

**...ABOUT THE BUSH: THE FIVE EXCUSES OF
MOSES**

AND BONUS BOOK:

**A MAGNIFICENT SUNSET: THE LAST DAYS OF JA-
COB**

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Published by:

HAYES PRESS Publisher, Resources & Media,

The Barn, Flaxlands

Royal Wootton Bassett

Swindon, SN4 8DY

United Kingdom

www.hayespress.org

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ABOUT THE BUSH: THE FIVE EXCUSES OF MOSES

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

One recollection I have from early school days is of our class giving a performance on parents' night. We were to sing a piece called "All Through the Night". I vividly recall the headmaster introducing the piece before we performed it. He began by saying we were going to sing all through the night, then hastened to explain he didn't mean we were going to sing all through the night, but simply that we were going to sing "All Through the Night!" Perhaps it was his annual joke.

I ought not of course to be critical, especially as I am going to repeat his technique – well, almost. I'd like to introduce this book by saying that I'll be beating about the bush in order not to beat about the bush! If you're not familiar with the expression then allow me to explain that from ancient times, some who hunt for birds first of all set the birds to flight by beating about the bushes with sticks while others catch them in nets. Beating about the bush was literally something which led up to the main activity which was, of course, catching the birds. A speaker, therefore, who never gets to the main point of what he should be saying might be said to be "beating about the bush".

When I say I'm not going to beat about the bush in order to beat about the bush, I mean I want to get to the main point of our Bible text - but the text we'll be examining is the one that concerns Moses and the burning bush. We'll be trying to beat out some lessons from the surrounding verses.

Let's turn to it and read about it now. But just before we do, let me say this about why I want to share this topic with you. Many of you who are reading this book may be considering taking up fresh responsibilities in following and serving the Lord Jesus Christ. And when anyone stands at the threshold of an exciting new phase of service for the Lord, it can be a bit daunting. There's nothing unusual, or even wrong, about that. In fact, it can be a healthy sign. Great heroes of the Bible like Gideon and Jeremiah - to name but two - certainly needed God's encouragement before they felt ready to be launching out on their life's work.

Moses, too, felt that way. Let's learn how God graciously dealt with him, knowing he'll be as gracious with us, too. We've set the scene now, so let's read the first three verses of Exodus chapter 3:

“Now Moses was pasturing the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian; and he led the flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. The angel of the LORD appeared to him in a blazing fire from the midst of a bush; and he looked, and behold, the bush was burning with fire, yet the bush was not consumed. So Moses said, “I must turn aside now and see this mar-

velous sight, why the bush is not burned up” (Exodus 3:1-3).

You’ll notice our story is set in the wild west - the west side of the wilderness, that is. And we might say: God is the God of the wild west, for he’s the one who’s going to be calling the shots, by telling Moses what to do. But you say, wait a minute! We’ve read about the angel of the LORD, not about God. So, let’s be very clear about this - whenever in the Old Testament we read about ‘the angel of the LORD,’ on an occasion like this, these were actual manifestations of God himself, as the next verses make absolutely clear:

“When the LORD saw that he turned aside to look, God called to him from the midst of the bush and said, “Moses, Moses!” And he said, “Here I am.” Then He said, “Do not come near here; remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” He said also, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” Then Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God” (Exodus 3:4-6).

Before we finish this chapter, we come back for a third short reading from Exodus chapter 3. It’s one that will bring us to the message that God had for Moses, and the mission he was giving him to perform. But - before we get there - let’s just say something to set up the structure of this book. It was a mission that Moses was very reluctant to take on, so he made no less than five excuses - and we’re going to consider them one by one in this study. We’re going to do that because these excuses are very typi-

cal of the ones that we, too, may tend to make when we're asked to take on some duty in service for the Lord. But more of that later ...

First, in this introductory chapter, we really ought to refresh our memories all about the background to this very special meeting that Moses had with God at the burning bush. A very handy summary is found in the Book of Acts chapter 7 - words spoken by Stephen, the first Christian martyr, who said:

“... Jacob went down to Egypt and there he and our fathers died ... there arose another king over Egypt who knew nothing about Joseph. It was he who took shrewd advantage of our race and mistreated our fathers so that they would expose their infants and they would not survive. It was at this time that Moses was born; and he was lovely in the sight of God, and he was nurtured three months in his father's home.

And after he had been set outside, Pharaoh's daughter took him away and nurtured him as her own son. Moses was educated in all the learning of the Egyptians, and he was a man of power in words and deeds. But when he was approaching the age of forty, it entered his mind to visit his brethren, the sons of Israel. And when he saw one of them being treated unjustly, he defended him and took vengeance for the oppressed by striking down the Egyptian. And he supposed that his brethren understood that God was granting them deliverance through him but they did not understand.

On the following day he appeared to them as they were fighting together and he tried to reconcile them in peace, saying, 'Men you are brethren - why do you injure one another?' But the one who was injuring his neighbor pushed him away, saying, 'Who made you a ruler and judge over us? You do not mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday, do you?'

At this remark, Moses fled and became an alien in the land of Midian, where he became the father of two sons. After forty years had passed, an angel appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, in the flame of a burning thorn bush. When Moses saw it, he marveled at the sight; and as he approached to look more closely, there came the voice of the Lord: 'I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, and Isaac and Jacob' Moses shook with fear and would not venture to look. But the Lord said to him, 'Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground. I have certainly seen the oppression of My people in Egypt and have heard their groans, and I have come down to rescue them; come now, and I will send you to Egypt.'

This Moses whom they disowned, saying, 'Who made you a ruler and a judge?' is the one whom God sent to be both a ruler and a deliverer with the help of the angel who appeared to him in the thorn bush. This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in the

land of Egypt and in the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years” (Acts 7:15-36).

Moses is standing on the brink of the final third of his life. He’s now eighty years of age, and he’ll be a hundred and twenty by the time he dies. But his real life’s work hasn’t even begun yet. That, however, is about to change. That’s the very reason why the Lord has come down to meet him in the flame of a burning thorn bush - so that he could say to Moses:

“I have surely seen the affliction of My people who are in Egypt, and have given heed to their cry because of their task masters, for I am aware of their sufferings. So I have come down to deliver them from the power of the Egyptians, and to bring them up from that land to a good land spacious land, to a land owing with milk and honey ... Now, behold, the cry of the sons of Israel has come to Me; furthermore, I have seen the oppression with which the Egyptians are oppressing them. Therefore, come now, and I will send you to Pharaoh, so that you may bring My people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt” (Exodus 3:7-10).

There at last, is the mission that God has for Moses. He’s to go back to the country he ran away from forty years before and this time he’s to bring all his countrymen out of it with him. He’s only being asked to free the Israelite slaves from the power of Pharaoh, who’s at the head of the world’s greatest super-power of that time in history! It’s a prospect we can imagine makes Moses go weak at the knees. Before long he’s trotted out no less than five excuses, but God has an answer for each one of them. Maybe

it will help us if in the next five chapters, we look at each excuse in turn and study what God has to say. We may find that we, too, will be helped to take on that challenging new role that seems so daunting to us right now!

CHAPTER TWO: “I’M A NOBODY”

We live in an image-conscious world, don’t we? People like to look good and this world affords some great sights: some natural, some man-made. They are sights people like to look at, perhaps even have their picture taken at. Take, for example, the Eiffel Tower, the Taj Mahal, the Grand Canyon, or the leaning tower of Pisa, to name but a few of the more famous ... but in this study we’re going to be focusing on something that’s nothing to look at. It’s an ordinary, dry bush – basically, a bunch of dead twigs. Yet, strangely enough, it’s described as being a ‘marvellous’ sight. The clump of dry twigs is, of course, the burning bush at which Moses met with God, as recorded in Exodus chapter 3:

“Now Moses was pasturing the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian; and he led the flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. The angel of the LORD appeared to him in a blazing fire from the midst of a bush; and he looked, and behold, the bush was burning with fire, yet the bush was not consumed. So Moses said, “I must turn aside now and see this marvellous sight, why the bush is not burned up” (Exodus 3:1-3).

It wasn't the fact that the bush was burning which drew Moses' attention. I suppose he would have seen plenty of bushes catching fire in the baking heat of the desert. No, it was the fact that this bush went on burning, without being consumed. This was neither the usual, nor the natural, sequence of events. How could it be possible? Moses drew closer, and that's when God spoke to him out of the middle of the bush. Graciously, God had chosen something as ordinary as a dry bush to be the vehicle for his revelation to Moses. I want to pause there with Moses, because perhaps you feel that God would never use anyone as ordinary as yourself in order to reveal himself to someone else.

But I would like to say to you, based on this incident, that God is into some very ordinary things! In fact, God wants ordinary - he'll supply the extra! As I write this, I'm reminded of one response which reached us from a Search For Truth radio listener who was on death row in a Zambian prison. He wrote in to say that he had got saved - which means that he had received Christ as His own personal Saviour by faith and knew that his sins were all forgiven. He wrote these rather touching words: 'Although I'm a nobody waiting to die - the Son of God loved this nobody and already died for me.' When I think of ordinary people leading extraordinary lives, I think of my friends in the Church of God in Tagum, deep in the south of the Philippines. From simple bamboo and coconut lumber shacks with uneven, dry mud floors, there emerges the triumphant grace of God in hearts that are burning for the gospel. Yes, God's into some very ordinary things - making them into a marvelous sight! These are sights which have enriched my life, causing me to draw near and worship God for his marvelous grace.

