forward to advancement and honour. Practical, moral lessons we can read immediately for ourselves.

Then we mentioned that you can read also prototypical lessons. Things happened in those early days of the history of the nation and you can't help seeing in them foreshadowings of events that are to come. Notably, of course, in the story of Joseph; how he was sold by his brothers to the Gentiles, falsely accused, put in the dungeon, and at last brought out to a position of great eminence. When he was virtually the under-Pharaoh, lord of the earth, his brothers came to him in their distress and were eventually reconciled to him and bound to his lordship. Joseph brought Jew and Gentile together under the one rule in Egypt.

You say, 'What a lovely picture that is, and prototype of Jesus Christ our Lord.' Yes, it is indeed.

Other prototypical features in these stories

Just by way of provoking your interest, let me point out another prototypical feature of these stories.

1. This is the story of Jacob—I keep on telling you that, don't I! Well that's what the Bible says; it's the story of Jacob and his sons. What a poignant story it is, because, in the course of these chapters, Jacob loses some of his sons. When he loses Joseph he said that it would bring down his old hairs in sorrow to the grave. It was an irreparable loss; Joseph is gone. How tremendously increased his sorrow would have been if he had known the truth about how Joseph had gone.

At the climax of the story the brothers come back to Jacob their father, and they say, 'That man down in Egypt'—they didn't know who he was—'has kept Simeon behind as a pledge, and he's told us that it's no use our coming down to Egypt to buy food unless we bring Benjamin with us.' Poor old Jacob is exasperated.

'Why on earth did you tell him that you've got a younger brother?'

'The man directly asked us, and how could we know he was going to imprison Simeon, and ask for him to be taken down?'

Poor old Jacob; he's already lost Joseph, and now Simeon is down in prison in Egypt. In his bitterness, he cries out, 'Joseph is not, Simeon is not, and you're going to take Benjamin?'

That's three sons out of twelve. You may decide that twelve is a big family, but to lose three sons out of twelve is a quarter of the family.

2. The story of the nation of Israel in modern times. That wasn't the last time poor old Israel has known that. If you've got twenty-four million in the nation of Israel, and somebody goes and gasses six million, that's a quarter of the nation too. Oh what sorrow Israel has known over its children. To put it another way, 'Rachel is weeping for her children . . . because they are no more' (Jer 31:15), and this week in Chile they buried a man who had been responsible for gassing hundreds of thousands of Jews in his mobile vans.⁴

What a story Israel has been through. It started right back here. What's the meaning of Israel's sufferings and the loss of her children? Is this not God's favourite nation? Isn't Jacob the man upon whom God's blessing rests? Didn't God promise that in him shall all the nations of the world be blessed? When they look upon Israel and Israel's sons, they shall say, 'Yes, God, make me like them; they are the most blessed of them all and I'd like to be like them.' But what you hear now are the sobs of a broken hearted father over his sons that are not.

3. Joseph was eventually elevated to power and glory—that's a wonderful bit of the story.

4. But isn't this bit wonderful too? When he discovers Joseph is still alive, Jacob says, 'I'll go and see him before I die.' So off he goes. Eventually he gets settled in the land, and now he's a real old boy—his beard has grown I don't know how much! He calls Joseph and makes him swear an oath that he won't leave him forever in Egypt; he'll take him back to Canaan and bury him there.

5. And then Joseph brings in his sons. Can you picture it; the lads coming to see their grandpapa? Believe me, in those days grandpapas were old and decrepit, and Jacob was patriarch.

When Israel saw Joseph's sons, he said, '*Who are these?*' Joseph said to his father, 'They are my sons, whom God has given me here.' And he said, 'Bring them to me, please, that I may bless them.' Now the eyes of Israel were dim with age, so that he could not see. So Joseph brought them near him, and he kissed them and embraced them. And Israel said to Joseph, 'I never expected to see your face; and behold, God has let me see your offspring also.' (48:8–11)

What a happy surprise it was for elderly Jacob. Fasten on that question for a moment; Jacob's surprise as he sees these two boys. '*Who are these?*' he says. He never dreamed that he would see his son again, let alone his grandsons. And with the question ringing in your mind, let's read Isaiah's prophetic comments.

This is the Lord comforting Israel, 'Comfort ye, comfort ye my people' (Isa 40:1 RV). When all their disciplines have been accomplished, then there shall come restoration.

Your builders make haste; your destroyers and those who laid you waste go out from you . . . Surely your waste and your desolate places and your devastated land—surely now you will be too narrow for your inhabitants, and those who swallowed you up will be far away. The children of your bereavement will yet say in your ears: 'The place is too narrow for me; make

⁴ Walter Rauff (1906–1984).

room for me to dwell in.’ Then you will say in your heart: *‘Who has borne me these? I was bereaved and barren, exiled and put away, but who has brought up these? Behold, I was left alone; from where have these come?’* (Isa 49:17; 19–21)

It is so like Jacob, crying out, ‘Who are these?’ He thought himself bereft of a quarter of his children, and now he can scarcely believe his eyes, for in the goodness of God he sees Joseph; but not only Joseph, Joseph’s children, born of an Egyptian girl, and now belonging to Jacob. ‘Who are these?’ he says.

So in that coming day, after all the gas chambers of Hitler, the pogroms of Russia, the persecutions of King John, Israel shall yet find a vast multitude of children. The very land is too narrow to contain them, and she shall say, ‘Who are these, and who has borne them?’

6. What’s more, says the prophet, the Gentiles shall bring Israel back to the land.

Thus says the Lord GOD: ‘Behold, I will lift up my hand to the nations, and raise my signal to the peoples; and they shall bring your sons in their bosom, and your daughters shall be carried on their shoulders. Kings shall be your foster fathers, and their queens your nursing mothers. With their faces to the ground they shall bow down to you, and lick the dust of your feet. Then you will know that I am the LORD; those who wait for me shall not be put to shame.’ (vv. 22–23)

How do you suppose Genesis ends? It’s got a few more verses after that, but Jacob’s story ends with this. Says he to Joseph, ‘You won’t leave me here in Egypt, will you; you will take me back to Canaan?’ and Joseph swears the oath. Presently Jacob ‘dies in faith’ (Heb 11:13). Then what happens? Joseph says, ‘I must take him back. I must ask permission from Pharaoh to leave the land with my servants, and take my father back to Israel.’ So Joseph collects all the living Israelites to take him back home, father Jacob to Canaan.

Joseph spoke to the household of Pharaoh, saying, ‘If now I have found favour in your eyes, please speak in the ears of Pharaoh, saying, My father made me swear, saying, “I am about to die: in my tomb that I hewed out for myself in the land of Canaan, there shall you bury me.” Now therefore, let me please go up and bury my father. Then I will return.’ (50:4–5)

The Egyptians say, ‘Yes, and what’s more we’ll come with you.’ Hidden in the middle of chapter 50 is a most spectacular scene. ‘All the servants of Pharaoh, the elders of his household, and all the elders of the land of Egypt’ — all the officials of Egypt joining with the Jews to take Jews back to the land of Israel (v. 7).

Old Jacob’s dead now and you mustn’t expect too much of Genesis; the resurrection hasn’t happened yet. But when at last Isaiah 49 is fulfilled and the nations bring the Jews back again, then there shall be a resurrection and those that sleep in the dust shall arise. Old Testament history is real history and a prototype of what shall yet be.

Judah

We have noticed that the story is Jacob’s story, and about his sons. Now let me go into it a little bit deeper. The end of Genesis is not only about Joseph, it’s about Judah. He is central in

these stories. Judah went before, to lead Jacob to Joseph (46:28) and in the blessings of the sons Joseph is mentioned and gets a very big write up, but Judah gets an equally big write up.

Judah, your brothers shall praise you; your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies; your father's sons shall bow down before you. Judah is a lion's cub; from the prey, my son, you have gone up. He stooped down; he crouched as a lion and as a lioness; who dares rouse him? The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples. Binding his foal to the vine and his donkey's colt to the choice vine, he has washed his garments in wine and his vesture in the blood of grapes. His eyes are darker than wine and his teeth whiter than milk. (49:8–12)

What is more, Judah comes out on top in the end, for, says Jacob, 'The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come; and unto him *shall* the gathering of the people *be*' (v. 10 KJV). Judah is the beginning and the head of the tribe that shall bring in the king; the Messiah comes from Judah and not Joseph. So the story's going to be about Joseph and Judah.

Let's have a look, then, at this story about Judah in chapter 38. Bearing in mind what we've just read, that he's going to be very important, it's not looking very promising. In this story Judah came across a lady sitting by the side of the road (v. 14).

'You'll have to give me a pledge,' she said.

'What shall I give you?'

'Your staff.'

I'm afraid 'the staff' departed that day from Judah, didn't it?

QUESTIONS ABOUT CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

DWG: I'm not asking you to expound all the gory details, but I want to ask a few questions. Were Tamar and Judah bad?

AUDIENCE: They acted badly.

DWG: Should Judah have gone down to the Gentiles? He went down to the Canaanites and had three sons to a Gentile woman. That was bad, was it?

AUDIENCE: Was there any command not to do so at that stage, because you get the same thing later with Joseph? Did the command not come until later?

DWG: The very next story tells us that Joseph went down to Egypt. He married a Gentile girl as well, and these famous boys, Ephraim and Manasseh, were the sons of an Egyptian girl. So let's start with Joseph. Was Joseph very bad for marrying a Gentile girl and producing sons by her?

AUDIENCE: Chapter 45 says, 'God meant it for good.'

DWG: So you're all going to maintain that Joseph was absolutely right to marry a Gentile girl? Let's say it was good; then why would you say that Judah's going down was bad?

AUDIENCE: Surely, Judah was going down for his own pleasure.

DWG: Would it make any difference to your understanding of it all if it had not been Judah—Simeon, Issachar or Naphtali, say? Do you see any significance in the fact that it was Judah who went down to Canaan?

AUDIENCE: Wasn't Judah the princely line? He would have had no notion that Tamar's son, Perez, would be in the direct line of genealogy in Matthew's Gospel.

DWG: That might be true. Of course, if he hadn't married the girl, there wouldn't have been a Perez. But let's look at that, because we've got to read the story in the light of the rest of Scripture and one of the big passages of Scripture that bears on it is the final chapter of the book of Ruth.

Then all the people who were at the gate and the elders said, 'We are witnesses. May the LORD make the woman, who is coming into your house, like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you act worthily in Ephrathah and be renowned in Bethlehem, and may your house be *like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah*, because of the offspring that the LORD will give you by this young woman.' (4:11–12)

Those verses are further underlined when you come to verse 18 and we get the genealogy that is going to lead to David the king. It begins like this, 'Now these are the generations of Perez.' Our Lord comes of the tribe of Judah and David came of the tribe of Judah; this is the beginning of that succession. We shall have to be careful what we say, shan't we?

I don't make too frequent a habit of it; but I do go to weddings and I listen with interest to the speeches. I've heard all sorts of things said at wedding breakfasts, some of them said on the spur of the moment! It was at the wedding breakfast of Boaz and Ruth that one of the guests said, 'May your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah.'

Would you have said something like that if you had been asked to make a speech at that wedding? Or would you have said, 'You mustn't mention that; keep it under the carpet. Fancy dragging that up!'

What do you think is the point of it—'May your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah'—and what on earth was that all about in the book of Ruth?

AUDIENCE: Would it have anything to do with the fact that Perez means 'a breach'? When the twins were being born, Zerah put his hand out first and grasped the scarlet thread and burst into the princely line, but he missed it because Perez was born first.

DWG: That's what I used to think. It's the kind of thing that lives on in the family memory. According to Genesis 38, the first little lad put out his hand and they tied a scarlet thread on it; but then his brother Perez pushed him to the side and was born first. So the one that really had the scarlet thread on his hand was second; Perez made a breach upon his brother, and, as you say, burst into the kingly line.

