

I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant...save me, I pray. (v.10, 11)

When the board members of George Muller's orphanage told him it was impossible to raise enough money to keep the operation going, Muller rejoiced. He said their sense of helplessness would make them rely more fully on the Lord. They did, and God met their need. Complete dependence on God is an absolute necessity if we are to enjoy His blessing and power. But we seldom learn this truth apart from bitter experience.

Jacob had that bitter experience. He had tried to engineer his own blessing from his father and in so doing he angered and alienated his brother Esau. Jacob was a deceiver and trickster. Now we see him worried and anxious – Esau is on his way to him. He fears for his life. I think he does want reconciliation because the guilt is eating away inside him. Jacob decided on his own plans once more though. He knows God has promised him back in chapter 28 that his descendants will be like the dust of the earth (similar promise given to Abraham) and that God will protect him and be with him but still he fears his brother. And so the plan to split the family and possessions into 2 camps so that even if one is attacked the other can escape.

Then he does what he should have done in the first place – he comes before God and admits his guilt and asks God to save him. Isn't it strange how we always seem to wait until the last possible moment? When we have tried everything on our own and it hasn't worked that is the time we turn to God. God is always there – and He should be our first port of call not the last. Jacob would then learn in the wrestling encounter that God is all powerful and dependable. He kept clinging to God. May we always do the same.

Pray: asking for God's help and guidance in that problem situation we are trying to solve on our own.

Reflect: do I depend on God or do I always try and do things in my own strength? Hand over to God those situations you are currently trying to solve yourself.

But Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. And they wept. (v.4)

Jacob has just spent the night wrestling with God and was blessed. He had a great spiritual experience. Only a little later and Jacob has forgotten that spiritual high and is in fear once more. Esau is coming with 400 men. Isn't it amazing that our times of intimacy with God can so easily be forgotten. We take our eyes off of him and turn them to what lies in front and we are fearful. The writer to the Hebrews got it right when he said 'Let us fix our eyes on Jesus.' (Hebrews 12:3).

And yet this experience does not unfold as Jacob feared. These two brothers have been separated for twenty years. They were driven apart because of hatred and deceit. This is all forgotten as they confront each other. There is embrace and reconciliation. No harsh reminders of the past. No words accusing each other of wrong doing. They embraced each other. They shared their hearts with each other. Healing occurred. Praise God for His ability to mend broken relationships.

God is still in the business of mending broken relationships. He sent His Son Jesus to restore our relationship with God. He longs for relationships of all kinds to be restored. Let us allow the wrongs done in the past to be forgotten. Maybe there is hurt and pain in the family – go and be reconciled. Maybe there is division and lack of trust with a brother or sister in the church – go and be reconciled. If we practiced this our troubles in the church would be greatly diminished.

Pray: for forgiveness for broken relationships and your part in them. Ask for God's strength to go and be reconciled.

Reflect: are there broken relationships in your family, in your circle of friends, or in the church family – go and be reconciled. No harsh reminders...no accusing words...rather a warm embrace.

Jacob's sons replied deceitfully. (v.13)

Trouble still abounds for Jacob and his family. He is not where he should be – he has settled near Shechem where he bought a piece of land. Note that none of his ancestors had bought any land (except for the burial plot Abraham purchased). Dinah, his daughter, goes out exploring. She wants to see what the place and the people are like. Shechem, son of Hamor, set his eyes on Dinah, took advantage of her and seduced her. In fact you could say he raped her. Her brothers were furious when they found out.

Shechem wanted Dinah though and asked for her hand in marriage. Although having done wrong he does want to do the right thing. He is obviously attracted to her. The brothers were sneaky and said they would only allow her to marry a man who was circumcised like they were. They spoke deceitfully to Shechem and his father. The brothers had watched their father on many occasions make the best of a bad situation by using deceit. So, like father like sons. But they were not alone in the practice of deceit. Shechem and his father were less than honest when talking with Jacob's sons. Their true feelings were expressed before the elders of their community. The web of deception becomes greatly entangled and the results are usually very tragic. It is no wonder that the Bible admonishes us to always practice truthfulness. It still is the best way.

As the chapter draws to a close we see Jacob condemning the actions of his sons. The sons though have no guilt or remorse; indeed they try to justify their actions. How sad that we follow the sins of our fathers. How sad that we always try and justify our sinful action as well. Sin is sin, plain and simple. There can be no justification – only repentance.

Pray: for forgiveness for sin in your life. Thank God for his faithfulness in forgiving us as we confess our sins.

Reflect: is their sin in my life that I have been justifying? Root it out and confess it before God.

Go up to Bethel...Jacob called the place where God had talked with him Bethel. (v.1, 15)

How wonderful to return to Bethel, the place of God's promises. Throughout Scripture we read of men and women of God returning to those places where God had intervened in their lives in a very special way. The return to Bethel was a source of encouragement to Jacob as God reaffirmed to him the precious promises. Praise God for the "Bethels" in your life.

One of the promises was the change of name from Jacob to Israel. We read of that back in Genesis 32:28. Much had happened since then and still more sin from Jacob. It is by the grace of God that Jacob meets with God again and has his name changed. These verses are a great reminder to us that it is God's grace that saves us. There is nothing in our lives that can make us good; nothing we can do that will save us.