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“Can your Jesus save someone like me?” is what a man called Stephen Lungu once asked a South African preacher. “Yes,” came the reply, along with a request to share a bit of information on Lungu’s background. As Stephen told of his rejection, the preacher himself began to cry. “Young man,” he said, “I shall now tell you a story. Many years ago there was a fourteen-year-old girl who became pregnant.” He went on to tell of how the father refused to take responsibility, so the girl dumped the baby in a toilet - but someone heard it drowning and rescued it, taking it to hospital. “I was that child,” the preacher said. Stephen stared at him in astonishment.

The preacher then read to him Psalm 27 verse 10: “Though my father and my mother forsake me, the Lord will take me up.” Hearing that verse became the changing point in Stephen’s life. “God,” he cried, “I have nothing. I am nothing. I can’t read. I can’t write. My parents don’t want me. Take me up, God, take me up. I’m sorry for the bad things I’ve done. Jesus, forgive me, and take me now.” A throw-away child among the millions of Africa, but Jesus had found him – and He turned his life round. To this day he tells others, all across Africa and beyond, of how God took him up.

These were people ‘on-fire’, but with no ‘burn-out’. For when God is in something, it lasts. They might be nobodies in an image-conscious world, but they are transformed by the sheer grace of God into a marvelous sight through which others have come to know God. Meanwhile, back at the burning bush, Moses still hadn’t learnt the lesson. Here, again, was the mission God asked Moses to undertake:

“When the LORD saw that he turned aside to look, God called to him from the midst of the bush and said, “Moses, Moses!” And he said, “Here I am.” Then He said, “Do not come near here; remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” He said, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” Then Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God ... “I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have given heed to their cry because of their taskmasters, for I am aware of their sufferings. So I have come down to deliver them from the power of the Egyptians, and to bring them up from that land to a good and spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey ... Now, behold, the cry of the sons of Israel has come to Me; furthermore, I have seen the oppression with which the Egyptians are oppressing them. Therefore, come now, and I will send you to Pharaoh, so that you may bring my people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt” (Exodus 3:4-10).

Why do I say that Moses still hadn't learnt his lesson? Simply because of Moses' reply to God - he said: “Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?” (Exodus 3:11). If only he'd considered God's use of a clump of dry twigs! However, this is the first of Moses' five excuses which we'll be looking at. Let's read it again: “Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?” God's reply is so impressive.

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“And He said, “Certainly will be with you, and this shall be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain.” Then Moses said to God, “Behold, I am going to the sons of Israel, and I will say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you ‘Now they may say to me, what is His name?’ What shall I say to them?’” God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM”; and He said, “Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you’” (Exodus 3:12-14).

Do you see what God is finally saying there in response to this first excuse of Moses? Moses has just said that he’s a nobody; how could he possibly go into the presence of the king of Egypt, no less, and demand the freedom of all the king’s slaves? In fact, he says to God, “Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh? “Who am I? Moses is obsessed with his weakness, his nothingness - compared to the king of Egypt. But in verse 14, God says to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM”. It’s as if he says: “Moses it’s not about who you are; but it’s about WHO I AM! You may be just like this bunch of dry twigs, but I can use you!” An ordinary person for an extraordinary mission.

Whenever we find ourselves shrinking back from the call of God - whenever we make use of this same, first excuse which Moses made - whenever we’re tempted to say, “Lord, I can’t do what you’re asking me to do, because I am just a nobody” - then let’s remember God’s answer to Moses: It’s not who I am, but it’s all about Who God is. When we tell God we’re not able because of

who we are, we've simply missed the point. The God who calls us will also enable us to do what he has called us to do.

CHAPTER THREE: “I DON’T KNOW”

Perhaps you stand at the brink of a new commitment in your life of following the Lord Jesus Christ. Maybe you’re being asked to take on some new responsibility in service for him. Understandably, you’re feeling a bit daunted, nervous about this commitment. In this study, we’re aiming to draw practical help from the fact that Moses felt the same when God asked him to go into the palace of Pharaoh in Egypt and demand the release of his Israelite slaves. Moses hesitates. We can probably sympathize with that. In answer to Moses’ hesitation, God says: “This shall be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain” (Exodus 3:12).

Moses was not immediately convinced and filled with courage. Because I share his weakness of faith, I think I can understand why! God was offering retrospective confirmation - for the sign would come after the event! Worshipping God back at this mountain again would be the sign that the whole thing had been of God. But no doubt Moses is asking himself: “How does that help me right now?” It would be good to be sure after the event – but I’d much rather have some reassurance now!

Perhaps, the basic lesson here is that God always asks us to take a step of faith. In many aspects of our service it’s only as we look back later that we can clearly see the evidence of God’s hand

having guided us. But to find out afterwards wasn't going to be enough for Moses. He said to God, "Behold, I am going to the sons of Israel, and I will say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you' Now they may say to me, 'What is His name?' What shall I say to them?" (Exodus 3:13).

Moses was even worried about the stage before getting to speak to Pharaoh. When he imagined his own people were checking out his credentials, he didn't feel he had all the answers for even them! So, basically, Moses' second excuse which he offers to God is: "Pease don't send me. I can't go. I don't know enough yet!" We can understand that, I'm sure. If we're due to give some kind of presentation to a group of people, we wouldn't be very keen to do it if we believed they knew more about the topic of our talk than we did. There's someone in John's Gospel chapter 9 that we should meet at this point. He's a man who started life with a disadvantage - he was born blind. Then one day Jesus met him and healed him, and with this personal experience of going from minus to plus, the man became an inspiring example of a very focused witness when he later testified to having experienced at first-hand the power of Jesus Christ. The Gospel writer, John, takes up the story:

"... the neighbors and those who previously had seen that he was blind said, "Is not this he who sat and begged? Some said, "This is he." Others said, "He is like him." He said, "I am he." Therefore they said to him, "How were your eyes opened?" He answered and said, "A man called Jesus made clay and anointed my eyes and said to me, 'Go to the pool of Siloam and wash. 'So I went and washed, and I received sight.

“Then they said to him, ‘Where is He?’ He said, ‘I do not know.’ They brought him who formerly was blind to the Pharisees. Now it was a Sabbath when Jesus made the clay and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees also asked him again how he had received his sight. He said to them, ‘He put clay on my eyes, and I washed, and I see.’”

Therefore, some of the Pharisees said, ‘This man is not from God, because He does not keep the Sabbath.’ Others said, ‘How can a man who is a sinner do such signs?’ And there was a division among them. They said to the blind man again, ‘What do you say about Him because He opened your eyes?’ He said, ‘He is a prophet.’ But the Jews did not believe concerning him, that he had been blind and received his sight, until they called the parents of him who had received his sight. And they asked them, saying, ‘Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?’

His parents answered them and said, ‘We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but by what means he now sees we do not know, or who opened his eyes we do not know. He is of age; ask him. He will speak for himself.’ His parents said these things because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had agreed already that if anyone confessed that He was Christ, he would be put out of the synagogue. Therefore his parents said, ‘He is of age; ask him.’

So they again called the man who was blind, and said to him, 'Give God the glory! We know that this man is a sinner.' He answered and said, 'Whether He is a sinner or not I do not know. One thing I know: that though I was blind, now I see.' Then they said to him again, 'What did He do to you? How did He open your eyes?' He answered them, 'I told you already, and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become His disciples?' Then they reviled him and said, 'You are His disciple, but we are Moses' disciples. We know that God spoke to Moses; as for this fellow, we do not know where He is from.'

"The man answered and said to them, 'Why, this is a marvelous thing, that you do not know where He is from; yet He has opened my eyes! Now we know that God does not hear sinners; but if anyone is a worshiper of God and does His will He hears him. Since the world began it has been unheard of that anyone opened the eyes of one who was born blind. If this Man were not from God, He could do nothing'" (John 9:8-33 NKJV).

This unnamed disciple is an inspiration to us all. He stuck to the one fact of his personal experience, and from there on in his logic was pretty good. I'm sure there are times when we all struggle to witness. We might easily think "Oh, I don't know enough. If I were to speak up and declare my faith in Jesus, someone might ask me a question - and I wouldn't know the answer to it." Well, think about this. The man we've been reading about was a brand-

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new disciple. His knowledge of Jesus was virtually non-existent. But this incident - with his witness - is included in our Bibles as an example of an effective witness to Jesus Christ! When the religious leaders came calling it seems he felt he couldn't cope with their theological arguments when they interrogated him about his encounter with Jesus. But people can't argue successfully against a real personal experience. After all, we ought to know what's happened to ourselves better than anyone else does.

One man I read about was a well-known drunkard before he put his faith in Christ. It was then his life changed. He didn't waste money on alcohol any longer, which meant he could buy more of life's necessities - and perhaps a little more. His Bible knowledge was limited. Perhaps he'd never read of how Jesus' first miracle had been one of turning water into wine. You might think then, that he was at a disadvantage when he was witnessing. But not at all, instead he told everyone who listened that the Lord had turned beer into furniture - as he told them of his own life's experience of Christ and what faith in him had meant to him.

And so it was with this man in John chapter 9. He didn't even know the basics about Jesus, but his answer to the sceptics was, "One thing I know: that though I was blind, now I see." Obviously, this was something he really was sure about. He'd known this life-changing experience - so it became the focus of his witness. It's the kind of powerful testimony from experience that even the newest child of God can give. As believers, we've all got a story to tell: an experience of going from minus to plus - one which God can use to convince others.