Ruth was a Gentile girl, wasn't she? Many girls in Israel would have eaten their fingers off to have been the ancestress of the Messiah (not literally, of course!). If Orpah, Ruth's sister-in-law, had thought that she could have become the mother of the Messiah she might have made a different decision, but she went away and was never heard of again. Ruth

followed Naomi, got converted and became a believer in the Lord. There follows this love story and a Gentile, taken into the great purposes of God, becomes an ancestor of the Messiah. That's the significance of what Tamar did.

AUDIENCE: There are four women mentioned in Matthew 1: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah.

DWG: It remains the sovereign choice of God to pick whoever he will, even though they're the worst. Of course, Rahab and Ruth did have to make their great decisions of faith. I don't know about Bathsheba; I put a big question mark over her.

To come back to Tamar, here she is mentioned unashamedly in Matthew. It begins the line of Judah, 'Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar' (1:3). As Christians who believe that our blessed Lord is indeed the Christ, the Son of God, it is a tenet of our faith that he is of the tribe of Judah, and we read here where the line began.

AUDIENCE: Could I stick up for Tamar? It was Judah who took a wrong turn; Tamar was living by the obligations of the social conditions of the day.

DWG: And would you allow me to embroider that by saying that in Genesis 38 you have the same principle as you do in the story of Ruth. Technically it is called levirate marriage. We have no record of any rule existing as early as this because Israel had only started, or if other nations had the same rule. The rule itself is laid down in subsequent years in the Pentateuch after Israel came out of Egypt; it's called levirate marriage.

It went like this. If a married man died without a male heir to carry on his name and his line, then his brother was to take the widow and 'raise up seed to his brother.' Their first child was to be reckoned as the child of the deceased so that the man's name would not be blotted out and the line of the inheritance might come on through the child.

The *kinsman redeemer* is an institution in Israel and the story of Ruth turns on it. Ruth's husband, the son of Elimelech, had died. The name of Elimelech, 'my God is king,' was about to die out forever and no trace of Elimelech would be left. Boaz the kinsman took the widow, married her and raised up a son to the deceased Elimelech. Not every man in Israel was prepared to do that.

That is the story in Genesis 38. When Judah's firstborn died, his second son was not prepared to do it, and Judah himself wasn't concerned to see it should be done. However, Tamar wasn't going to give up her right to levirate marriage and insisted on Judah's line coming through her and not some other woman.

These are the facts, but now it's far too late for us to work out the significance of Tamar's insistence that Judah's line should come through her. Next time we shall ask ourselves, 'What has that got to do with me; why should I trouble my head about the ancestry of Christ? Then these other things about Judah—how at last Judah and Joseph are brought together. Judah, the man that sold Joseph, leads Jacob to Joseph. That's lovely, isn't it? You can tell me the significance of it all.

Lessons from the Life of Judah

Thank you very much for last week, when many of you so kindly cooperated in the study and helped us enormously in the consideration of the stories at the end of Genesis.

Just let me remind you of what we have been thinking about so far. We noticed that the end chapters of the book of Genesis, while they contain a lot about Joseph, are strictly speaking not primarily about Joseph, but about Jacob. We saw that from the headings which we find in Scripture to the four major sections in this part of Genesis.

1. Jacob dwelt in the land
2. Jacob saw there was corn in Egypt
3. Jacob took his journey and went down to Egypt
4. Jacob lived in Egypt

It is the story of Jacob then, who very frequently in this section of the book is called Israel; father of the twelve sons that became the heads of the tribes of the nation of Israel. So in this part of Genesis we are considering the beginnings of the nation of Israel. It's no longer an individual patriarch with one or two sons but the patriarch Jacob, who has twelve sons who form the beginning, the embryo, of the nation that is to play such a tremendously significant part in world history down to this very day, and such a vital part in the redemption of mankind. The purposes of God fulfilled, not just in individuals like Abraham and Isaac, but in that unique nation of Israel.

So, it's going to be about Jacob and about how he lost his sons; a whole quarter of his sons were lost to him at one stage and in his sorrow he was nearly brought down to the grave, but eventually was revived. We mentioned last week what a poignant prototype that is of what has happened to Israel in the course of the years. There have come times when Israel, or Rachel, has mourned for her children.

A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more. (Matt 2:18)

Enormous persecutions have come upon that nation and sometimes threatened to annihilate it, yet it has survived. Here, in the very earliest stage of the formation of the nation, you already get that poignant element of suffering. Jacob is mourning for his children, thinking them to be destroyed, and then finds in the goodness of God that the nation is preserved and brought to a position of great influence and honour among the Gentile nations.

We saw also that, having lived in Egypt for a while, eventually Jacob dies and is brought back to Palestine; not merely by his son Joseph, but by the coordinated efforts of the Gentiles as well as Joseph and his sons. So much so that, when the local Canaanites saw the burial party arriving and heard all the ceremonies and all the weeping, they thought it was a mourning of the Egyptians. At the command of Pharaoh, it was the Egyptians bringing the Israelites back to their land.

That caused us to think of the great prophecies in Isaiah. Notably the one in chapter 49, where Israel first of all weeps and mourns for the children that she had lost in the course of the great persecutions, and shall yet lose in the time of the great tribulation that shall be Jacob's trouble. Yet how, in the end, God will bless that nation so that Israel shall say what Jacob said of Joseph's children: 'I hadn't thought to see your face, and God has shown me these children. Who are these children? Where do they come from?' So, in the future day, Israel, astounded at the blessing of God and the multitude of her posterity, shall say, 'These children, where hence are they? Where do they come from?' 'The kings of the earth shall bring back your children,' says the Lord (vv. 21–23).

Judah, Tamar and Perez

So we noticed again that, in the course of this great story of Israel/Jacob and Joseph, Judah features prominently. From his union with Tamar sprang Perez, the ancestor of Jesus Christ our Lord. Genesis 38, then, is exceedingly important. It is the beginning of the physical line of the Messiah, our blessed Lord himself, and all who love our Lord must take this story very seriously and ponder what the Holy Spirit is saying about it.

Judah becomes a substitute for Benjamin

Then, at the critical point at the climax of the second expedition, where the cup had been found in Benjamin's sack, Judah is prominent again, when he was moved to offer himself as substitute for Benjamin so that Benjamin could go back to his father.

Judah leads Jacob to Joseph

When Israel was encouraged by God to remove the whole family, 70 souls—that little insipient nation—down to Egypt, we noticed that it was Judah who was sent before to pioneer the way and to lead Israel and his sons to Joseph. Pharaoh then settled them in the appropriate part of Egypt. We shall have to consider why that was important, perhaps next time.

Judah and the blessing

Finally, we come to that central point, the blessing of Israel/Jacob upon the tribes. All twelve get a mention, some of them only a brief verse or a sentence or two, but the two sons that are mentioned at great length are, first of all, Judah, and then Joseph. We reminded ourselves why that was. When the nation came out of Egypt and got settled in the land, over the course of the centuries, particularly in the times of the kings, the nation divided into two parts.

There was *Judah*—comprising Judah and Benjamin, the two tribes; and there was *Ephraim*, named after Joseph’s son Ephraim—sometimes referred to as Israel and Judah, the ten tribes.

Why is such a fuss made of the way Jacob blessed his sons here, and also how he blessed Joseph’s sons? It is because, in the development of the nation in the centuries that were to come, this was constitutionally an exceedingly important thing. It’s about the two major parts of the nation, Ephraim on the one hand, and Judah on the other. Ephraim was eventually taken into captivity to the Assyrians; Judah and Benjamin succumbed to the Babylonians.

So that begins to get this part of Scripture into our minds. It’s always one of the first necessities of understanding Scripture to get the facts, for the Holy Spirit can’t show us much until we have got them into our heads. Then, of course, how to understand them.

The twelve sons become one nation

Just let me point out one more thing from these chapters in Genesis. They tell us how the family was divided, torn apart, and brought into great sorrow. It nearly never became a nation at all; the fact that it did, and didn’t fly into twelve separate pieces, is in itself a remarkable thing.

Let’s go back two generations and remember what happened. Abraham had two sons, but they never formed one nation—Ishmael went off and formed his own nation, and left Isaac to form his. Isaac had two children, but Esau and Jacob didn’t form one nation—Esau went off and formed his own nation.

How did it come about that Jacob’s twelve sons managed to keep together and form one nation? Well, it nearly didn’t happen; they fell out right from the start. They sold Joseph down to Egypt, and that could have been the last of him, couldn’t it? Then Judah went off among the Canaanites, and that could have been the last of him. Israel could indeed have been brought down to his grave in sorrow, seeing his twelve sons split in all directions to the four corners of the earth.

How did those twelve boys eventually keep together and be brought back to begin to form the nation of Israel? They’ve sold Joseph and Judah has gone off. Joseph is down in Egypt and comes to personal success there. Had that been the last of the story, there would have been no nation of Israel; for at this point the famine came and if it hadn’t been for Joseph the whole nation would have been blotted out. So, what the story of Joseph is telling us is not merely how good a chap Joseph was, but how God preserved that insipient nation in those most difficult days. Isn’t it a miracle how Israel has survived as a nation and maintained its national characteristics?

I have a friend in this city, a very elderly man, brought up as a Jew in Austria in virtual agnosticism. He doesn’t really know what to believe. Some days he thinks there’s a God, some days he thinks there isn’t.

Then he says to me, ‘You know, when I think there isn’t a God, then I see a man walking down the road, and I say, “That’s a Jew.” Isn’t it a marvellous thing how we have maintained our identity all these centuries?’

The identity of the nation has been maintained

Yes, it's a very interesting thing how they were maintained from extinction. It has been a remarkable thing all down the centuries how God has providentially maintained that nation, in spite of all the rage of the enemy: the opposition and the pogroms and the persecutions. God has maintained them right to this present day, and he will yet maintain them in the face of all their foes, and finally *the man of sin*, because that nation was, and remains, God's chosen people. They carry a special role within history as a witness to the fact that there is a unique God in heaven, and you will not ultimately account for human history apart from that God and what he has done through Israel.

The family is reconciled

Then of course that brings us to the second climax; not merely Joseph's own personal success, but the tremendous story of the reconciliation of the different elements in that family. Judah and Joseph and Benjamin and the father and the sons; and the high point where Jacob finally realises that he had been earlier deceived. Joseph his son is yet alive; there is a future for him and for the nation, and he determines to go and see him. How that came about is one of the questions we shall have to ask.

They became recognized as a nation during the four hundred years in Egypt

Then there is another big story. The family has been reunited and welded together, and they're going to last; but all they are is a rather big family of seventy people. How would they ever become a nation, from just being a large extended family?

The very interesting thing is that, when God determined to turn them into a nation, he took them out of Palestine. Whatever did he do that for? They were turned into a nation in those four hundred years that they lived in Egypt, weren't they? Why did God do that? I give notice of that question; you might be asked it next time!

FURTHER QUESTIONS ON CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

DWG: We've heard a lot about Joseph from ten thousand preachers, so in our limited time available now we're going to look at Judah in particular. We asked ourselves questions about this story when Judah went down to the Gentiles—was it good, or was it bad? Some of you said that it was bad, and some of you thought it wasn't so bad as all that, because it was the beginning of the Messiah's ancestry.

Then we noticed he married a Gentile girl, and some of you said, 'Tut, tut, that wasn't very good.' Then others said, 'Didn't Joseph go and do the same?' They made all sorts of excuses for him and said it was okay if Joseph did it, but not so much if Judah did. Others disagreed, so it was all very interesting.

And then we noticed that Tamar was an ancestor of the Messiah. We'd better be careful how we speak of our blessed Lord's relatives, hadn't we? She gets honourable mention in the book of Ruth, again in connection with the genealogy of King David, and still more honourable mention in the genealogy in Matthew 1 that records the ancestry of our blessed

Lord and Saviour. So some of us felt a little more kindly disposed towards Tamar, but we could see that she got up to some funny tricks. Dr Chapman is going to help us focus on these two stories about Judah.