So please don't use Moses' second excuse of saying; "I don't know enough." In any work for God - whether it's witnessing or something else - it's not what you know, but who you know that counts.

CHAPTER FOUR: “WHAT WILL PEOPLE THINK?”

Some people have a hard time living down their past. Some have lived such a shameful past that those who have known them may find their new profession of Christianity hardly credible. “Surely not!” they say. “Not him!” or “Not her! I just don’t believe it.” This was what Saul of Tarsus discovered after his conversion: “When he came to Jerusalem, he was trying to associate with the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple” (Acts 9:26).

And this, too, was the next problem Moses anticipated as he offered one excuse after another. You remember, he was trying to avoid the call of God at the time. It was when he was standing by the burning bush, and God was asking him to go and deliver his people from slavery in Egypt. Moses imagined that events in his past would count against him.

But first, let’s go over the story, using the history of events given by Stephen in the New Testament. He starts with the whole historical situation, which is handy - and, of course, he writes as a Jew: “There arose another king over Egypt who knew nothing about Joseph. It was he who took shrewd advantage of our race and mistreated our fathers so that they would expose their infants and they would not survive. It was at this time that Moses was born; and he was lovely in the sight of God, and he was nurtured three months in his father’s home. And after he had

been set outside, Pharaoh's daughter took him away and nurtured him as her own son. Moses was educated in at the learning of the Egyptians, and he was a man of power in words and deeds. But when he was approaching the age of forty, it entered his mind to visit his brethren, the sons of Israel. And when he saw one of them being treated unjustly, he defended him and took vengeance for the oppressed by striking down the Egyptian.

And he supposed that his brethren understood that God was granting them deliverance through him, but they did not understand. On the following day he appeared to them as they were fighting together, and he tried to reconcile them in peace, saying, 'Men, you are brethren, why do you injure one another?' But the one who was injuring his neighbor pushed him away, saying, who made you a ruler and judge over us? You do not mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday, do you?' "At this remark, Moses fled and became an alien in the land of Midian, where he became the father of two sons.

"After forty years had passed, an angel appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, in the flaming of a burning thorn bush. When Moses saw it, he marveled at the sight; and as he approached to look more closely, there came the voice of the Lord: 'I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.' Moses shook with fear and would not venture to look. But the LORD said to him, 'Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground. I have certainly seen the oppression of My people in Egypt and have heard their

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groans, and I have come down to rescue them; come now, and I will send you to Egypt’

“This Moses whom they disowned, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge?’ is the one whom God sent to be both a ruler and a deliverer with the help of the angel who appeared to him in the thorn bush” (Acts 7:18-35).

It’s good to end our reading there, at the mention of the burning thorn bush, because in this study we’re beating out lessons from the time Moses spent there with God. God was asking Moses to go back to Egypt - from where he’d fled 40 years earlier - and to become his people’s deliverer from the slavery they were in there at the hands of Pharaoh. Moses now offers his third excuse, when he says: “What if they will not believe me or listen to what I say? For they may say, ‘The LORD has not appeared to you’” (Exodus 4:1).

Why was Moses worried about what his own people would say? Because they’d already doubted his good intentions. We read: “And he supposed that his brethren understood that God was granting them deliverance through him, but they did not understand” (Acts 7:25). That was forty years ago, but I’m sure Moses remembered it like it was yesterday. He had already felt rejection from his own people, and he wasn’t ready to repeat the dose. This episode of failure in his past haunted him now. It seems to be rubbed in as we ended our quotation from Stephen’s speech: “This Moses whom they disowned, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge?’ is the one whom God sent to be both a ruler

and a deliverer with the help of the angel who appeared to him in the thorn bush” (Acts 7:35).

The people had not believed Moses before and had not followed his leadership. They’d disowned him. Why should this time be any different? Of course, this was now God’s timing. God was now inviting - or rather commanding - Moses to act. This time it was not Moses’ own initiative based on his wrong perception about what his people understood about him. But Moses had been scarred by that earlier rejection - and so we can, in part, sympathize with Moses’ excuse - or at least the thinking behind it. He didn’t want to be disowned again!

What other people will think or say about us, and this matter of living down our past are very real issues that we need to overcome if we’re to move forward with God. And we can often - like Moses - be tempted to offer them as excuses for our disobedience.

Even now, I can bring to mind a memorable afternoon as we sat together as a group, sharing God’s Word. About fifteen to twenty of us had gathered under the porch of a house in the tropics. There was a good-natured atmosphere which made the time spent there immensely enjoyable but what was most thrilling was a real sense that God’s Word was being received as the voice of the living God. Here was a group engaging with the Bible as the Word of God. The sounds of a neighbor’s karaoke machine and a passing rain-shower weren’t sufficient to distract us that afternoon. Questions came pouring out, and again and again we turned to the most relevant Bible verses and found answers that truly satisfied hearts that were seriously thirsty. Finally, one lady

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- in fact it was the lady under whose porch we were sheltering from the heat - she said, "It's magnificent!"

It truly is a magnificent experience whenever we hear God's voice speaking to our heart out of our reading of his Word, the Bible. In the days which followed, the unfolding of events clearly confirmed that a work of God's Holy Spirit really had taken place in the hearts of our host family, and days of rejoicing followed just like we read about in the New Testament. Mother, father and daughter testified of their salvation. A week ago, their lives had been so empty, they said. But in the last few days they'd received God's word; had heard him speaking to them in the scriptures we shared; and they were full of the joy of their salvation - even the knowledge that their sins were all forgiven.

But they were also aware that their past might catch up with them. As they talked with us about their very real desire to be baptized, they realized at the same time that some of their neighbours could speak against them and mention the drinking, smoking and partying they'd been known for before. Yet despite what people might say, we urged them to go forward and follow the Lord's command to be baptized. They did so, and I was delighted to return later and to have their close friends who were not in the church come up to me and quite spontaneously tell me that they'd seen a wonderful change in their lives.

You see, the only answer to our critics - imagined or otherwise - is to begin to live out a genuine relationship with Christ. We mentioned the Apostle Paul's violently anti-Christian past, and how that made his early days as a Christian difficult - and difficult for others to accept. But Paul models for us the best answer to

give our critics when he says: “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me” (Galatians 2:20). When we live a life of faith, with a contagious enthusiasm, and a real desire to share our faith with others, then they will soon see we’ve been with Jesus, and plainly see that God is with us. As the Apostle Peter encourages us:

“Do not fear their intimidation, and do not be troubled, but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence; and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ will be put to shame” (1 Peter 3:14-16).

That’s the best way to live down our past, and go forward with God.

CHAPTER FIVE: “I’M NOT UP TO THE JOB!”

When God called Moses at the burning bush to return to Egypt and deliver his people, Moses was ready with his excuses. He said first of all that he was a nobody; then he was afraid that he didn’t know enough; and next he worried about what others would say (especially about his past). God has graciously dealt with all these, but still Moses hesitates, and says to the LORD, “Please, Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither recently nor in time past, nor since You have spoken to Your servant; for I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.” (Exodus 4:10) This reminds us of Jeremiah’s similar reaction when God called him to be a prophet, saying:

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I have appointed you a prophet to the nations.” Then I said, “Alas, Lord GOD! Behold, I do not know how to speak, Because I am a youth.” But the LORD said to me, “Do not say, ‘I am a youth,’ Because everywhere I send you, you shall go, and at that I command you, you shall speak. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you,” declares the LORD. Then the LORD stretched out His hand and touched my mouth, and the LORD said to me, “Behold, I have put My words in your mouth” (Jeremiah 1:5-9).

Moses' reaction here is similar. "I'm no good at speaking," he says. A surprising confession, perhaps, when we recall that he's previously been described as powerful in his words and deeds, having benefited from an Egyptian education. What's happened since, we wonder? Well, he's just spent the past forty years in the desert; it could be that's got something to do with it. But God gave Moses the same reassurance he gave to Jeremiah - and to us - "I will teach you what you are to say" (Exodus 4:12).

But notice, God has already asked Moses a question (see chapter 4:2) - "What is that in your hand?" Literally, the answer was Moses' shepherd's staff or rod and God showed him a sign to do with it in the land of Egypt. But perhaps, we can also think of a general principle here. When God asks what Moses has in his hand, is he not indicating that he has the power to use whatever it is that Moses has?

And it's the same in our case: God will use what you have, not what you don't have. I remember this principle being taught in a counselling course to parents - the message being, focus on what you can do, not on what you can't. Of course, even the abilities and gifts we have are God-given, as the apostle Paul reminded the Church at Corinth, asking them: "What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?" (1 Corinthians 4:7).

We need to remember that lesson. The gifts belong to the Giver himself. We employ them for him and for his glory. In fact, all we have, our physical and mental strength and energies, if sanctified for our Master's use, can be used by God in advancing his purpose through our lives. So, don't look at the gifts God has given

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to others, and then reflect on what you don't have - I can guarantee you from the Bible that God has gifted you - and what he's given you he'll use in ministry for him. Take, for example, the words of the apostle Peter, when he says:

“As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. Whoever speaks, is to do so as one who is speaking the utterances of God; whoever serves is to do so as one who is serving by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things God maybe glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen” (1 Peter 4:10-11).

Each one - each believer on the Lord Jesus - has a gift from God to use in his service. We, too, can learn from what the apostle Paul said to Timothy in First Timothy chapter 4:

“Let no one look down on your youthfulness, but rather in speech, conduct, love, faith and purity, show yourself an example of those who believe. Until I come, give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching. Do not neglect the spiritual gift within you, which was bestowed upon you through prophetic utterance with the laying on of hands by the presbytery” (1 Timothy 4:12-14 NASB).