DR CHAPMAN: Friends, it's such a pleasure to put Dr Gooding into focus—no small assignment! Just let me say that when you ask the 'why' of God, you can't be sure to get an answer. God's thoughts are higher than our thoughts, as the heaven is higher than the earth; so we can ask the question, but if we don't get an answer the reason for it is, 'My thoughts are not your thoughts' (Isa 55:8).

We try to think logically—that is equal to that, and that is equal to that; therefore that is equal to that. This is logic, and this is the way we think. Not all the cultures of the world think like that, and certainly some of the reasoning in the Old Testament doesn't seem to be going along logical lines. So maybe we'll not get the answers right because we don't think the right way. 'For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom' (1 Cor 1:22). Different methods of thinking.

Why is this story written in the holy Scriptures; why is it put *here*; what is the basic message? Now let me broaden those questions:

1. Is it about the effect of Judah going down and his relationship with the Canaanites? Is this story a picture of what the nation was doing at the time? The constant temptation was that they would live as the Canaanites did and worship their gods. God judged them over and over and over again, because they did these things. Maybe that's what it's about?

2. Maybe it's about the law of the husband's brother, and this is a clear example to teach us the duty of a husband's brother to the husband's widow?

3. Maybe it's a clear description of prevention of conception; the whole concept of birth control and contraception? Here's an example where it was practised and God judged the man very, very severely. So whatever he did it's a very serious thing, and God judged him.

4. Maybe it's to show us that God can overrule the schemes of men and women; and if the people had been trusting in the Lord maybe they wouldn't have had to take the law into their own hands? What if they had done what Joseph did, and left it with the Lord and got on with living for him, not scheming so much?

5. Or maybe it's about *justice*? 'The sceptre shall not depart from Judah'—Judah is going to be a very changed man as far as judgment goes. Judgment means *administration*; he's the head of a tribe and he's got to give rulings in certain situations.

We've just been told that we mustn't speak ill of those who are ancestors of the Lord, and I would certainly agree with that, but we can say what the Scriptures say about them. When Judah heard that his daughter-in-law had sinned, he said that she must be judged. 'Bring her out and let her be burned' (v. 24). Now that's his judgment and it was over strict; she should have been stoned according to the Mosaic law, but anyway, she had to die. This was his judgment as the head of the tribe; then later on he said, 'She is more righteous than I' (v. 26), meaning he had sinned more than she had.

So the obvious logical thinking is, 'If she deserves to be burned, and I have sinned more than that, obviously I deserve something pretty terrible.' But his attitude was, because he was involved, 'Let's not bother about it,' and the whole thing was brushed under the carpet. So as

far as judgment goes, this shows what happens when a man is acting in the flesh, and how God will have to change his attitude—‘the sceptre shall not depart . . .’

6. Maybe it’s about evidence? Joseph’s coat, the signet, the cord and the staff, and then the wagons?

7. Maybe it’s about Perez, the messianic line; or maybe it’s about sexual morality, and all the things we read about here, prostitution and whatnot.

My view is that, firstly, it’s about Perez, and it’s put in here to let us see this. All the other things are secondary. But as a very important second I would put the going down to Canaan; I think that that’s very important. So these are the two things. 1. Perez; 2. Going to Canaan.

DWG: Thank you very much, sir. Would anyone else like to comment?

AUDIENCE: Simply to put in the fact you mentioned the first night we were here about Esau: there were kings who reigned in the land of Edom before any king reigned over Israel (36:31). You have pointed out already the kingly line in this chapter. Not really in the best light at that stage, but as the thing develops you see character developing in Judah of the right kind of king, looking forward to King David. Like a shepherd, Judah led the family down into Egypt where they developed into a nation. You’ll find that this blessing has to do with the provision of wine and milk; perhaps the king and the shepherd again linked together, leading on to the sceptre of the mighty king that was to follow.

DWG: Let’s take up that strain then, and see where that leads this evening, focussing now on Judah and looking forward to what Jacob eventually will say, ‘The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him’ (49:10). We remember that the ancestry of Messiah begins here, so, while this end part of Genesis has a lot to say about Joseph, it is now evident that it’s going to talk also about Judah. In the end, Judah will be more important than Joseph, because it is from Judah that the king will come, not of Joseph.

So let’s follow that line and ask ourselves what is happening to Judah, and perhaps look for progression in the character of Judah. Let’s take it as read, for instance, that God did overrule the events of chapter 38. We won’t speak disrespectfully of our Lord’s ancestors, yet there was a lot of careless, doubtful things; Judah’s double standards of morality and his irresponsibility. What is the story going to tell us about Judah and his development?

Let me put that in one more context. We are used to thinking of Joseph and his great character. What makes him such a delightful prototype of our Lord Jesus is the way Joseph suffered. By contrast, is there anything that makes Judah a prototype of the Lord Jesus?

You say, ‘Well not here; he’s acting very irresponsibly.’

Is the story going to show us Judah changing and being changed, and being brought to the position where he can become a worthy vessel in the purpose of God to be the one whose tribe shall eventually carry the sceptre?

I’m going to advance the theory that in the development of the nation there were a number of things that would have split the nation, and did begin to split it. Where shall I begin? Am I right to think that the trouble began in chapter 37 with Jacob’s favouritism? Jacob showed a great deal of favouritism to Joseph, and Joseph was a bit of a spoiled boy.

Where parents favour one child, may they expect difficult behaviour from the other children? Are you all agreed on that?

AUDIENCE: No, I think Joseph's character was so beautiful in comparison to the others. He did the things his father wanted him to do and the others didn't.

DWG: I see. Any other views?

AUDIENCE: I think you're right. At that stage Joseph was too young to compete with his brothers and his father definitely showed favouritism.

DWG: And he shouldn't have done that?

AUDIENCE: He shouldn't have.

DWG: Just allow me to argue on the other side for a minute. As a father, Israel shouldn't have shown any favouritism, but he had a right to appoint the son who should carry the birthright.

AUDIENCE: It was a little bit early for that. That's the reason he rejected Reuben, because it hadn't been manifested yet.

DWG: Yes it had! Before we get to chapter 36, the story is told of Reuben's terrible and grave sin against his father (35:22). It is not said there that he lost the birthright because of that, but a later Scripture tells us that he did (1 Chron 5:1). Am I not correct in saying that it was the prerogative of the father to choose a son to carry the birthright, and that would have bestowed some privilege?

The things that began to split the family

They resented Joseph

Some people have said that he told tales out of school. *He brought his father the evil report of the sons of Bilhah.* Alongside that perhaps we ought to put the fact that when our Lord was here on earth he said, 'The world . . . hates me because I testify about it that its works are evil' (John 7:7). That certainly wasn't telling tales out of school.

Joseph had his dreams

It was this in particular that upset all the rest of the brothers, and I'm not sure his father didn't feel a little bit peeved as well. All the other sons would bow down to Joseph, and even the sun and the stars would bow down to him, and they resented the implications of that dream. For the sake of time I'm going to grant you that he may have been extreme in his dreams. Did his father ever bow down to him? The later text says he bowed down to his father when he came to see him, but I don't read anywhere that Jacob bowed down to Joseph. His brothers did, didn't they?

There's some wonderful irony in the stories that follow. His brothers came in, not once or twice, but many times and, not knowing who he was, they bowed down to Joseph; and yet one of the reasons why the nation would be split was their resentment that one of them should rule over them.

The cruelty and deception of the brothers

First of all *their cruelty*—they were going to kill him; and then *their deception*. Some family this, wasn't it? What hypocrites they were. When they brought the coat to Jacob they said, 'Discern and see if it's your son's coat' (37:32), and they tried to comfort him.

Judah's sense of profit

You say, 'He suggested selling him rather than killing him, and that was a good thing.'

Yes, maybe it was. But Judah actually said, '*What profit is there if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? I tell you a better thing than that, we could eliminate him, get rid of him forever and we could make a bit of cash on the side. Let's sell him to the Midianites,*' and they sold him for twenty pieces of silver (see vv. 26–28).

'What profit is there in it for us?' It's a thing that has marked the Jewish nation in many eras of its history. We remember how our Lord was sold by Judas for his love of money. Profit, profit, profit—that has been a mark of the Jewish nation. It was with old Jacob, wasn't it? Down in Laban's country, he got all Laban's stock under his own hand and all Laban's capital into his own bank balance, so that when Laban and his sons looked around they saw that everything seemed to be owned by Jacob. They didn't like it, and kicked him out.

Their salvation depended upon Joseph

Now the story is going to tell us how, just for the moment, the nation's salvation depended upon Joseph. A Jew has got his hands on the unnumbered and innumerable tonnes of corn and wheat in Egypt. All the granaries in Egypt were under his control, and how much profit did he make out of it? Joseph is going to be the first key in saving this nation, as well as in saving the world.

He was a faithful steward

What is the peculiar thing about Joseph's merit? When he was sold he became, first of all, a steward in Potiphar's house and all his master's goods were in his hand. When he was down in the prison he became a steward; all the affairs of the prison were in his hand and the governor of the prison didn't need to attend to it. When he came out of prison to fame in Egypt, all the economics of Egypt were in his hand. The characteristic thing of Joseph and his ministry is that, first of all, he was a steward. Secondly, he was an utterly selfless and faithful steward.

In his first post all his master's goods were in his hand, and then his master's wife tempted him. In the manner of Egyptian society he could have taken the woman, and nobody would have blamed him; but he protested, saying, 'Look, my master has given me everything and he doesn't need to check up on what I do, he trusts me so absolutely. Everything of his is in my hand. Only one thing has he kept back from me—you, his wife. How can I do this great sin against my master? How can I do this great sin against God?' (39:8–9).

Now we're at the level of very practical lessons, aren't we? A steward that is found faithful, incorrupt in his stewardship—we shouldn't forget at this stage that we are stewards. 'It is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy' (1 Cor 4:2). If one of these days we are to reign with the blessed Lord and have him put into our hands the running of his

kingdom in the ages yet to come, the number one qualification is that we shall have used our stewardship here faithfully. That will mean that we first of all regard it as a trust.

Naught that I have my own I call,
I hold it for the Giver;
My heart, my strength, my life, my all,
Are His, and His forever.⁵

We shall be tested in our stewardship, and if personal profit has been our motive it's going to lead us into all sorts of temptations and perhaps spoil our chances of being actively engaged in reigning with Christ in the age to come.

Joseph was not only faithful in his stewardship in Potiphar's house, but also when he was put into the prison. He didn't complain, 'I've given them all I've got and now they're blaming me for what I didn't do, and they've put me down in this wretched old dungeon with a lot of crooks. I shall just sit here and twiddle my thumbs. What career prospects are open to me down here; why should I bother?' If you were falsely imprisoned, with no prospect, no career, no promotion and no acknowledgement, what would you do? Joseph served down there just as he did in Potiphar's house and when he became second in command of Egypt.

That has practical implications for us, doesn't it? Stewards, wanting one day to reign with Christ—are we trying to compete with one another?

'I should try and run a bit harder than Mrs Zebedee. She's got some big ideas about her sons, you know. She's got notions of her sons being chief, but I shall see that she doesn't get her request in first. I'll get mine in first.'

I would serve if you can give me a big congregation, thousands of people and much publicity, and it seems a worthwhile job. But in obscurity, under false criticism, would I be a steward when there seems no future in it, serving people that are much less intelligent, and a lot of old crooks? The way to exaltation and glory lay through that prison for Joseph, didn't it? In God's providence this was the training course for Joseph, whether you think he started off as a spoilt boy or not. Here he was in training for his position of glory, and so are we. It's how we're behaving now—how we're using our talents now in obscure and small things, how we react under criticism—that is determining what position we can be given in the coming kingdom of our Lord.

He was marked by innocent suffering

Of course, the very big thing about Joseph was that he not only was a steward, but he was marked by—notice the phrase, *innocent suffering*. I'm going to emphasise this, and then I'm going to ask you to contrast it with Judah.