Notice how Paul speaks to Timothy regarding the gift that was in him. He was to use what he already had, recognizing that he had

received it from God. 'Show yourself an example,' Paul says first of all. The word 'example' here literally means a 'striking impression.' Put that way it's quite challenging, isn't it? What impression are others struck with as they listen to our speech, as they regard our conduct and as they detect our faith, love and purity? Next, Paul calls on Timothy to recognize the Bible's authority.

Notice the order when he says 'give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine.' This referred to Timothy's public reading of Scripture, and it was to come first: before the encouraging and the teaching. As a matter of principle, reading comes before exhortation and doctrine. Any preacher or teacher must first identify his authority as being from God through the Bible, the Word of God.

The third piece of advice Paul passes on to Timothy - and this is the one we're mainly interested in - is about the need to develop Timothy's gift. He's told not to neglect the gift within him. That tells us quite a few things. It confirms what we've already seen from Peter: that we've each got a gift: a spiritual endowment from God which we may take as dating back to the time of our new birth. But surely, it also implies there's benefit in recognizing our personal gift or gifts. Perhaps you believe you can still serve God perfectly well without having identified your particular gift from God.

To a fair extent that's true - you can use it unconsciously - and in small churches, of necessity, you can sometimes serve in a capacity for which you don't feel specially qualified and God can come in to help in a special way in these circumstances; but the fact remains that if Timothy was called upon not to neglect his gift -

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and if we're to do the same - we'll first have to recognize our own gift so that we can be careful not to neglect it. Will we not maximize our potential effectiveness under God and perhaps minimize our stress levels when we serve according to the gift we've been given?

Timothy seems to have been guided in relation to his gift by a prophetic message. Since we now have the completed Bible, the equivalent process today would be expected to operate in connection with God's Word. I think one helpful guide to discerning which gift we have from God is by noticing how the Word of God affects us in our daily reading - how the Bible impacts us. What leaps out from its pages and grips us? Is it a sermon structure or an illustration of the gospel or a message of encouragement to pass on? Or is our heart moved by examples of compassion and helpfulness in caring for others? These can give an indication to a maturing Christian as to the direction in which his or her gift lies. Also, just as the church elders came to Timothy and had fellowship with him in this matter of affirming his gift, we can learn the value of being guided by mature counsel as to the use of our gift.

So far Paul has passed on key advice about setting a personal example, and about being up-front as to our Bible basis in all that we teach, as well as encouragement to use our gift for the Lord. As we return in closing this chapter to Moses, let's not make the same excuse he did. If God asks us to speak up for him or do something for him, let's think again of Peter's words: "Whoever speaks, is to do so as one who is speaking the utterances of God; whoever serves is to do so as one who is serving by the strength

which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 4:11).

Let's in faith do what God asks of us. When Moses said, "I'm not up to the job," God had really already answered this by demonstrating to him that he had the power to use whatever he had. Just as he could use Moses' staff - he could also use Moses' speaking ability whenever it was sanctified to God's use. So please don't neglect what you have, what God has given you, your gift from God - God has given it to you because he wants to use it through you in his service. The power and the glory will rightly belong to the Giver - God; but the Lord graciously waits to say, "Well done, good and faithful servant!" May that be for our encouragement in doing the job God gives us.

CHAPTER SIX: “YOU’VE GOT THE WRONG PERSON!”

I’ve got a question for you. “When is a computer expert not a computer expert?” Answer: when he’s a taxi driver. If that seems a bit weird, read on and I’ll explain. A very strange thing happened on the BBC’s 24-hour news channel a while ago. It involved totally the wrong person being interviewed. The man who should have been interviewed was a computer expert, and he could only watch in astonishment when he saw the interview go out live - an interview with someone else who was supposedly him! A white-bearded technology expert was astonished to see himself appear on screen as a black man with an apparent French accent and unable to answer basic questions about a legal battle over the use of an Apple symbol.

The whole thing descended into farce as the wrong person gamely attempted to answer questions fired at him by the hapless BBC consumer affairs correspondent. Somehow, he’d found himself being ushered into a studio and fitted with a microphone. Before he knew it, he was in the hot seat being interviewed live on air.

The man who should have been interviewed said that the other man seemed as baffled as he himself felt when asked about the consequences of the lawsuit live on BBC News 24. It was only when the BBC’s consumer affairs correspondent announced live on air the name and title of the man who should have been there

and asked the first question did the taxi driver realise that there had been a mix-up. A BBC spokeswoman said: “Unfortunately we did make a mistake and the wrong person was interviewed briefly on air before we cut to our reporter.”

Mistakes do happen, of course, but we mention this by way of introduction because the fifth and final excuse that Moses offered to God was, in effect: “God, I’m sorry. You’ve got the wrong person!” This was when verse 13 in chapter 4 records Moses as saying: “Please, Lord, now send the message by whomever You wish” (Exodus 4:13). When we read on and see what follows and how God answers Moses, it’s almost as if we could summarize Moses’ sentiment here as: “Here am I, send Aaron!” Before we comment further on that, I think we should hear the Lord’s answer in full - and the conclusion of the whole matter. We pick up the story after Moses has just told God that he’s not a good communicator:

“Then the anger of the LORD burned against Moses, and He said, “Is there not your brother Aaron the Levite? I know that he speaks fluently. And moreover, behold he is coming out to meet you; when he sees you, he will be glad in his heart. You are to speak to him and put the words in his mouth; and I, even I, will be with your mouth and his mouth, and I will teach you what you are to do. Moreover, he shall speak for you to the people; and he will be as a mouth for you and you will be as God to him. You shall take in your hand this staff with which you shall perform the signs.”

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Then Moses departed and returned to Jethro his father-in-law and said to him, "Please, let me go, that I may return to my brethren who are in Egypt, and see if they are still alive." And Jethro said to Moses, "Go in peace." Now the LORD said to Moses in Midian, "Go back to Egypt, for at the men who were seeking your life are dead." Moses took his wife and his sons and mounted them on a donkey, and returned to the land of Egypt, taking the staff of God in his hand. The LORD said to Moses, "When you go back to Egypt see that you perform before Pharaoh at the wonders which I have put in your power; but I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go ...

Now the LORD said to Aaron, "Go to meet Moses in the wilderness." So he went and met him at the mountain of God and kissed him. Moses told Aaron all the words of the LORD with which He had sent him, and all the signs that He had commanded him to do. Then Moses and Aaron went and assembled at the elders of the sons of Israel; and Aaron spoke all the words which the LORD had spoken to Moses. He then performed the signs in the sight of the people. So the people believed; and when they heard that the LORD was concerned about the sons of Israel and that He had seen their affliction, then they bowed low and worshiped" (Exodus 4:14-31).

Well, what has this to do with us? Just this - do we not sometimes try to slide out of our responsibilities in serving the Lord - pre-

ferring the Lord to use someone else perhaps, someone we think of as being better equipped to handle the task than we are?

For example, we hear the words of the Lord Jesus in the Book of Acts, chapter one - when right at the beginning of that book he addressed the Apostles and said: "You shall be My witnesses" (Acts 1:8). Although that was something extra special for them - they were the eye-witnesses of his resurrection - still, the implications of this command come down the centuries to all followers of Christ. Each of us has a personal responsibility to witness for our Lord in whatever circumstances he's placed us.

"You shall be My witnesses" - each word in that five-word sentence is full of significance. It begins 'You' - the Lord is now pointing to each one of us, not to the person next to us. Then he says 'shall' - notice it's not 'may be', but 'shall be'. The Lord expects - he's counting on us - to obey his command. He has no other plan to reach the world with the Christian message, other than this plan in which you and I play our part. Then he says 'be': you'll be My witnesses. It's not so much about what we do; more about being different and showing the world that we are new creatures in Christ. Before we even speak, our lives should testify for him. Witnessing is not so much one extra activity box that we've got to tick, but rather it's a whole lifestyle thing.

Then, of course, he says 'My' - 'My witnesses' - we're to be his witnesses. What an honour! Witnesses of the risen Lord. We're to evidence our personal relationship with the King of kings! Finally, the last word is 'witnesses'. Behind this word is the word from which we get our English language word 'martyr' - reminding us that many of the early Christians actually lost their lives because

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of their courageous witness for their Master. For us, it will at least mean laying down our own agendas and ambitions, and putting Christ and his claims first in our lives.

That's some responsibility, I'm sure you'll agree. But we can't slide out of it. The Lord here is not talking about the gift of evangelism when he says, 'You shall be My witnesses.' Some of us will be more gifted for evangelism than others, but witnessing is a matter of responsibility, not gift. The Lord expects it of each of us. We can't try it on like Moses: "Here am I, send my brother"

But, of course, the Lord meets our need for support in this witnessing activity. For after saying this in the first chapter of Acts, when we turn the page into the second chapter of Acts, we begin to read of the first 'witness centre' at Jerusalem. The first witnesses - in other words the first Christians - were together in the Church of God at Jerusalem - and the setting is 52 days after the cross of Christ.

"So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls. They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe ... And all those who had believed were together ... Day by day continuing with one mind ... together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved" (Acts 2:41-47).

There's a wonderful sense of togetherness there, I'm sure you'll agree. The Lord Jesus Christ has planned in his Word that there should be a biblical context for our witnessing. We're not to be 'lone rangers'; but together with other witnessing Christians as part of the authentic community for which the Lord gives us the blueprint throughout the New Testament - and everywhere we look it's consistent with what we find here in Acts chapter 2.