Being the favourite of his father was a minor offence, not worth being put in prison for, was it? In Potiphar's house he did nothing wrong. Then, when the butler was going to get a chance to get out of prison, Joseph told him his story. He said, 'Tell Pharaoh about me when you get out; how I was sold, and how I've never done any wrong here either but they've put

⁵ James Grindlay Small (1817–88), 'I've found a friend, oh, such a Friend!'

me in this dungeon' (40:14–15). Innocent suffering: suffering when you haven't done any wrong.

Well, two things are to be said about that. That is the path our Lord went; the way to the throne is the way of suffering, innocent suffering. Secondly, when Joseph got out into a position of power, and was in a position to have tortured his brethren or even to have them executed, he sought no vengeance.

I scarcely need to remind you of the passage in the New Testament that brings before us particularly our Lord's innocent suffering.

Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. (1 Pet 2:21–24)

He did not seek for revenge

So Joseph suffered innocently and in spite of it sought no revenge. No wonder people see in him a picture of our Lord. But if Joseph suffered innocently, what is the point of this story? It is the crucial crisis, isn't it? Joseph has come to glory and power in Egypt; he is in control of all the corn. Here come his brothers—first expedition, second expedition; Joseph knows all about them and they don't realise it. He never takes any revenge, but he doesn't just say the first time they appear, 'I'm Joseph, and I forgive all you've done. Let's forget it.' No, no, no.

There should never be forgiveness without repentance, should there? Forgiveness, yes, *but when there's repentance*. It would harm his brothers to forgive them if they don't repent. You just imagine the damage it would do to their souls. It would encourage them to think that it doesn't matter how you behave. With all their trickery and their lies and their deceit, to bring them down to Egypt when they're in need, and say, 'Yes, take the corn, and forget about the past,' that's not forgiveness.

There will be no revenge, but first he'll bring them to repentance. Judah, who sold Joseph into slavery, will be brought to the point where he is prepared to be a slave. The man will be brought to repentance. The point of Joseph's dealings with his brethren, then, was to bring them to repentance and it's brought to the climax by a tremendous speech by Judah.

Judah goes surety for Benjamin and then becomes his substitute

Now please tell me what you're going to say about Judah. Have you forgiven him yet? Has he made up for all his irresponsibility? What is the point of Judah's speech? If it was to show his repentance, in what sense did it show his repentance?

Audience: It shows love for his father.

DWG: Yes, it shows his love for his father and his family. Listen to what Judah says to Joseph when he doesn't yet know who Joseph is.

Then Judah went up to him and said, 'Oh, my lord, please let your servant speak a word in my lord's ears, and let not your anger burn against your servant, for you are like Pharaoh himself. My lord asked his servants, saying, "Have you a father, or a brother?" And we said to my lord,

“We have a father, an old man, and a young brother, the child of his old age. His brother is dead, and he alone is left of his mother’s children, and his father loves him.” Then you said to your servants, “Bring him down to me, that I may set my eyes on him.” We said to my lord, “The boy cannot leave his father, for if he should leave his father, his father would die.” Then you said to your servants, “Unless your youngest brother comes down with you, you shall not see my face again.” When we went back to your servant my father, we told him the words of my lord. And when our father said, “Go again, buy us a little food”, we said, “We cannot go down. If our youngest brother goes with us, then we will go down. For we cannot see the man’s face unless our youngest brother is with us.” Then your servant my father said to us, “You know that my wife bore me two sons. One left me, and I said, Surely he has been torn to pieces, and I have never seen him since. If you take this one also from me, and harm happens to him, you will bring down my grey hairs in evil to Sheol.” Now therefore, as soon as I come to your servant my father, and the boy is not with us, then, as his life is bound up in the boy’s life, as soon as he sees that the boy is not with us, he will die, and your servants will bring down the grey hairs of your servant our father with sorrow to Sheol. For your servant became a pledge of safety for the boy to my father, saying, “If I do not bring him back to you, then I shall bear the blame before my father all my life.” Now therefore, please let your servant remain instead of the boy as a servant to my lord, and let the boy go back with his brothers. For how can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? I fear to see the evil that would find my father.’ (44:18–34)

He hadn’t quite repented, had he? He didn’t get round to actually facing the real truth until chapter 50. He didn’t care much about his father when, with Reuben and all the others, he brought the coat in and said, ‘Would this be your son’s coat?’ The poor old boy nearly had a heart attack and died then. Judah didn’t care too much about it then, did he?

Now he is very careful about his father. He says, ‘It will be his death, if I go home without Benjamin.’ What does his love for [Israel] lead him to do?

AUDIENCE: Offer himself as surety.

DWG: Yes, he did that when he left his father.

I will be a pledge of [Benjamin’s] safety. From my hand you shall require him. If I do not bring him back to you and set him before you, then let me bear the blame for ever. (43:9)

‘Don’t be surety for anybody; you’ll smart for it’ (see Prov 11:15). He not only gave himself at the beginning as a surety, he now offered himself as a substitute. Rather than his father die and Benjamin be left a slave, he offered to take the slave’s place for the rest of his life. Though he would have the staff and the sceptre among his brethren, he offered to remain a slave to this man who he thought was an Egyptian. To save his family he offered to be a substitute.

I’ve heard lots of delightful sermons preached on Joseph as a prototype of the Lord Jesus, but I’ve never yet heard one preached about Judah. To save Israel from death by famine, Judah was in an impossible situation. They couldn’t stay where they were, they’ve got to go down to Egypt. If they didn’t, death stared them in the face. So he said, ‘I’ll become a surety

for the boy.’ Now if he goes back without Benjamin, corn or no corn, Israel will die. There was only one way for it. Said Judah, ‘I’ll become his substitute to save the nation.’ I don’t need to apply the lesson to our own heart’s devotion, do I?

AUDIENCE: Chapter 42 verse 21 is a remarkable verse, because it applies to them all.

Then they said to one another, ‘In truth we are guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the distress of his soul, when he begged us *and we did not listen*. That is why this distress has come upon us.’

They still remembered the anguish of Joseph’s soul, and that’s what made them feel guilty.

DWG: That is indeed so. We ought to spend some time on that next week; how Joseph so ordered their circumstances to bring that to their memory.

You know, our Lord will have us to repent. It’s not that when we get to heaven nothing will be said; he’ll bring it to our minds when we stand before the judgment seat of Christ. God will yet bring that nation of Israel through terrible suffering, and they’ll remember what they did to the Lord Jesus; they will indeed. God is love but God is tough. He’ll not give them peace until they’re brought to repentance.

One thing I would like to emphasise is this. Joseph brought them through all these many bitter experiences, and he persisted until he had brought them to a position where he was satisfied that he could reveal himself to them (45:1–3). That point came after Judah had offered himself as a substitute for the sake of Benjamin and his father.

AUDIENCE: Is there a practical lesson here that God could teach the church?

DWG: Like all Scripture, this is to be understood at all sorts of levels. As a picture of God’s dealings with Israel, when at last they’re brought to ‘look on him whom they pierced’, and remember what they did with him. When they are brought to repentance, there will be great mourning over him, says Zechariah (12:10).

Those lessons of stewardship talk to us as well, do they not? If we’re going to be a blessing to the nation, as Israel in another sense is to be a blessing to the nations, we must show the Joseph side and the Judah side in our experience. Like Joseph, we are to be faithful as stewards, and we’re to follow the example of the Lord Jesus when we suffer unjustly (1 Pet 2:20–21). Through suffering unjustly, we too might nevertheless be used of God as a means of bringing people to repentance. And we’ve got to be prepared to be like Judah, to suffer so that others might go free. We come back to this business of practical repentance and how we ought to behave, if we, like Israel, are going to be ‘a holy nation’, and a blessing amongst men.

Joseph, the one who suffered innocently, said, ‘As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good’ (50:20). ‘God meant it for your salvation, and therefore I suffered innocently; but never mind, God has achieved through it the salvation of others.’

Judah was as guilty as the rest of his brothers, but now he is brought to the place where he is prepared to suffer as a substitute.

Let's think about the Lord, shall we? He was utterly without any guilt; he had no need to come down to our world but he came as a surety and he died as a substitute, for which we shall love him and obey him eternally. The one who will wield the sceptre was prepared to be a slave; 'though he was in the form of God, [he] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant' (Phil 2:6–7). That's why he'll have the sceptre.

So, in Joseph we see innocent suffering and in Judah we see substitutionary suffering, and together they point us to the Lord Jesus.

Israel Took his Journey

Genesis chapters 37 to the end give great prominence to Joseph, and rightly so. In God's hand he was the member of the family that proved such a key to its development; but the stories as a whole are about the development of the family. I think it is important to see that, so that we get all the other stories in focus. It is not just the one man, Israel, but the whole family and the insipient nation; how God saved both from disintegration.

The family could easily have disintegrated

How easy it would have been for them all to go off, like Judah did, among the Canaanites, and institute all sorts of marriage alliances. The whole family might have got quite lost and indistinguishable from the Canaanites that were around them. That could easily have happened. If you think of the monstrous results that would have come from that regarding the line of our Lord and the coming of the Messiah, that is a very important thing, isn't it?

Down the centuries, Israel was forever doing that. In the times of the Judges they would persist in going off and marrying amongst the Gentiles; the Canaanites and the Hivites and the Perizzites and the Ammonites and all the others. By compromising their faith, their monotheism, they were in grave danger of losing their identity.

It was not only in the primitive period, but you have to remember other periods of Israel's history, such as in the second century BC under Antiochus Epiphanes. There were renegade Jews in Jerusalem whose hearts were set upon turning Israel, and Jerusalem in particular, into a Hellenistic state. In cooperation with Antiochus Epiphanes, the Gentile emperor, they forbade the reading of Scripture, the practice of circumcision and observance of the Sabbath. They put an idol on the altar of the Lord in the temple in Jerusalem. They had temple prostitutes (Tamar dressed up like one), and shrines to the pagan gods down the streets of the city of Jerusalem as late as 167 BC. Can you just imagine, if that kind of thing had triumphed, what our Lord would have found when he came to Israel? So this is very important.

We have the early story, then, of a family that was in danger of disintegrating. God in his sovereignty overruled human sin and turned this to the preservation of the line of Judah, and therefore the ancestry of Christ. Similarly, they started disintegrating themselves through their own jealousy of Joseph, God's appointed ruler, and they nearly destroyed themselves by selling off Joseph to Egypt. Had they killed Joseph, the whole lot of them would eventually have starved.

So once more you can see God overruling their sin and turning it through his wonderful mechanism to a way of preserving the family. The workings of the government of God were extraordinary in the lives of that early family, to maintain it as a family so that the nation could begin.

Was there a prohibition against marrying Gentiles?

As far as Genesis goes, however, there doesn't appear to be any prohibition on the Hebrews at this time marrying Gentiles, and if one looks at it from an ordinary human standpoint, unless Jacob's sons were going to marry their own sisters they would have had to marry Gentiles to keep the family going. Esau went off and married a lot of local girls, and they 'were a grief of mind unto Isaac and to Rebekah' (26:35 KJV). When Abraham wanted a wife for Isaac he got her from the Gentiles, but not the local Gentiles. He seems to have regarded them as particularly bad and offensive, and sent back to Padan-aram (ch. 24). Jacob likewise went back to Padan-aram (ch. 28). Technically they were Gentiles too, but the locals seem to have been regarded as very bad.

AUDIENCE: One thing I did notice in reading, that when Joseph was selling corn and making provision for the people, it was not only for Egypt, but Canaan (41:57). Could the two lands have been joined together in some way?

DWG: At that stage, Canaan was possibly under the imperial direction of Egypt, and therefore they were in some sense satellite countries, if no more. Therefore, just like Jacob and his sons came down to trade, the other Canaanites would have come down to trade. I can't quote you the exact reference, but there is a record in history of Bedouin nomads coming with their flocks and dwelling on the outskirts of Egypt in time of difficulty.