In serving the Lord there's no excuse for us not doing his will in the way he intends.

A MAGNIFICENT SUNSET: THE LAST DAYS OF JACOB

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

A professor of mine once told us that, in the sciences, a person's greatest work is usually done before they reach the age of twenty-six. In the year 1905, for example, it was an unknown 26-year-old in Berne, Switzerland, who wrote three scientific papers which would change how we see the universe. Albert Einstein was then a young man struggling to make his mark. His applications to universities throughout Europe had all been rejected. Finally, his father had pulled strings to get him a job as a third-class clerk evaluating the latest electrical gizmos, but in his spare time he was formulating the most extraordinary scientific ideas.

Fifty years later, as Einstein lay on his deathbed, he asked only for his glasses, his writing implements and his latest equations. He knew he was dying, yet he continued his work. In those final hours of his life, while fading in and out of consciousness, he was working on what he hoped would be his greatest work of all. In his case, it was not to be. It was a project that he had hoped would unlock the mind of God. "I want to know God's thoughts," he'd said. "I am not interested in this phenomenon or that phenomenon," Einstein had said earlier in his life. "I want to know God's thoughts - the rest are mere details."

Einstein's work was underpinned by the idea that the laws of physics were an expression of the divine. This belief led him to think that everything could be described by simple, elegant mathematics. But as he lay dying in Princeton Hospital, the greatest scientist of his age died knowing that he had become isolated from the scientific community; revered on the one hand, ridiculed for this quest on the other.

The case of Einstein would support my old professor's claim that in the sciences a person's greatest work is usually done before they reach the age of twenty-six. But that's not always true in spiritual things. Early in the Bible, we meet the man whose name is Jacob. The high tidemark of Jacob's faith was not reached until he was on his deathbed - as an old man of 147, no less! The Bible tells us quite indisputably that his greatest work of faith came at the very end of his remarkable life. That's why it's by Jacob's deathbed that I'd like us to linger. Out of Jacob's long career, the writer of the New Testament letter to the Hebrews selects Jacob's final blessing of his grandchildren as the one act out of all the deeds of his life as that which best demonstrates his faith. That's most remarkable, for it was chosen from the entirety of all the varied experiences in what had been a long, colourful and eventful life (see Hebrews 11:21).

Born moments after his twin brother, Esau, Jacob's early life seemed to be about playing catch-up. Even in the womb he had grasped and taken hold of his brother's heel. This set the tone for the first part of his life. Although his mother had been promised that Jacob would eventually come out on top, she lost little time in encouraging her younger son to seize his brother's privileges for himself. When this came to involve deceit - by actually dis-

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guising himself and impersonating his older brother - it had clearly gone too far. Neither Jacob nor his mother was acting out of faith. Having tricked his old, partially-sighted father in this way, Jacob ran off with his brother's blessing.

But he would have to reap what he had sown. He was soon to experience his own uncle cheating him time and time again, for example by constantly short-changing him with his wages. Then one day, God told Jacob to return home. It was on that return journey that something truly amazing happened to Jacob, something that would change his life for good.

He first had an encounter with angels. But even that pales by comparison with what happened shortly afterwards. A strange figure appeared and began to wrestle with Jacob. What could he do, but to wrestle back? But who was this mysterious aggressor? He's variously described as a man (Genesis 32:24), an angel (Hosea 12:4), and it's even implied as somehow being the Lord himself (Genesis 32:30). Could it be that Jacob was wrestling with God?

What might God's purpose have been in what we should have expected to be such a one-sided contest? In glorious self-restraint, could it actually be that God was coming down to Jacob's level to teach him the most vital lesson of his life? It was one which he seemed to learn well, for this would become the key turning-point of his entire life. This experience down by the fords of the Jabbok river, in the shades of evening, during a particularly stressful time in his life, would leave its mark on the rest of Jacob's life in more ways than one.

Jacob's personal history to this point in time had been one which had seen him struggling with both man and God in order to obtain for himself the things God had already planned to give him anyway. His life up to this point was anything but the life of a man of faith, for he had lived by his wits as a cunning strategist, determined to outwit those around him. The great promises which God had first made to his grandfather, Abraham, had been personally renewed to him. He believed them, but he wasn't leaving the outcome to God: he was set on bringing it all about by his own actions.

Even now in his struggle against the wrestler in the chasm, he says to God, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." God then says to him, "What's your name?" It seems like an unusual question at that precise moment, doesn't it? But that is only until we remember that Jacob had once tricked his own blind father - and deceived him into giving him a blessing by using his brother's name. His father had asked his name back then, and at that time Jacob had lied and said: "Esau. My name's Esau." But now, later, and alone with God, when God the all-seeing Father, the Father of all, asks his name, he says: "Jacob - it's Jacob." I wonder, in that split second, whether Jacob thought to himself: "Ah, you've got me! You've exposed my heart. It's true, the last time I asked someone for a blessing, I deceived him by giving a false name." In that moment, perhaps, he saw the deceitfulness of his own heart. He admitted it, and his life was changed. But wisdom didn't come overnight.

Later, Jacob's actions within the family circle created a very inflammable atmosphere. He'd taken multiple wives, and singled one out as his favourite. He next singled out one of her children

as being the special object of his affections. And to make matters much worse, he did this in a very public way by giving Joseph a special coat – this was a totally inappropriate signal to the other siblings. It seems that Jacob couldn't have stoked up the fires of jealousy any better if he'd tried!

None of this, of course, justifies - or even excuses - what Joseph's brothers did to him. To sell your own brother (or even half-brother) into a life of slavery, and cover it up by faking his death, was a horrible act of treachery – and it was one which came close to breaking Jacob's heart, for again he was deceived by it. But through it all, God's purposes were still ripening, and Jacob now depends on God's compassion (Genesis 43:14). And he's about to discover that Joseph, whom he thinks is dead, is in fact still alive. For when Jacob sends his other sons to Egypt to buy food in a time of famine, they discover that Joseph is in fact no longer a slave; but is now Pharaoh's main man in charge of Egypt's entire food distribution programme. Wonderfully, Joseph forgives his brothers, and has Jacob brought down into Egypt to live, where he provides for him in his old age. The record of Genesis chapter 47 tells us that:

“Jacob lived in the land of Egypt seventeen years; so the length of Jacob's life was one hundred and forty-seven years. When the time for Israel (which was another God-given name for Jacob) to die drew near, he called his son Joseph and said to him, “Please, if I have found favor in your sight, place now your hand under my thigh and deal with me in kindness and faithfulness. Please do not bury me in Egypt, but when I lie down with my fathers, you shall carry me out of

Egypt and bury me in their burial place. “And he said, “I will do as you have said.” He said, “Swear to me.” So he swore to him. Then Israel bowed in worship at the head of the bed. Now it came about after these things that Joseph was told, “Behold, your father is sick” So he took his two sons Manasseh and Ephraim with him. When it was told to Jacob, “Behold, your son Joseph has come to you, “Israel collected his strength and sat up in the bed” (Genesis 47:28-48:2).

This is the setting for our New Testament text found in Hebrews chapter 11, verse 21: “By faith Jacob, as he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshiped, leaning on the top of his staff.” The wise preacher in the Bible wrote:

“A good name is better than a good ointment, and the day of one’s death is better than the day of one’s birth. It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, because that is the end of every man, and the living takes it to heart” (Ecclesiastes 7:1,2).

In the remainder of this book, we aim to spend some time by Jacob’s death-bed. We want to discover lessons from the time of his death. The Holy Spirit has singled it out as an example of faith for us to take to heart. Silhouetted against the skyline of eternity, we want to observe this great man of God as he dies. He’s definitely a man of faith, for he’s made it into the gallery of the faithful: those heroes of faith we find listed in that eleventh chapter of Hebrews. In all of Jacob’s long life, it seems that the best was always still to come. The basis for saying this is that our text in

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Hebrews 11 verse 21 selects Jacob's act of blessing the two sons of Joseph as being the clearest expression of his faith.

Conferring this blessing, naturally enough, was something which took place towards the end of his life, when his faculties were going. By contrast, his faith was evidently increasing. Here he was then, with dimmed eyesight, and in the face of death, but reaching out by faith for the continuation of the divine promise made to Abraham's seed. In this way, Jacob ended his life with a magnificent sunset. What about us? Our duties are not yet over. Perhaps in God's estimation, our life's greatest work of faith lies ahead. Let's take to heart the fact that Jacob's greatest expression of faith was as an old man of one hundred and forty-seven years of age. In spiritual experience, our later years can definitely be our best!

CHAPTER TWO: THE DEVOTION OF HIS FAITH

It's said that when Josef Stalin was dying, he raised himself up from his deathbed and was seen to shake his fist at the ceiling. This was his final act of defiance. He'd lived as an atheist and was determined, by an act of his will, to die as one. But you have to ask the question, at whom did he believe he was shaking his fist? The agnostic - the person who doesn't know - is more restrained in his words and actions. Facing death, philosopher Thomas Hobbes was heard to say: "Now for a fearful leap in the dark." By contrast, the end of Genesis chapter 47 allows us to see how a devout man dies:

"When the time for Israel [that's Jacob] to die drew near, he called his son Joseph and said to him, "Please, if I have found favor in your sight, place now your hand under my thigh and deal with me in kindness and faithfulness. Pease do not bury me in Egypt, but when I lie down with my fathers, you shall carry me out of Egypt and bury me in their burial place. "And he said, "I will do as you have said." He said, "Swear to me." So he swore to him. Then Israel bowed in worship at the head of the bed" (Genesis 47:29-31).

This was Jacob's final request. He didn't want to be buried in Egypt, but wanted rather to be buried in the burial place of his fathers in the land which God had promised to them and their

descendants as being an eternal possession. Then Jacob bowed in worship at the head of the bed. He'd been looking ahead in faith to the land God had promised as an everlasting possession, and so now he bowed in worshipful acknowledgement in the presence of the generous God in whom he trusted throughout life. With funeral arrangements all made, Jacob worshipped the God who had personally renewed these promises to him.

This confidence in the face of death reminds me of the story told of a Christian lady who also gave guidance as to how her funeral was to be conducted. After choosing the hymns which she wanted to be sung, and the Bible verses she wanted printed on the order of service, she said goodbye to the pastor and turned to leave. But then she stopped and added a further, strange request. While her body was on display in the coffin, she requested that a fork be placed in her hand. When the pastor politely asked the reason for this, she explained that she'd been part of a large family, and that times had often been hard while they were growing up. There hadn't always been plenty of food at home. It was a rare treat to get a dessert, a second course at meal times. When that was to happen, their father would simply announce that they should hold on to their fork after the first course was finished.

The message about keeping their fork, rather than piling them all up for immediate washing, was met with great joy and excitement in the household, for the children knew it meant that there was something better still to come - at least that's how they viewed it as children, preferring their desserts to their main course, especially since it was a rare treat. "And so," the woman told her pastor, "when people ask you why there's a fork in my hand, I want you to explain that it shows that I believe that for

me there's something better still to come; something better for me as a Christian believer beyond this life." That's a well-founded belief, for the apostle Paul, writing in Philippians chapter 1 and verse 23 spoke about departing and being with Christ, which, he said, 'is very much better'.

But only a true Christian believer can have that confidence. Elsewhere in the Bible, we're told that it's appointed for men to die once and after his comes judgment (Hebrews 9:27). However, the Christian believer, who takes Christ at his word, has confidence in the words of Jesus in John chapter 5, verse 24: "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life."

A friend of mine recently died of cancer. I'd only known him for a couple of years. On my final visit to him in the hospice, as the sun could be seen to be setting through the window of his room, I reminded him of the evening hymn:

Abide with me; fast falls the eventide;

The darkness deepens, Lord, with me abide.

When other helpers fail, and comforts flee,

Help of the helpless, O abide with me!

We talked of an evening time recorded by Luke in his gospel when two disciples of Jesus invited a stranger - a companion in travel - to stay or 'abide' with them. The date was resurrection Sunday. Those two disciples had been in Jerusalem and no doubt

they'd witnessed the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. When we're first introduced to these two disciples they're walking together on to road to Emmaus which is a little over 6 miles from Jerusalem - they are obviously very sad as they're talking to each other. The Gospel by Luke records it like this:

“... two of them were going that very day to a village named Emmaus, which was about seven miles from Jerusalem. And they were talking with each other about all these things which had taken place. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus Himself approached and began traveling with them. But their eyes were prevented from recognizing Him. And He said to them, “What are these words that you are exchanging with one another as you are walking?” And they stood still, looking sad. One of them, named Cleopas, answered and said to Him, “Are You the only one visiting Jerusalem and unaware of the things which have happened here in these days?” And He said to them, “What things?”

And they said to Him, “The things about Jesus the Nazarene, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word in the sight of God and all the people, and how the chief priests and our rulers delivered Him to the sentence of death, and crucified Him. But we were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel. Indeed, besides all this, it is the third day since these things happened. But also some women among us amazed us. When they were at the tomb early the

morning, and did not find His body, they came, saying that they had also seen a vision of angels who said that He was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just exactly as the women also had said; but Him they did not see.”

And He said to them, “O foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory?” Then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning himself in all the Scriptures. And they approached the village where they were going, and He acted as though He were going farther. But they urged Him, saying, “Stay with us, for it is getting toward evening, and the day is now nearly over.” So He went in to stay with them. When He had reclined at the table with them, He took the bread and blessed it, and breaking it, He began giving it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized Him; and He vanished from their sight. They said to one another, “Were not our hearts burning within us while He was speaking to us on the road, while He was explaining the Scriptures to us?” And they got up that very hour and returned to Jerusalem, and found gathered together the eleven and those who were with them ...” (Luke 24:13-33).

These two disciples were still loyal to Christ, but they had been (so they thought) disappointed in their hopes and expectations.

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It's interesting to see how Jesus deals with them: by taking them back to God's Word, and not by immediately and physically proving his identity to them. To give them this Bible study he joined them on their walk, though they didn't know it was Jesus. It would seem that Jesus spent most of the afternoon with these two very ordinary disciples - which goes to show us that with Jesus, there aren't any 'ordinary' people: we're all important to him. He'd already made a brief appearance to Mary Magdalene and he'd spoken with Peter, but most of the day was spent with these two men about whom we know so very little.

"Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who doesn't know about the things that happened there in the last few days?", they asked him. "What things?" Jesus asked. At his invitation, they began to share their view of him. In this way Jesus encouraged them to reveal their hearts - as he longs for us to tell him our hearts, even though he already knows them. What did these men know about Jesus? They knew his name and where he was from; that he was a Prophet; mighty in deeds and in words. They knew he'd been crucified, after showing promise as a deliverer, and they knew others had said he'd risen from the dead. These disciples had a hope that they felt: had turned to disappointment - but in reality, their hope would be fulfilled in a greater way than they could have ever dreamed of!

When at first we met the two disciples in Luke chapter 24 they were trudging into the rays of the setting sun, for Emmaus was west of Jerusalem. It was going to be the most magnificent sunset of their lives, for after their encounter with the risen Lord Jesus they walked joyfully beyond the sunset to face the risen Son of God at Jerusalem. When, as disciples, we walk with him, we, too,

can walk beyond the sunset of our lives to abide with him where it will never be night. Even facing death, like Jacob, we can worship in calm assurance!

CHAPTER THREE: THE BASIS OF HIS FAITH

Have you ever sat spell-bound, listening to an old person give an account of their experiences of a bygone age? It's fascinating to hear Jacob's review, in Genesis chapter 48, of 'the few and unpleasant years' of his pilgrimage. That expression 'few and unpleasant ... years' had been Jacob's own description of his life's experiences, when he met Pharaoh for the first time seventeen years earlier. Perhaps, the final years of Jacob's life had brought less in the way of trial and hardship, and had given him an opportunity to enjoy the grandchildren of his favourite son.

Supporting this suggestion is the fact that when Jacob is cited in Hebrews 11 as an example to us of faith, the illustration given is drawn from the final days, or even hours, of his life. The best was reserved for the end in Jacob's life experience, it seems. When you listen to an old person, often the further back in time they go, the clearer their recollections become. It appears that's how it was with Jacob. Let's read from the Bible account given in Genesis chapter 48, the first 5 verses:

"Now it came about after these things that Joseph was told, "Behold, your father is sick" So he took his two sons Manasseh and Ephraim with him. When it was told to Jacob, "Behold, your son Joseph has come to you," Israel collected his strength and sat up in the bed. Then Jacob said to Joseph, "God Almighty ap-

peared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan and blessed me, and He said to me, 'Behold, I will make you fruitful and numerous, and I will make you a company of peoples, and will give this land to your descendants after you for an everlasting possession. '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' (Genesis 48:1-5).

Jacob makes clear what was the basis of his faith. Surely the eyes of this old, dying man brightened at the recollection of the time of his early encounter with God, one which had come in trying times and in what, to him, was the most unlikely of places. As far as we know, this had been his first direct encounter with God. We can be sure, I believe, that he recalled it vividly and with vigour. After all, we're told he'd gathered his strength for the last time as he sat up in bed. This was something he just had to share in this emotional heart-to-heart with Joseph, his son, and his grandsons, Ephraim and Manasseh.

Joseph had missed out on so much quality time with his father through having been sold as a slave into Egypt by his jealous brothers. And while lord of all Egypt, perhaps times for meaningful conversations with his father had been at a premium. Be that as it may, this time was especially poignant for each of them. Time was now so short. This was no time for small talk. In such times a father opens his heart.

Jacob begins by sharing about his first meeting with God and the revelation he'd received from God at that time, clearly in-

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dicating it had been the anchor-point of his life: "... Jacob said to Joseph, "God Almighty appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan and blessed me ..." (Genesis 48:3). Jacob rehearsed how God Almighty had given him that personal reassurance (28:10-22). He'd never forgotten God's blessing, renewed to him in his generation, having been first spoken by God to his grandfather, Abraham. This was the whole point of being found gathered with his son and grandchildren, for he was now to pass on that blessing, in faith looking beyond his own death to the continuation of the divine promise. This is the greatness of his faith, which the Holy Spirit identifies for us.

What memories might have come flooding into Jacob's mind then. Perhaps he paused for a while with a faraway look in his eye, imagining again a lonely stretch of desert with the sun going down, setting on a weary traveller. This traveller - young Jacob, of course - occasionally glances backwards. He clearly remembers why, even after all those years! There had been sin on his conscience back then as he ran away from his brother Esau whose blessing he'd taken by deception and trickery. Now he realized he hadn't needed to stoop to these tactics, for God had intended it for him anyway - but he'd been young back then with little or no experience of God.