Joseph was a man who had dreams

You will have noticed that we've missed out one very big theme, namely the dreams of these early chapters. Why should dreams be a matter of great prominence? Joseph has his dreams in chapter 37, and then when he's down in prison the butler and the baker have their dreams, which he interprets (ch. 40), and then he is eventually brought out of prison to interpret Pharaoh's dreams (ch. 41). Will you allow me to pass by that as merely circumstantial detail for the moment, or does somebody want to comment on this? Do you see some great significance in it?

AUDIENCE: Dreams have significance in the Middle East among Muslims. A missionary has said that he doesn't know any Muslim who became a Christian, who didn't start off with a dream of some sort.

DWG: The dreams of Joseph here, given to him by God, were dreams of future glory for him personally and the role he was to play—glorious dreams for a young man to get into his head. I wonder, as the years went by, did he come to doubt those dreams or wonder if they would ever be fulfilled? Or did he cling on to them, believing that they were real? They certainly tested his faith.

It is an exceedingly important thing for young men and women to have dreams of what the future is going to be. I don't mean literal dreams that you get in the middle of the night, necessarily, but visions, dreams, hopes—what is 'the hope of our calling'? (See Eph 1:18.)

If I could say to my younger brothers and sisters, particularly those under thirty, 'Have you some dream in your heart of what you want to be by fifty? Then you'd better start, because fifty will come very quickly. As the major job in your life, what are you going to be for God? Do you think God has a plan for us, as he had for Joseph? He gave Joseph an outstanding, brilliant career. What about us lesser fry? Perhaps we mustn't 'hitch our wagons to a star,' but dreams are important in the sense of what future God has for us.

I've known of people who wanted to be missionaries; others who, from early on, wanted to be teachers of God's word; others, evangelists; and others, this, or that, or the other. It's marvellous to have an objective—God given hope and objective. Sometimes it takes years for God to fulfil it. Sometimes there are endless frustrations on the way. Joseph was laid in chains, the iron entered into his soul,⁶ and God tested the man's faith and loyalty when all seemed wrong.

Joseph, who was sold as a slave. His feet were hurt with fetters; his neck was put in a collar of iron; until what he had said came to pass, the word of the LORD tested him. (Ps 105:17–19)

A man with dreams of his own and in the end they were fulfilled.

Joseph was a man in whom was the Spirit of God

It wasn't a question of his own future, but of other people's—the butler's and the baker's. He was able to stand amongst men and interpret the judgments of God. 'And Pharaoh said to his servants, "Can we find a man like this, in whom is the Spirit of God?"' (41:38). Yes, of course that's pre-eminently true of our Lord, 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me . . . to set at liberty those who are oppressed' (Luke 4:18). Our Lord will rise in resurrection and Joseph will rise and be restored to his office in life. Joseph uses the same term of the butler and the baker, 'Pharaoh will *lift up your head*': one would be restored to office and one would be hanged (40:13, 19).

Joseph was a man in whom was the wisdom of God

He knew divine wisdom as to what it would be wise to do in light of immediate, daily, practical matters and the organisation and administration of future affairs. That's a wisdom given to our elders, who can see the drift of the times and what might be needed in the next ten years in the administration of a church, or in the development of the life of the people of God.

Has anybody got anything else to say about dreams?

AUDIENCE: What about on the day of Pentecost, where Peter is quoting the prophecy of Joel?

⁶ The Coverdale Bible, 1535.

And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. (Acts 2:17)

It's the reverse of what you were mentioning, where the young men are going to do the dreaming; here the young men are seeing visions and the old men are dreaming dreams.

DWG: I think what Peter is saying there is that we have now arrived in *the last days*. I believe the last days started at Pentecost. They have already set in, but the great and notable *day of the Lord* has not yet arrived; we're in between the two.

AUDIENCE: There was a partial fulfilment at the time and the fuller fulfilment will be later on?

DWG: Yes. Right from the very earliest time Abraham had his dreams, and now Joseph and others. Israel all down the centuries had their dreams of a wonderful future, the coming of a Messiah. Now, with the actual advent of Messiah—his birth in Bethlehem, his death and his resurrection, and now he sits at the right hand of God—why shouldn't we have dreams?

What comfortable dreams old folks particularly could have, amidst all the old aching bones and prospect of death itself. Why not in addition have dreams of what it's going to be like when the Messiah comes again? That is an exceedingly important thing.

AUDIENCE: Dreams were important also in the life of Joseph, the husband of Mary. The Lord spoke to him in dreams.

DWG: May I cite one more? This is a little known and obscure observation, but let me throw it into the pool of your thinking.

Jesus therefore no longer walked openly among the Jews, but went from there to the region near the wilderness, to a town called Ephraim, and there he stayed with the disciples. (John 11:54)

If this wasn't the fourth Gospel, you might say to yourself, '*Ephraim* is the name of a little village; that's what it is, and no more.' But this is the fourth Gospel, and when John quotes names and things, he is inviting you to think back over history. The Lord Jesus had just raised Lazarus from the dead and the Jews were determined to destroy him. Therefore, he retired to a city called Ephraim. So, historically then, who or what is Ephraim?

Joseph's brothers rejected him, put him into the pit and sold him down to Egypt. When he had eventually come to glory he had a son whom he called Ephraim, saying 'God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction' (Gen 41:52).

Now our Lord is rejected by his people and retires into Ephraim; then he comes forth to Bethany (John 12:1). One of the best known verses of chapter 12 is, 'Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit' (v. 24).

How did Joseph come to have that fruitful son, saying, 'God has made me to be fruitful in the land of my affliction'? It was because he was thrown into the pit and into the dungeon, and because of his willingness to suffer. Eventually he came forth and was fruitful not only in his own life, but he saved Egypt, his family and all the nations around him in the then known world.

So here's our Lord in Ephraim, prepared to die and suffer so that he might bring forth a very fruitful harvest. Then he comes to Bethany on his way to Jerusalem. He had raised Lazarus from the dead and Martha and Mary make him a supper. It was an ordinary supper, and they were grateful for Lazarus's resurrection. What do you suppose the Lord might have been thinking? Do you suppose he ever had dreams? Here he was, sitting around a table. There was Martha and Mary, still very much alive, and Lazarus, recently dead, raised again; the family reunited and sitting at the supper with the Lord.

Well perhaps you'll say that our Lord didn't have dreams. I mustn't say he did, because Scripture doesn't say he did. But could you sit there with these dear saints at the supper with the Lord and the family brought together again—Lazarus from the dead, the others never having died—without having a few dreams? This wasn't heaven, but some day something like this is going to happen. The dead shall be raised, the living changed, and together they shall sit at the marriage supper of the Lamb.

The next day, as he went out from that supper, the crowd met him in Jerusalem saying, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord' (v. 13). That would set a few dreams going, wouldn't it? There shall be a time when he shall come again and Israel shall welcome their long lost Messiah.

Then the Pharisees in their annoyance said to one another, 'You see that you are gaining nothing? Look, the world has gone after him' (v. 19). And so it will be one of these days. It was at that point that our Lord said, 'Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone . . . If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also' (vv. 24, 26). If you want to translate dreams into realities it is the universal law that before there can be fruitfulness there must first come the dying of the seed.

God will accomplish his purposes

So let's move on now. We've been discussing God's marvellous providential governance, largely through Joseph, but then through Judah, to preserve the family and keep it together, overruling human sin, in order to save the nation.

We may well think of what the apostles kept telling their fellow Jews on the day of Pentecost onwards.

This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it. (Acts 2:23–24)

Peter told them, 'This is the very means that God has to offer you forgiveness of sins. In your wickedness you had him crucified. You used the hands of Gentile lawless men to kill your own Messiah.' They meant it for evil, but God turned that very means into gaining forgiveness and salvation for Israel. The marvels of God's government in his triumph over human sin; using, if I may say it, even the foolish and wicked machinations of men to accomplish his ways of redemption through Christ.

As we saw in our earlier studies, God accomplished his purposes through Joseph and his innocent suffering, and through Judah eventually in his substitutionary suffering. These two elements would preserve the nation, and be fulfilled completely in our blessed Lord.

The family becoming a nation

Let us look at what God tells Jacob as he goes down into Egypt and what things are now going to be about.

So Israel took his journey with all that he had and came to Beersheba, and offered sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac. And God spoke to Israel in visions of the night and said, 'Jacob, Jacob.' And he said, 'Here am I.' Then he said, 'I am God, the God of your father. Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for there I will make you into a great nation. I myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you up again, and Joseph's hand shall close your eyes.' (46:1–4)

It's not merely a question of saving the family from extinction and disintegration; it's now a question of how God would go about turning that family into a nation. Multiplying them and forming a nation that should play its tremendous role in the history of redemption. So God appears to Jacob. Was it right for him to go down to Egypt? Hadn't he and his fathers been called out of the Gentiles to live in the land of Canaan? Was it right now, to take the whole lot of them down to Egypt?

It was all right, perhaps, when father Isaac had stayed in Canaan and Jacob had gone off to get a living down in Padan-aram; but was it right now, as the head of the house, to take the whole lot of them down to Egypt? That's a tremendous decision for Jacob to have to take, and how would he take it? As he launches the family on this scheme, he will never himself come back alive. He is told that he will see his son Joseph again, but eventually he would die and Joseph, as his best loved and dutiful son, would close his eyes in death.

How then will the great promises of God be fulfilled? How can Jacob be sure that he's doing the right thing for all that lies in the future, in taking this momentous step, and that God will turn his family into a nation? It's a tremendous step of faith. So he starts out on his way to Egypt, coming down from the direction of Shechem to Beersheba, with all its hallowed associations. As a child, he would have been told about the God of Abraham, and the oath that had been given on Mount Moriah, 'I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring' (22:17). Now, as heir to those promises, he comes himself to Beersheba and God appears to him at night at 'the well of the oath,' saying, 'Yes Jacob, I am with you. I want you to go to Egypt. I will make of you a nation, and I shall fulfil my promise for the great and the distant future.'

Associations with Beersheba

Abraham

Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba and called there on the name of the LORD, the Everlasting God. (21:33)

Isaac

From there he went up to Beersheba. And the LORD appeared to him the same night and said, 'I am the God of Abraham your father. Fear not, for I am with you and will bless you and multiply your offspring for my servant Abraham's sake.' (26:23–24)

Jacob

Jacob left Beersheba and went towards Haran. And he came to a certain place and stayed there that night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place to sleep. And he dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it! And behold, the LORD stood above it and said, 'I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed. Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.' (28:10–15)

So Israel took his journey with all that he had and came to Beersheba, and offered sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac. And God spoke to Israel in visions of the night and said, 'Jacob, Jacob.' And he said, 'Here am I.' Then he said, 'I am God, the God of your father. Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for there *I will make you into a great nation*. I myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you up again, and Joseph's hand shall close your eyes.' Then Jacob set out from Beersheba. The sons of Israel carried Jacob their father, their little ones, and their wives, in the wagons that Pharaoh had sent to carry him. (46:1–5)

A practical lesson arises immediately. In times of crisis, when we must make very big decisions that go beyond us and affect our families and perhaps their spirituality and growth for years to come, it is a lovely thing to be able to come back to our 'Beersheba' and the promises God has given us and to his great purposes, of which we are the inheritors.

His love in time past forbids me to think
He'll leave me at last in trouble to sink;
Each sweet Ebenezer I have in review,
Confirms His good pleasure to help me quite through.⁷

Sometimes we think of ourselves as 'our little selves', as individuals. Some better Christians, because they are parents, rise a bit higher than that and think of the family—'What's going to happen to my children when I die?' But for a moment how lovely it is to think of ourselves as part of the great family of God; the people of God bound in the same bundle of life as Abraham himself, 'who is the father of us all' (Rom 4:16). I'm part of the great ongoing purposes of God down the centuries. I occupy my little part. I never knew

⁷ John Newton (1725–1807), 'Begone unbelief, my Saviour is near'.

Abraham. Perhaps I shall be dead before the Lord comes and, like Abraham, I shall have to take life's journey in the light of God's oath and covenant that the promise will be fulfilled. 'These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar' (Heb 11:13).

How God's promises to Jacob were completely fulfilled

The promise was fulfilled, of course, here in part. They got down to Egypt and were allowed to build up their families there in Goshen. They were given physical sustenance with the best of food, under the administration of Joseph. But I want to come back a bit. They were physically preserved—is it a question of the mere physical survival of the nation? What is God saying, when he says 'I will make you into a great nation'? Is it merely a matter of multiplying them physically, so that twelve men presently turn into seventy, and seventy eventually turn into seven million? Is it merely a question of developing a nation that way, or is there more to *development* than that?

So let's look first of all at a poignant thing in chapter 48. 'After this, Joseph was told, "Behold, your father is ill"' (v. 1). Jacob is sick and Joseph brings in his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. Jacob prepares himself to bless the lads, and as we saw last week Jacob adopts them as his own sons, lifting them up a generation.

You say, 'Why did he do that?'

Well, let him tell us:

As for me, when I came from Paddan, to my sorrow Rachel died in the land of Canaan on the way, when there was still some distance to go to Ephrath, and I buried her there on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem). (v. 7)

That was a very sorrowful occasion; it must have cut deep into Jacob's heart. When Jacob came back into the land of Canaan God met him at Luz, and said,

Behold, I will make you fruitful and multiply you, and I will make of you a company of peoples and will give this land to your offspring after you for an everlasting possession. (v. 4)

He and Rachel had only one son so far, Joseph. She was his very favourite wife and presently Rachel was with child, but she died in childbirth. Could you understand it, if Jacob in his quieter moments had said, 'What is all this business about the promises of God? Are they given simply to mock me? How do you add this up? Here's Leah, she can have all the sons she likes, and the slave girls too, but Rachel . . .' He is thinking as the father of a family, and eventually of a nation, and how big a part of that nation will come from his loved wife, Rachel.

Now he sees a lovely thing in his old, old age. Says he to Joseph, 'Joseph my boy, I never expected to see your face again. I thought you were gone completely, and I'd got to the stage when I thought even Benjamin, my last child by Rachel when she died, had gone too, and this is where the promises of God were going to end up.'

And now your two sons, who were born to you in the land of Egypt before I came to you in Egypt, are mine; Ephraim and Manasseh shall be mine, as Reuben and Simeon are. (v. 5)

‘I claim them as mine,’ he says. So he’d have Joseph and Benjamin and Manasseh and Ephraim, all counted as Rachel’s sons.

You say, ‘That stupid old man, he ought to have been above that kind of jealousy.’ Alright, have a word with him when you get home to heaven and tell him so, but he went home happy after the apparent disappointment. He had dared to trust the promise of God, and then it seemed to him that it had all come unstuck, but now it was fulfilled beyond his expectation in the next generation, his two more sons, Ephraim and Manasseh.

Now look forward a little bit down the centuries, and how God fulfilled his promise to Jacob: ‘Behold I will make you fruitful and multiply you’. In the actual history of the nation, how well did God fulfil it? Ephraim became the biggest tribe bar none, the leading tribe among the ten; so that the nation was known as ‘Ephraim and Judah’. Two tribes went with Judah—Benjamin and Judah, so Benjamin was half of that lot. Ephraim was the chief of the ten, and the biggest tribe.

God fulfils his promises, even when at first they seem to go wrong. How would Jacob have felt, if he could have seen the long, chequered future of his nation, and all the sufferings that were on the way? But God holds the key of all the unknown and in his mercy he doesn’t give us to see too much. He asks us to trust his word about being fruitful, and if at the beginning it is bitter, in the end we shall find God has kept his promise, and one thousand times enlarged it.

The prophecies inherent in Jacob’s blessings

In chapter 49 we have Jacob blessing his twelve sons, the twelve tribes. What are we to make of these prophecies? Well, in my innocence, I’m going to say to you that there is more to building a nation than just multiplying them arithmetically. What about the question of building character into people—isn’t that important too? What’s the nation going to be like? Here comes Jacob, looking forward to the future, not merely on these twelve boys, or thirteen in front of him, but on their descendants, and what shall happen to them.

Gather yourselves together, that I may tell you what shall happen to you in days to come. Assemble and listen, O sons of Jacob, listen to Israel your father. (49:1–2)

So now I’m going to ask you to do some hard thinking. Jacob is about to tell them things to come. What things to come?

My first question: Are these prophecies simply personal to the twelve men that stood in front of him? For instance, the first one,

Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might, and the firstfruits of my strength, pre-eminent in dignity and pre-eminent in power. Unstable as water, you shall not have pre-eminence,

because you went up to your father's bed; then you defiled it—he went up to my couch!
(vv. 3–4)

Is this merely telling Reuben, the actual man that went around on two legs, what is going to happen to him in the next twenty years? Or is this a prophecy that says not only what shall happen to Reuben, but to the descendants of Reuben?

AUDIENCE: They're not mutually exclusive. It's a prophetic portrait, a synopsis of Jewish history right through.

DWG: Well that's very important, and now you've played right into my hands for the next question.

Second question: If this is a prophecy of what shall happen to the tribe of Reuben, has the whole of the tribe of Reuben, all down the centuries and right to the latter days, to suffer because of what Reuben did at the beginning?

AUDIENCE: They did suffer. They lost their birthright; their first place in the nation (1 Chron 5:1), up to the third and fourth generation.

DWG: Yes, up to the third and fourth generation. Is anybody here suffering tonight because of what somebody did in the past?

AUDIENCE: Because of Adam's sin.

DWG: Adam's sin, yes. Now I want us to face this seriously. Here is Jacob, looking ahead to the development of character and position within the nation. He is solemnly declaring that, because of what Reuben did, all down the generations his descendants will have to suffer. Is that a thing that happened only to Adam and Reuben, or could it happen to us? Could it be that what you or I have done will bring a blight on future generations?

AUDIENCE: It could apply even to ourselves as a company here in Apsley. You've talked about people with wisdom, like Joseph, administering and projecting their minds forward ten years and seeing what needs to be done. If that's not done by the leaders, in ten years' time the folks who are trying to carry on the work will suffer as a result.

DWG: Yes, that's perfectly true.

AUDIENCE: Perhaps the comment about Reuben is not about punishment and suffering following it, but a statement of weakness of character.

DWG: What do you mean?

AUDIENCE: A weakness of character, which led him to go up to his father's bed. This instability is something that his children will have, not as a punishment, but because of their genes; their mental attitudes and all that sort of thing.

DWG: Now that's an exceedingly important thing. It's not merely a question of God saying, 'Because Reuben has sinned I will punish the rest.' Reuben was of unstable character; how much of that was due to his own psychological make up? How much of that instability of

character is going down the years through his descendants because they're born with their father's psychological make up? Is that what you meant, Dr Chapman? It could happen, couldn't it?

AUDIENCE: Actually it has been proved that character traits are inherited to a greater extent than even intelligence.

DWG: Yes, that can be true.

AUDIENCE: Let's not miss the first words, 'Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might, and the firstfruits of my strength, pre-eminent in dignity and pre-eminent in power' (49:3). That was the position he had, from which he fell; but there were others who took it up—Judah and Joseph in particular. That could be very appropriately said of God's son, 'the firstborn among many brothers' (Rom 8:29).

DWG: Yes, there are going to be lots of historical and prophetic things in this chapter that you can compare with the history of the tribes in the book of Judges, for instance, and in the days of the kings. You can see how many of these things came true physically, and then positionally, historically and politically,

But would you not allow that there are moral things in this chapter also? Take the first three boys for instance. Reuben is said to be unstable; 'Simeon and Levi are brothers', and they are charged with terrible wrath and cruelty and anger. These are moral defects, aren't they?

So now I say to myself, 'What is this chapter doing here?' How would you feel if you were summoned to meet your father on his death bed, and you were the eldest son? Why on earth would a poor old boy, when he's going home to glory, talk about this kind of thing? What is he saying?

I thought this was the patriarch who was full of confidence that God was going to multiply his nation. What, multiply a lot of people like Reuben! Do you get my point? How does it fit the ongoing story?

AUDIENCE: I'm just wondering if you take away some of their responsibility, when you say they are what they are because their father was what he was. After all, when you read the history of the Jews, blessing was available, but it wasn't automatic—they had to obey God's commandment to get the blessing.

DWG: Yes, that's another point, isn't it? I wonder whether you can in fact combine both. Physically and psychologically I am the product of generations of people who were sinners because of what Adam did. I am what I am and I didn't ask to be born. Perhaps some of my ancestors were terribly immoral, and physically they transmitted weaknesses down the generations. It can happen. I may have a difficulty and a weakness to battle with that you haven't. Perhaps you came into life with a regal bearing; you find it easy to command people and step on other people's toes. We are, in one sense, what we are because of our physical inheritance and the things that our parents have done—some bad things, and some things they couldn't help. That doesn't excuse us. We are still responsible before God to repent, and thank God there is salvation.

The names of these men are going to be on the gates of the eternal city (Rev 21:12). They're going to shine in glory one of these days. Jacob is prophesying about their future, and there is a bright future for them.

He's warning them of their weaknesses and saying some of the things that will result from those weaknesses, but behind all this there's the call to repentance. As the revelation of God goes on there will be the provision of salvation, so that people might be saved from their weaknesses and in the end come through, purged of every fault and stain and made all glorious and beautiful.

Chapter 49 is the dying message of Jacob to his twelve sons. It begins with Reuben, the firstborn; he was unstable and he yielded to temptation. Then it goes on to talk about Simeon and Levi.

Simeon and Levi are brothers; weapons of violence are their swords. Let my soul come not into their council; O my glory, be not joined to their company. For in their anger they killed men, and in their wilfulness they hamstrung oxen. Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce, and their wrath, for it is cruel! I will divide them in Jacob and scatter them in Israel. (vv. 5–7)

And so on, as Jacob continues with the twelve sons.

Now let's flick over to the Epistle of James in the New Testament. James is the English word for the Greek word *Yakōbos*, and Jacobus is the Greek for Hebrew, *Yakōv*.

AUDIENCE: Sounds like Jacob!

DWG: Yes, the Epistle of James is in fact the Epistle of Jacob, and now listen to whom it's written: 'James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion' (Jas 1:1).

So Genesis 49 is *Jacob to the twelve sons*, and the Epistle of James is *Jacob to the twelve tribes*. That's interesting, because James, the Christian apostle, is writing at least one thousand years after Jacob lay on his death bed talking to his twelve boys. How have they got on in the meantime? Are any of those old characteristics left?

If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, *unstable* in all his ways . . . Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of *firstfruits* of his creatures. (vv. 5–8, 18)

How about that for *Reuben*? Therefore, says James, when temptation assails you, remember that you are a firstfruits of his creatures. What does that mean?

I have a notion in my head that when Reuben was tempted to do what he did, if he had stepped back for a moment and remembered that he was the firstborn, and what he was about to do would lose him the rights of firstborn, he might have just paused a minute, in time to recover from the temptation.

Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for *the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God*. (Jas 1:19–20)

The next two were *Simeon and Levi*. Can you remember what Jacob was talking about when he said, ‘For in their anger they killed men, and in their wilfulness they hamstrung oxen. Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce, and their wrath, for it is cruel!’ (49:6–7)?

Well, he’s talking of what they did in Shechem (Gen 34). They said they were working the righteousness of God on the Shechemites; they were standing for the truth. But ‘the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.’ ‘Cursed be their anger,’ says Jacob.

So one thousand years later, here is [Jacob] of the New Testament pointing out that those same characteristics, found in Jacob’s sons, are still very much in evidence and the Christian is called upon to do something about them.