And so that night, while on the run, he'd come to a certain place and spent the night there, because the sun had set; and he took one of the stones of the place and put it under his head and lay down in that place (Genesis 28:11). It's the first ever mention of 'the place' in the Bible, and he called the name of that place Bethel (meaning 'house of God' in Jacob's language) but previously the name ... had been Luz (Genesis 28:19). Now, on his

deathbed, Jacob recalls one final time: “God Almighty appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan and blessed me ...”

The eyes of the grandsons must have been popping out at the old man’s story, as, between rest pauses, perhaps, he now told them how he’d fallen asleep there and had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. There, above it, stood the LORD, and he said: “I am the LORD ... I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying ... I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land” (vv.12-15).

Can we imagine Ephraim and Manasseh exchanging glances, then saying, “Do tell us what happened next!” “Well,” the old man says, “I woke up and said: “Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it.” ... “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven” (vv.16,17). Maybe Jacob paused to see what effect all this was having on this intimate audience. He wanted them to realize that this had been the awakening experience of his lifetime, awakening him to the purpose of God for his life.

“And then what?” the grandsons had asked, perhaps with more solemnity now, realizing something of how momentous this had been - and even perhaps beginning to appreciate, albeit ever so slightly, that it had implications for them too. Jacob wanted to emphasize God’s words - wanted his grandchildren to understand their place in history, in the purposes of God - so he continued: and He said to me, “Behold, I will make you fruitful and numerous, and I will make you a company of peoples, and will

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give this land to your descendants after you lords an everlasting possession” (Genesis 48:4).

Jacob says, “And [God] said to me.” God had spoken to Jacob. All his life long, Jacob had never forgotten that. Through the ups and downs, including his bitter grief at Joseph’s apparent loss, this is what had sustained him. Jacob reveals that secret here. Not only for his grandchildren then, but for all of us as we eavesdrop on this tender scene. We’ll remain on course in life, if we can always go back - with an assurance that’s from God - to a time we knew God speaking to us. By faith in the word of God Jacob had plotted his course in life. This is what comes across in this final scene - and what an example he leaves us! Jacob remained true to that revelation. His had been a worshipful response to that revelation: he responded by reverencing the Lord; setting up a memorial stone or pillar; consecrating the stone by anointing the top of it with oil; naming the place Bethel (‘house of God’); making a vow in which he expressed for the first time his faith in the Lord (“the LORD will be my God); and by promising to tithe (Genesis 28:22).

A fitting response, indeed, to the place he’d come to know as the house of God, a place defined here as: chosen and revealed by God; where God’s will is done on earth as in heaven; where God’s presence can be accessed in a special way; a place of reverent approach and worship; a place to be characterized by holiness (see later in Genesis 35); and finally a place of blessing and commitment. Here then, at the time of its first mention, are the first principles God wants us to realize about what is called throughout the Bible ‘the house of God’. They are of lasting application to those today who can claim - like those in 1 Peter 2:5

- 'to be being built up as a spiritual house' in a way that answers to the original New Testament churches of God.

But back to Jacob and our story. He'd had the sure word of God: he could say: 'and [God] said to me (v.4). That word, as we say, had been his mainstay in life - the word of the God of the house of God - confirming to him in his generation the promise regarding offspring and a land first given to his grandfather - and now with the added dimension - given specially to Jacob - of the revelation of God's house as being involved in that same promise. Now as a wiser man of mature faith, he surely wondered (worshipfully) at his unworthiness to receive such a revelation, and appreciated all the better the marvellous grace of God.

This was the basis of the faith he expressed so dearly at the end of his life. For it took faith to discern God's purposes in terms of the blessing he was to impart through Joseph and not Reuben, and through Ephraim, not Manasseh - but more of that later! Have you had this wonderful revelation that Jacob had? I think of friends away in the Philippines, for whom the revelation of this same truth has become the focus of their lives. Remember Jacob's stairway reaching to heaven? After sharing together once about our entry into the heavenly Holy Place during worship, a young man there came forward and said: "Now I know what's special about the Churches of God!" Yes, the gate of heaven indeed!

CHAPTER FOUR: THE TESTING OF HIS FAITH

Fire officials believed the fire at Luz Cuevas' home was sparked by an extension cord. It was extinguished in ten minutes but her daughter Delimar's room was gutted, and investigators conceded that the infant's body must have been consumed by the intense heat and flames. At the time of the fire, authorities told the mother that her child had died in the blaze, although no body was found. The girl, Delimar Vera, was believed to be dead only ten days after she was born in 1997. The truth only began to emerge six years later when the child's birth mother, Luz, happened to be at a birthday party in Philadelphia that a six-year-old girl was also attending. The woman said she 'instantly knew' - there and then - that she was gazing at the face of her long-lost daughter! To prove it, she approached the girl, pretended there was gum in her hair, and removed five strands. DNA tests confirmed the mother's intuition - it was her long-lost child.

What had happened? Well, Carolyn Correa was a family acquaintance who announced that she was pregnant during a visit to the new mother shortly after baby Delimar's birth. She then abruptly ceased contact after the 15 December 1997 blaze. Police believe she snatched her friend's newborn daughter in 1997 and then torched the family's house to cover her tracks. Carolyn Correa of Willingboro, N.J., later turned herself in to face charges of arson and kidnapping.

A bizarre story, perhaps, but it's not that this kind of thing is anything new. Around four thousand years ago, in the Middle East, a father is confronted with the evidence of his son's death, only to discover years later that he'd been conned - his son was alive! The father in question was Jacob, whose life - or at least the final hours of it - we're studying in this section of our book. We're picking it up from the book of Genesis: "Now it came about after these things that Joseph was told, "Behold, your father is sick." So he took his two sons Manasseh and Ephraim with him. When it was told to Jacob, "Behold, your son Joseph has come to you, "Israel collected his strength and sat up in the bed" (Genesis 48:1,2).

And so Jacob began a remarkable conversation in which he reviewed his life in their presence - just the four of them it seems, in this intimate setting. After Jacob has begun by telling his three guests about his first direct encounter with God, with great pathos he then goes on to recount some of the sorrows of his life: especially the loss of his beloved wife, Rachel...

"Now as for me, when I came from Paddan, Rachel died, to my sorrow, in the land of Canaan on the journey, when there was still some distance to go to Ephrath; and I buried her there on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem)." 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." So he said, "Bring them to me, please, that I may bless them." Now the eyes of Israel were so dim from age that he could not see. Then Joseph brought them close to him, and he kissed them and embraced them. Is-

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rael said to Joseph, “I never expected to see your face, and behold, God has let me see your children as well” (Genesis 48:7-11).

With great pathos, Jacob recounts one of the bitterest moments of his life, when he says:

‘Rachel died to my sorrow ... when there was still some distance to go to Ephrath; and I buried her there.’ It just reads as though the memory of that fateful day was still crystal clear in his mind’s eye. He seems to be remembering the exact spot where it took place - still some distance away from Ephrath. I wonder if the old man’s voice was cracking with emotion as he re-told this painful recollection. Perhaps he was lost in thought for a while, reliving the anguish of that terrible day on which Rachel died. I can imagine Joseph and his two sons quietly waiting until Jacob regained his composure. At any rate, the next verse seems to come in abruptly: When Israel saw Joseph’s sons, he said, “Who are these?” (v.8).

It does read as though Jacob seems to distract himself from his daydreaming, perhaps by looking up suddenly and catching a glimpse of his two grandchildren. He’s disoriented now and needs to be reminded who they are. After all they’re children he’d never dreamt of seeing. As he himself said to Joseph, their father: “I never expected to see your face, and behold, God has let me see your children as well” (v.11).

It was an emotional farewell, rich in human drama. Jacob has already described how his faith was rooted and grounded in God's Word, from the time when God had spoken to him. But his was a faith that had been sorely tested. It must have been tested that day with the loss of his favourite wife as she gave birth to her second son, Benjamin - for Rachel died in childbirth; and then it was later tested again when Rachel's elder son - Jacob's favourite son by his favourite wife - was declared missing, presumed dead.

I once read of a Christian man who suffered the terrible loss of multiple family members in a car accident. He told how his initial reaction had, understandably, been one of asking: "Why me?" - as if his innermost thought had been that he didn't deserve such a thing to befall him. Other well-meaning Christian friends encouraged him in this way of thinking, he said. But as he worked through his grief with God, gradually he began to see there was another question, just as relevant, which was: "Why not me?"

He counted the blessings he'd known from God, including the rich blessing of time he'd been privileged to spend with those who'd now been taken from him - and he readily acknowledged that he'd not been deserving of them either. It gave him a renewed perspective. Experiences like these - and like those Jacob experienced - either make a man bitter or better. By God's grace, with Jacob it was the latter. His faith in God didn't fail, it even continued to build to a biblically recorded high point at the very end of his life. His faith in the God who'd spoken to him, had endured the storms of testing experiences in life. James, in the New Testament, has this to say about the testing of our faith:

“Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind ... Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him” (James 1:2-12).

I read of a Christian struggling to come to terms with her trial, until she remembered the story of someone who attempted to make it easier for an emperor moth. Emperor moths appear to have a great struggle to emerge from their cocoons. Carefully this man made the hole bigger for the moth to come through, but only for it to emerge with shrivelled and deformed wings. He hadn't realised that the struggle for the moth to get through the small opening was so necessary. The sheer effort of the struggle is God's way to force fluid from the moth's body into its wings. To assist in bypassing that suffering had in reality been cruel. The Christian woman remembered how Romans chapter 8 explains how all things work together for our good; that is, our long-term good. It has to be our long-term good that's in view because obviously any form of suffering in trial isn't peasant at the time, and can hardly be expected to be appreciated.