Homework for next week

How many correspondences can you find between Genesis 49 and the Epistle of James –Jacob to the twelve sons, and the Epistle of James to the twelve tribes? We shall think together of the future development of the people of God and God’s great gracious plan for his elect nation. How they will have to face their weaknesses and seek the help of God to overcome them, and what will happen if they don’t. What provision God may make for the salvation of that nation, redeeming them from their weakness of character and making them a nation that shall show forth his praise, ‘My chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself that they might declare my praise’ (Isa 43:20–21).

Lessons from Jacob's Blessings

Last week I suggested that we do some homework for this evening; that we should look at Genesis 49—the story of the prophecy that Jacob made to his twelve sons, and compare it with the Epistle of James in the New Testament. *James* is the English translation of the name *Jacob*, so that really the Epistle of James, to both Greeks and Hebrews, is the *Epistle of Jacob*. According to verse 1 of his epistle, he is writing ‘to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion’. Now just let’s remind ourselves why it is that we are making this comparison.

We found that the last major section of the book of Genesis falls largely into two parts.

The first set of stories. God preserved the family of Jacob/Israel from its internal dissensions, and how he saved it from destruction in the famine. As we thought of the two principal people involved—Joseph and, in a secondary sense, Judah—we learned many practical lessons on Joseph’s faithful stewardship and his willingness to suffer.

Then also, prototypically, we found it pointing to our Lord, through whom Israel shall be saved, and we are saved. Firstly, as illustrated in Joseph’s life by his innocent suffering; and in Judah’s action in being prepared to suffer as surety and substitute for Benjamin, and thus to preserve his father’s life.

The second set of stories. They begin to talk to us, not so much of the preservation of the family of Jacob, the insipient nation of Israel, but of its development—how that in Egypt through Joseph God gave them the situation in which they could multiply into a nation.

Finally we began to concentrate on the prophecy of Israel as he looked at his twelve sons. By God’s grace, he was able to look down the coming years to what should happen, both to the twelve boys themselves—grown men now, the heads of the coming tribes—and to their descendants.

Our actions can affect future generations

When we looked at that, we fell to wondering what exactly this story is doing in Genesis. For what purpose did Jacob make these announcements to his twelve boys? What good did he expect it to do them? Some of the things that he said were quite grim. He had no word of praise at all for Reuben, and announces not only to Reuben personally, but for the coming centuries that he and they should never have pre-eminence (49:4). ‘They shall not excel’ (KJV). We reminded ourselves that Reuben’s sin not only damaged his own status within the tribe,

the family and the nation, but it damaged and took its toll upon succeeding generations. We noticed the seriousness of sin. We too can sin; make wrong choices, make mistakes that not only damage us for the rest of our lives, but may damage our children and their posterity too.

Here's a man, and in his young manhood, while his family are growing up, he's too busy to have much time for the Lord. He chooses immediate satisfaction over doing the Lord's will, and his children grow up unbelievers, because he's never there to see that anything else happens.

In his fifties, after his first heart attack, he begins to take life seriously and repents and wants to go on with the Lord, but the damage is done. His grandchildren are brought up by his unbelieving children, and there you have it for who knows how many years. We can make mistakes that affect not only ourselves, but coming generations.

How would Jacob's sons have felt as they listened to these blessings?

Then in these announcements of course there are happy things blended with the serious and solemn things; very happy things about the future, of God's goodness and of his programme.

I'm hoping to hear from you why Jacob should have told all that to the twelve tribes. I would be interested to know what you imagine you would have felt like, if you were one of the boys standing round that bed. What would have been your reaction as you came away? What would you have thought as the words of your father kept coming back to your memory from time to time in the years that followed?

Obviously Jacob had some very good purpose in view in telling his sons these things; warning them about their weaknesses, encouraging them in their prospects. But we can begin to come near to feeling what the boys must have felt, if we listen to what our Jacob, the Apostle James, said some one thousand years later to the twelve tribes scattered abroad.

So we're going to ask ourselves what similarities we see between Genesis 49 and the Epistle of James. We shall notice the similarities and pause at each one to ask how it applies to us, so that our study doesn't remain just a literary game, but becomes a matter of very practical concern to us.

Reuben

Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might, and the firstfruits of my strength, pre-eminent in dignity and pre-eminent in power. Unstable as water, you shall not have pre-eminence, because you went up to your father's bed; then you defiled it—he went up to my couch! (Gen 49:3–4)

QUESTION: Is there any similarity to that in James?

AUDIENCE: 'A double minded man is unstable in all his ways' (Jas 1:8).

DWG: Would you have said it was Reuben's fault for being unstable? His father said he was 'unstable as water'. The word *unstable* there in the Hebrew means water that's boiling up and overflows. Presumably it's a reference to what happened to him that time he was tempted, or

any other time he was tempted. He was subject to that kind of turmoil within, and before he knew where he was, he'd acted. Would you say that was his temperament?

AUDIENCE: It would definitely be something he had inherited from his father.

DWG: Would anybody here admit to being like Reuben? Do you think because you have progressed spiritually or something that you've learned to conquer this trait, or weren't you born with it?

AUDIENCE: I think that when we act 'in the flesh' we're like Reuben; all these things are there in embryo. It can depend on our temperament. Aspects of sinful characteristics are more noticeable in some than in others, but they're there in all of us when we're working in the flesh, and not 'in the spirit'.

DWG: So you're inclined to say that, while this marked Reuben particularly, James warns us that there is a sense in which we could all be unstable? Is there anything we can do about it? What does James mean, for instance, when he says,

If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. (Jas 1:5–6)

That's pretty unstable as well, isn't it? What do you take that to mean, 'the one who doubts' — doubts what?

AUDIENCE: God's ability to give wisdom. If he focuses attention on God and asks for wisdom, then God would give it because he's looking at God and concentrating on God's faithfulness.

DWG: In life's practical behaviour I can do some foolish things; put my foot in it and get myself into disgrace and unfortunate things because I'm so unstable. Do you mean to say that if I feel I need wisdom, and therefore I come to God and ask for wisdom, if I doubt he can give it to me I shan't get it?

AUDIENCE: It might be better the other way round — ask for wisdom first.

DWG: You don't seem to see my trouble. The point is, I am unstable and that's what unstable people do, they keep on doubting. One day they think one thing, and they're great guns on that. Tomorrow that's all gone, and thereafter it's something else. That is my trouble if I've got to be firm as a rock before I get my prayers answered.

AUDIENCE: It says, 'Let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him' (v. 5 KJV). I don't think our condition really has a lot to do with it. We have a generous God.

DWG: I see. It's as long as I ask, even if I doubt that the Lord will answer my prayer? You can see my difficulty, can't you? It would be all right if I were as strong as some of you, who can be absolutely certain that if you ask, 'Lord, make me absolutely holy,' you know that he would. That's my trouble; I start off by being unstable. Today I'm keen and tomorrow I've forgotten. So you're encouraging me to say that the Lord will hear my prayer, even if I am a bit unstable?

AUDIENCE: The essential thing about the Christian life is that the Holy Spirit comes in and takes over your life, including the instability. He will start living out his life in you, and that life is not unstable. You've got to believe that the Holy Spirit is there and he will control this instability that we all have.

DWG: He can, so to speak, work the permanence within me?

AUDIENCE: Insofar as we keep trusting him, yes. He doesn't throw a switch and it is all well forever after.

DWG: If I might just come back to it once more; do you think that the doubting means that I really want this wisdom, though the thing that plagues me is the doubt that God will give it to me? Or is it that I want it today because I see the importance of it, but next Friday I've forgotten?

AUDIENCE: Does obedience come into it? I'm thinking of Solomon, who asked God for wisdom.

DWG: In his youth Solomon was very keen to please the Lord, and asked for wisdom. As he got older and got a lot of money, he could afford a mighty great harem and he no longer thought it was unwise to keep all those foreign women and build them temples to all sorts of gods and goddesses, did he?

Could the doubting be, so to speak, that today I see it is important not to do this particular sin, but tomorrow I give up and think it isn't so serious after all?

QUESTION: Here comes my second question.

Reuben, you are my firstborn . . . you shall not have pre-eminence. (Gen 49:3–4)

In the context doesn't this have regard to the fact that, as firstborn, he had the original claim to the birthright, but he had lost it because of his sin? So, while he was not cast out of the nation and remained one of the heads of the families—there was a tribe Reuben—he did not keep the birthright. He lost it, and 1 Chronicles 5 tells us explicitly that the birthright went to Joseph.

Is there anything in James relevant to that, or anything similar to the question of birthright? Anything about firstborns, for instance?

Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God', for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death. Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures. (Jas 1:13–18)

What does that mean, 'Of his own will he brought us forth . . . that we should be a kind of firstfruits'? What's it got to do with the subject on hand? It was talking about temptation just

a moment ago; now it's gone off and it's talking about firstfruits. When shall that be? Is this about our situation as creatures in this world, with mankind as the head of all the other animals or something? Or is this saying that at your new birth you were a kind of firstfruits? If so, firstfruits of what? Does anybody admit to being a firstfruits of God's creatures? Is that what it's saying here?

AUDIENCE: It says, 'Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth'. So every Christian that James is writing to, then and now, he's putting into the category of *firstfruits*. In Genesis 49:3 Jacob said that Reuben was the firstfruits of his strength. In James, we are the firstfruits of his creatures by the word of truth; so we're talking about humanity, not animals of the forest and so on.

DWG: You're talking about the new birth. 'Brought us forth by the word of truth'—are you inclined to think that's the new birth?

AUDIENCE: Yes, it could be.

DWG: Very good. So just like Reuben was the firstborn of his father, our Father has begotten us by the word of truth and made us a firstfruits of his creatures. In what sense? If not over the animals, what then?

AUDIENCE: 'For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named' (Eph 3:14–15). I would take that to be all the families of creation, whether families of birds and fishes and other kinds of things. In one sense, God is the Father of all, but those of us who are born again have got this position from which Reuben failed. The first in dignity, first in excellence, because we've been so closely associated with the Lord Jesus Christ as his church. That's his body and we are his bride. In that sense we are special, not only to the Father, but to the Lord Jesus Christ; special above all the other families that are part of creation.

DWG: I see, that's an interesting idea. God is *Father* in many different senses. He is the Father of the Lord Jesus. In that sense, he is not our Father, because he is Father within the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We're not members of the Trinity; that is a unique relationship. But he's now our Father in the sense that our Lord can say, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father' (John 20:17). He has become our Father by the new birth.

You are suggesting that at that level it makes us unique amongst all God's vast creation. As believers in the Lord Jesus we hold the superior rank and we know God as Father in a higher sense than any other created being. If that's so, that's extraordinary, isn't it? Tell me, what has that got to do with James? Like me, has he suddenly wandered off the subject, or has this still got something to do with temptation?

The point James is making is to get us to see that we're not tempted of God. God doesn't play 'ducks and drakes' with us. He doesn't one minute give us salvation, and the next minute do his hardest to tempt us into sin so he can have some excuse to destroy us. God is absolutely constant; he doesn't tempt us.

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. (Jas 1:17)

He gives every gift at the proper time to suit our needs. You wouldn't give a four year old boy one of those beautiful Swiss pen knives, would you? It's a good gift, but it wouldn't be suitable at that age. When he's eighteen, yes, but not when he's four. What a lovely thing to put against our variation and our instability; with him, there is no instability, no changing. If he begat us as firstfruits, he stands by it.

Could it be a practical help to us in times of temptation, to have the grace to stand back for two minutes and think of the marvel of God's design for us, lest Satan should tempt us in our instability into doing something that is against the will of God, saying, 'Go on, here's a lovely chance to enjoy yourself'?

When Reuben was tempted, if he could have remembered his position and thought for a minute about what he was about to lose, it might have helped him not to yield, mightn't it?

Simeon and Levi

Simeon and Levi are brothers; weapons of violence are their swords. Let my soul come not into their council; O my glory, be not joined to their company. For in their anger they killed men, and in their wilfulness they hamstringed oxen. Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce, and their wrath, for it is cruel! I will divide them in Jacob and scatter them in Israel. (Gen 49:5–7)

QUESTION: Has James anything similar to this thing in his epistle?

AUDIENCE: 'To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion' (v. 1). Because of their sin they were scattered.

DWG: Well that's an interesting thought. Are you thinking of James writing really to the Jewish community? They have been scattered, ultimately for their good, I presume.

If Reuben is noted for the bad quality of instability, what is the bad quality noted in Simeon and Levi?

AUDIENCE: Anger and cruelty and wrath. They took the law into their own hands.

Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. (Jas 1:19–20)

DWG: That is so, and it was particularly sad, wasn't it? We can be angry about all sorts of things, and doubtless they were angry at the wrong done to their sister, Dinah (Gen 34). Alas, they went and mixed it up with religion, if you please, and made an agreement to the effect that all the men of Shechem were to be circumcised, which in Israel was a religious rite.

Their objection to what had been done to their sister was on religious grounds, 'We cannot do this thing, to give our sister to one who is uncircumcised' (v. 14). Therefore, it was on that ground that eventually they went in and massacred the whole lot. If anger is a bad thing at any time, we ought to be slow to act on it because it's a very dangerous thing.

God's wrath is pure and holy, and he is 'slow to anger' (Nah 1:3). When it comes to spiritual and religious things, we ought to be doubly careful, because 'the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.'

Tell me, when Simeon and Levi were subsequently divided into Israel, what happened to them? What does it mean, 'I will divide them in Jacob and scatter them in Israel' (Gen 49:7)?

Simeon went to the bad, I'm afraid, on the whole, and his tribe nearly disappeared. Levi went to the good. That's the way with God sometimes, that people have to be separated from bad influences. Sometimes it's good for friendships to be broken.

Now let's follow the other side of that. It's an interesting point that, under God, sanctified anger is right. 'Be angry and do not sin' (Eph 4:26). If you see somebody defying the word of God, without having your righteous anger stirred, then perhaps you're not the Christian you ought to be.

AUDIENCE: The same thing happened in the temple when Christ was there. They were making it a commercial thing and the honour of God was being tarnished, and Christ got angry because his Father's glory was threatened (Matt 21:12–13).

DWG: That's so, indeed. We are not told that we must never get angry, but we've got to watch anger, nonetheless.

Now it's an interesting thing that Levi was given the great privilege of having the priesthood. Aaron and the other priests were of the tribe of Levi, also the lesser servants in the tabernacle and temple. They looked after practical matters also: transporting the tabernacle and so forth and so on. They were given charge of the *religious* duties—the rituals—the playing of the horns and the getting the wood for the sacrifice and all those religious duties related to the services in the temple.

QUESTION: Is there anything about religion in James?

If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world. (Jas 1:26–27)

DWG: Yes, thank you very much. The word used here is exceedingly rare in the New Testament. It means *religion* in the sense of the attendance upon forms and ceremonies; and there is a proper place for forms and ceremonies in spiritual experience. We are not Jews, but we have them in baptism and the Lord's Supper. Religious rites and ceremonies can go bad, can't they?

We remember the parable our Lord spoke against certain priests and Levites who were on their way to keep the service of the Lord in the temple at Jerusalem (the Good Samaritan, Luke 10:25–27). When they came across a man who had fallen among thieves, they passed by on the other side, lest they should get defiled and be disqualified from giving out a hymn—oh no, sorry, I've got mixed up! You know what I meant to say. James is talking about that kind of thing, lest we get one sided and content with mere ritual and it never translates itself into practice. 'Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world' (v. 27).

Judah

Judah, your brothers shall praise you; your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies; your father's sons shall bow down before you. Judah is a lion's cub; from the prey, my son, you have gone up. He stooped down; he crouched as a lion and as a lioness; who dares rouse him? The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples. Binding his foal to the vine and his donkey's colt to the choice vine, he has washed his garments in wine and his vesture in the blood of grapes. His eyes are darker than wine, and his teeth whiter than milk. (Gen 49:8–12)

Does anybody have a preferred translation for verse 10? Some people say that it should be 'until Shiloh come', and others, 'until he comes, the one to whom judgement belongs' (Ezek 21:27)—'whose right it is', in other words.

Whatever the exact translation, this is a reference to the fact that the Messiah would come of Judah. He's the one to have the sceptre and the rod of the lawgiver; and presumably it is a wonderful description of the peace and plenty when Messiah comes and sets up his kingdom. Vines will be so plentiful, the farmer or anybody else will tether his foal to a vine. Farmer's don't normally do that, because foals would trample the thing down, or eat it up or something; but there will be so many and it will be so prosperous in those days that they won't need to bother. Anyway, 'until Messiah, the king, comes'—is there anything about this in James?

Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains. You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. (Jas 5:7–8)

Yes, lovely; the hope of the Lord's coming. It's interesting to see Jacob telling his sons about their future and inviting them to face it. I don't suppose he was telling them in any fatalistic fashion, but when we're told what our inherent weaknesses are, and what our behaviour is likely to be in the future, it's one way of alerting us to lay hold of the grace of God.

QUESTION: When Jacob got round to telling Dan his future, the very prospect of it made him cry out, 'I wait for your salvation, O LORD' (Gen 49:18).

As we face up to ourselves getting old, must we not pray, 'Oh God, save me from developing the way it looks I might develop—as a horrible grumpy old man, or something worse. But along with the bad things there are the good things; the promise of the coming Messiah. God's purposes shall ripen and from Judah will come the Messiah, the king. Our hope likewise is held out by James, with the prospect of the coming of the king of the royal line of Judah.

Is there anything else about the royal line of Judah or anybody holding the royal law in James?

If you really fulfil the royal law according to the Scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself’, you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. (Jas 2:8–9)

Do you take that to mean that we’ve got to keep the law?

AUDIENCE: Sure.

DWG: Well now, here’s a pickle. ‘The lawgiver, the staff of the lawgiver, the regal sceptre in the hand of Judah’s son (our blessed Lord)’ — there is a *royal law*, and the question is simply, are we as Christians expected to keep it?

AUDIENCE: Surely it’s a law and a standard of God’s holiness?

DWG: Why do you suppose it’s called ‘the royal law’ by James?

AUDIENCE: I was just going to pick out some of the little phrases that James mentions in chapter 2, starting with ‘show no partiality’, regarding respect of persons. Linking it up with, ‘Unto him shall the obedience of the peoples be’ (Gen 49:10 RV). We are to have respect, but we can have it in the wrong sense, as they were here, to rich, unsaved (or even saved) men. Giving respect to people because of their riches and their position on earth; it is unto God that we should be obedient.

For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it . . .
So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. (Jas 2:10, 12).

DWG: Yes, and James calls it ‘the perfect law, the law of liberty’ (1:25). It is not hard slavery being obedient to this king. ‘My yoke is easy, and my burden is light,’ he says (Matt 11:30). It is *the law of liberty*, but it is also *the royal law*, because he’s a king. In his kingdom he will expect certain behaviour, consistent with his kingship and his glory.

We wait for the coming of the king, and I do like that verse, ‘My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory’ (2:1).

At that point the Greek, so I am told, is difficult; and where the experts disagree about it, ordinary folks can make up their own minds. So I take that privilege, and the way I want to translate it is, ‘Have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glory, with respect of persons.’

If you’ve got an Authorised or Revised Version you will notice that the words ‘the Lord’ are in italics, and that’s what constitutes the difficulty for the translators. It’s simply the words, ‘of glory’. At first sight it doesn’t seem to make sense, ‘have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, of glory.’ Some suggest that it’s meant to be spelt with a capital ‘G’, and it is a title of our Lord, ‘the Glory’. You say, ‘Meaning what?’ Well, *the shekinah glory* of course; the outshining of the glory of God. Notice the title, *our Lord Jesus Christ*, the full official title, and ponder the fact that he is the Glory — the magnificence of it.

The wonder of what these verses are saying is that, when he comes in his kingdom, he shall love every believer alike; and even now the man in poor clothes is as welcome to the Lord as the believer in rich clothes. To discriminate on that basis between believers is to break the law of the king himself. He — the Glory — consented to come down here and be born in a manger and he demands that we treat each other as he treats us.

This is the king's law. What a lovely prospect it is, as Jacob goes over it. He's thinking of the coming of the king and skipping whole centuries to the great time of his reign—his millennial reign of peace and plenty and glory and beauty.

We are in that kingdom and we wait for the coming of the king. In the meantime, the character of his subjects is being formed under his control. We need to face up to the treachery of our weakness within, and not object when we're told about it; learning to face it and seeking the grace of God to overcome it, but at the same time not losing hope. The one who was to come of the line of Judah eventually came and one day he'll come again.

CHARTS

The book of Genesis

The Rise of the Hebrew Nation from among the Gentiles

10:1-25:11

The generations of (a) the sons of Noah	10:1-11:9
and of Shem	11:10-26
(b) Terah	11:27-25:11

1. Nimrod and the great and famous cities

Babel, Erech, Accad, Calneh, Nineveh, Rehoboth-Ir, Calah, Resen (10:9-12)
 The building of the city and tower of Babel (11:1-9)

2. The call of Abram, the promise to make a nation of him, and the purpose of it

'In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed' (12:1-3; 18:18; 22:18)

3. The Promised Seed (12:7; 15:1-6; 18:10-18)

The birth (21:1-7), sacrifice (22:1-19) and marriage (ch. 24) of the Promised Seed.
 The covenants made with Abram and his seed; of inheritance (15:7-21); of circumcision (17:1-27).

4. The three major areas in Abraham's training and testing

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|----------------|--|
| (a) chs. 12-15 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The choice between 'goods' and 'life'; the denial of Sarah The choice of Lot; the capture and recovery of Lot The ministry of Melchizedek Justification by faith and the covenanted inheritance |
| (b) chs. 16-19 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Faith in the promise; or the works of the flesh? The taking of Hagar instead of Sarah and the birth of Ishmael The covenant of circumcision; 'the seal of the righteousness of faith' The renewal of the promise Lot's experience in Sodom; its destruction and Lot's rescue |
| (c) chs. 20-24 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The search for security; the second denial of Sarah The birth of the promised seed The expulsion of the bondwoman and her son Abraham's oath granting security to the Philistine and his son Justification by works and God's oath granting security to Abraham and his son The purchase of a burial-ground for Sarah The second 'calling-out' from the Gentiles—a bride for Isaac |

The section ends with the death of Abraham (25:8-11)

2

**The Maintenance of the Hebrews' Vision
and their Development into Israelites**

25:12–35:29

The generations of (a) Ishmael 25:12–18
(b) Isaac 25:19–35:29

1. The pre-natal struggle of Esau and Jacob; Jacob's election

Esau despises and sells his birthright 25:29–34
Isaac's struggle to maintain himself in the land; his denial of Rebekah;
the fight for water; the renewal of the promise ch. 26
Isaac's blessing of Jacob; Jacob's deception; Esau's anger; the nature of blessing ch. 27

2. Three periods in Jacob's life

In the land of promise 25:19–27:34
Out of the land among the Gentiles 28:1–31:55
Back again in the land; but still attended by many difficulties 32:1–35:29

3. The subject-matter of Jacob's training in his relations with the surrounding tribes

Leaving home to make a future for himself 28:1–35:29
The vision of the House of God and of the Gate of Heaven
Marriage-deals; the birth and naming of his children
The need to amass capital; trade-secrets, their use and abuse
The jealousy and anger of the Gentiles
Jacob's flight; problem of reconciliation with Esau
Wrestling with the Angel; the vision of the face of God; Jacob becomes Israel
The abuse of religion by Jacob's sons.

The section ends with the death of Isaac (35:28–29)

About the Author

DAVID W. GOODING is Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University, Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. His international teaching ministry is marked by fresh and careful expositions of both testaments. He has published scholarly studies on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John 13–17, Acts, Hebrews and the New Testament's use of the Old Testament.