Hard lesson as it is for those learning it, what we can be assured of is that God, in his sovereignty, allows suffering and struggles to come into our lives so that the goal of a Christ like character might be realized. Body-building takes athletes through the pain barrier, and if so, we can hardly expect character-building to be a painless process either. Jacob had broken through the pain barrier in his life. His faith, having been tested, was stronger than ever. And his character had undergone profound change too. God's dealings with him had transformed it away from the sly, scheming individual we first read of him as being and transformed to the kind of maturity we see Jacob display in these final moments of his life. Here was someone who now discerned God's will and bowed to it.

“[Jacob] blessed Joseph, and said, “The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, The God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day, The angel who has redeemed me from all evil, Bless the lads; And may my name live on in them, And the names of my fathers Abraham and Isaac; And may they grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth” (Genesis 48:15,16).

With these remarkable descriptions of God, the one who'd been the object of his trust through life, Jacob prayed for God's gracious blessing on the boys.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE MATURITY OF HIS FAITH

In this latter part of the book, we've spent time by Jacob's death-bed so that we might discover lessons from the passing of this great old man of faith. The Holy Spirit has especially singled out his final act as an example of faith that should give us food for thought. Silhouetted against the skyline of eternity, let's closely observe Jacob as he dies.

We're confident about describing him as a man of faith, for he's made it into the gallery of the faithful in the eleventh chapter of Hebrews. In all of Jacob's long life, it seems that with him the best was always still to come. The basis for saying this is our text in Hebrews 11 verse 21 which selects Jacob's final act of blessing the two sons of Joseph as being the clearest expression of faith in the whole of his life. So, finally, we now come to consider that act of blessing itself, having previously reflected on Jacob's speech which preceded it.

Conferring this blessing was something that took place when Jacob's natural faculties were in decline, understandably enough. By contrast, his faith was evidently increasing. Here we find him then, with dimmed eyesight, and in the face of death, but reaching out by faith for the continuation of the divine promise made to Abraham's offspring with a faith that was stronger and brighter than ever before. We should read what it says about this in Genesis chapter 48, from verse 13:

“Joseph took them both, Ephraim with his right hand toward Israel’s left, and Manasseh with his left hand toward Israel’s right, and brought them dose to him. But Israel stretched out his right hand and laid it on the head of Ephraim, who was the younger, and his left hand on Manasseh’s head, crossing his hands, although Manasseh was the firstborn. He blessed Joseph, and said, “The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, The God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day, The angel who has redeemed me from all evil, Bless the lads; And may my name live on in them, And the names of my fathers Abraham and Isaac; And may they grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth.”

When Joseph saw that his father laid his right hand on Ephraim’s head, it displeased him; and he grasped his father’s hand to remove it from Ephraim’s head to Manasseh’s head. Joseph said to his father, “Not so, my father, for this one is the firstborn. Place your right hand on his head.”

But his father refused and said, “I know, my son, I know; he also will become a people and he also will be great. However, his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his descendants shall become a multitude of nations.” He blessed them that day, saying, “By you Israel will pronounce blessing, saying, ‘May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh!’ Thus he put Ephraim before Manasseh” (Genesis 48:13-20).

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Here was Jacob, his physical faculties failing, yet with his spiritual discernment keener than ever. Contrary to the convention of that day and place, the old man was alert to the need to cross his hands and overthrow Joseph's sense of expectation of what was appropriate in the circumstances. By crossing his hands, he effectively switched the blessing from the elder to the younger. Joseph was not pleased. I imagine by this time Joseph was in the habit of getting his own way. Being lord of all Egypt, he surely only needed to snap his fingers and servants would fulfil his every wish - such was his prominence and importance as second only to Pharaoh. I'm always faintly amused by what we read at the end of Genesis 46 and its sequel in the early verses of chapter 47. It's there that we find Joseph in diplomatic mode: he's counselling his brothers on their upcoming interview with Pharaoh - coaching them on how to say all the right things, so as to make a favourable impression. We can do no better than just read it:

“Joseph said to his brothers and to his father's household, “I will go up and tell Pharaoh, and will say to him, ‘My brothers and my father's household, who were in the land of Canaan, have come to me; and the men are shepherds, for they have been keepers of livestock; and they have brought their flocks and their herds and all that they have.’

When Pharaoh calls you and says, ‘What is your occupation?’ you shall say, ‘Your servants have been keepers of livestock from our youth even until now, both we and our fathers,’ that you may live in the land of Goshen; for every shepherd is loathsome to the Egyp-

tians.” Then Joseph went in and told Pharaoh, and said, “My father and my brothers and their flocks and their herds and all that they have, have come out of the land of Canaan; and behold, they are in the land of Goshen.” He took five men from among his brothers and presented them to Pharaoh. Then Pharaoh said to his brothers, “What is your occupation?” So they said to Pharaoh, “Your servants are shepherds, both we and our fathers” (Genesis 46:31-47:3).

Can't you just imagine Joseph rolling his eyes, or maybe even fuming under his breath: “What did I just tell them to say! Did I not say: ‘Whatever you do, don't admit to being shepherds - it's the wrong answer as far as Egyptian society is concerned!’ And what do they go and do? When Pharaoh asks after their occupation; they immediately tell him they are shepherds!” Joseph, you might as well have saved your breath! But if his brothers had been a trial to him, frustrating his management skills: it now seems his old father has caught the disease! Joseph is learning that you can choose your servants - and make sure they're ‘yes men’ - but you can't choose your family, let alone predict what they'll say or do! In bringing his two sons for his father's blessing, Joseph had thought it through.

Aware that his father had failing eyesight, he'd considerably planned to make life easy for him. Therefore, he guided Manasseh, the elder - the one in line for the blessing - with his left: hand so that he'd be in the exact position to receive Jacob's right hand of blessing. In the same way, Ephraim was directed by Joseph's right hand to meet Jacob's left. Joseph had it all worked out. He was a master of these situations. A micro-manager, with

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nothing left to chance - accustomed to everything working out smoothly according to plan, and in his way.

But Joseph is in for a surprise, as his old father thwarts his preparations by crossing his hands at the last second so that he reaches out with his right hand to bless Ephraim, the younger of the two brothers, instead. In other words, after Joseph guides them purposefully forward, Jacob crosses his hands to favour the younger son. Joseph's thinking "Hey, something's wrong here. That's a mistake. Doesn't dad realize I'm trying to make life easy for him. Honestly! Maybe he's more senile than I thought."

He grasped his father's hand to remove it from Ephraim's head to Manasseh's head. "Joseph said to his father, "Not so, my father, for this one is the first born. Place your right hand on his head" (Genesis 48:18). But it turns out, Jacob is actually a step ahead of Joseph. He refused and said, "I know, my son, I know; he also will become a people and he also will be great. However, his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his descendants shall become a multitude of nations ..." (v.19)

Listen to the confidence of his faith! "I know, my son, I know." The practically blind old man assures the lord of Egypt that he knows exactly what he's doing! He was blessing according to the divine plan, and not according to the normal custom whereby the elder would expect to inherit the father's blessing. Jacob had learned that in spite of what man attempted to do, God had blessed him, the younger. The very thing he himself had once accomplished by deception - when he'd tricked his own near-blind father into blessing him, the younger brother (Genesis 27) - he

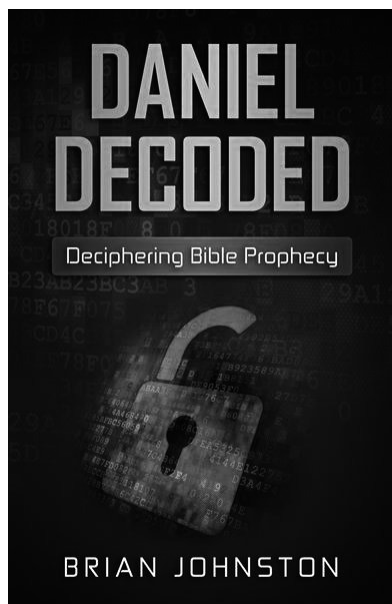
now carries out in full agreement with God's will. This time there was no scheming - it was an act of faith.

Faith recognizes that God's ways are not ours. It took Jacob a lifetime to learn that (and to bow to it). Jacob was no longer attempting to influence the transmission of the blessing through cunning as when he had deceived his own father, but was now conferring the blessing in accordance with the divine plan, and contrary to convention. His faith had matured, and it was reflected in his wonderful threefold description of God as the God of his fathers, his Shepherd and Deliverer!

For four generations this reversed pattern was followed: Isaac was blessed instead of Ishmael, Jacob preferred over Esau, Joseph over Reuben, and now Ephraim over Manasseh. And Ephraim did become a leading tribe in the Northern Kingdom, much superior to the tribe of Manasseh, just as Jacob in faith predicted in directing the blessing according to the divine will. In this way, Jacob ended his life with a magnificent sunset with an intelligent faith reaching out to the continuation of God's promise beyond Jacob's own death but reaching down to the generations to come.

And what about us? Our duties are not yet over. Perhaps in God's estimation, our life's greatest work of faith lies ahead. Let's take to heart the fact that Jacob's greatest expression of faith was as an old man of 147. In spiritual experience, our later years can definitely be our best!

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