Jacob recognises this and wants to come now completely to God – he should have done this years before. Jacob has allowed all kinds of influence on his life though. There has even been the worship of foreign gods. We see that in verse 2. Those within the household had placed other things before God. Perhaps Jacob had too. They now get rid of those and Jacob becomes fully devoted to God. Their relationship is restored and so is I suspect Jacob's prayer life. We read that they talked at Bethel. Sin has a way of drying up our prayer life and our communion with God.

And just a word on one last sin and cover up. We read in verse 22 of the sin of Reuben as he sleeps with his father's concubine. Israel heard of this we read but that is all that is said. It appears he did nothing with it. It appears he ignored it. Sin should always be dealt with – it should always be confessed before a holy and just and forgiving God.

Pray: giving thanks to God for his glorious grace and for the way he pours it us even when we do not deserve it.

Reflect: is my prayer life and devotional life dry? What unconfessed sin is hindering my relationship with God? Confess it now.

Their possessions were too great for them to remain together. (v.7)

Chapters like this often confuse us and puzzle us. What are they there for? So often we read a list of names most of which we never hear of again. What this genealogy does do for us though is remind us of the blessing Esau was to receive. Isaac, like his father Abraham, was promised many descendants. Although Jacob his other son received the birthright and blessing and the promise of being a fruitful nation, Esau too had many descendants. He was blessed with much but we do not read of him acknowledging God's goodness in this.

Some of the names mentioned would become enemies to Israel in time to come. Amalek (verse 12) stands out as a major one as the Amalekites would end up warring with Israel during the time of Moses.

Esau was gracious in separating from Jacob when their possessions became too much to be together. He could have made a song and dance but perhaps remembered Jacob had the blessing and decided to move out. Moving out served him well, though, as he gained much in the land of Edom. He had wealth, possessions, political power and fame. These were all meaningless though as he did not know God and acknowledge God.

We notice Esau's rebellion against God and his ignoring of God right from the start. Esau's turn away from God is seen in that he took his wives from the daughters of Canaan (36:2). Esau's grandfather, Abraham, had made his servant swear by the Lord that he would not take a wife for Isaac from the daughters of the Canaanites (24:3). But Esau shrugged off the strong warning of his godly grandfather and chose his wives from the Canaanites (26:34).

Pray: giving thanks to God for all his good gifts.

Reflect: do my possessions, my wealth, my job, my status, my family, my home all mean more to me than God?

*His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.
(v.11)*

We come now to one of the great storylines in Scripture – the story of Joseph. We remember the struggle Rachel had in having children and then how God heard her prayer. Here we read in verse 3 that Joseph was the favourite because he was born to his father in old age. Favouritism in the family is always difficult – it breeds so much contempt and hatred. And so here – Joseph got the fancy coat and got to stay at home while the brothers went to look after the flocks. In the midst of this Joseph shared those 2 God given dreams where his brothers bow down to him. This makes matters worse. And although his father rebukes him we read in verse 11 that he kept the matter in mind. I often wonder what Jacob thought about it all. Perhaps he remembered his own dream of the ladder up to heaven and how that dream came to pass.

His brothers were jealous and annoyed. The very audacity of Joseph to presume that they, his own brothers, would ever bow down to him. The end result of hatred was the selling of Joseph into slavery. (At least they could make some money that way - two shekels apiece). And they devised a plan to deceive their father into thinking that Joseph was dead. They had watched their father play the game of deceit well, and now it worked for them. I wonder if any of them had a touch of guilt as they watched their father mourn the supposed death of his son? Probably not! Hatred is such a cruel thing! Oh to guard our lives from it.

In the midst of this terrible cruelty God is still at work. He has plans to fulfil and those dreams of Joseph will come true. In Acts 7 when Stephen is speaking to the Sanhedrin we read in verse 9 *‘they sold him as a slave into Egypt. But God was with him.’* God was still with him – and He is always with us too in the good times and the hard and trying times.

Pray: for help in difficult relationships – ask for a spirit of love and not hatred.

Reflect: as a parent or grandparent do I have my favourites? Try to treat everyone with the same love and care.

She is more righteous than I. (v.26)

Chapter 38 is a little interlude in the Joseph story and it brings us up to speed with some of the happenings in Canaan when Joseph was enslaved in Egypt. It tells us what happened over a fairly lengthy period of time with Judah. It seems in many ways like a chapter about washing your dirty linen in public. The web of sin goes deep into the heart of this chapter. Lying, deception, prostitution, and adultery raise ugly heads. Judah, the one through whom the Promised One is to come, certainly does not come off too messianic in this chapter. In fact, we could say that he was a “chip off the old block.” Jacob had taught his children the concept of deception and lying very well.

But, out of this story come two participants in the genealogy of Jesus: Tamar - we would hardly hold her up as a model for our children, and Perez - the son, of the union between Tamar and Judah. Both names are featured in Matthew 1, the genealogy of Jesus. So, what can we possibly learn from this story?

Here we see how easy it is to blend into the culture around us. Judah marries a Canaanite woman and blends in completely with that corrupt culture. His corruption is contrasted with chapter 39, where Joseph resists the advances of Potiphar’s wife. Judah marries the wrong woman, his children grow up in a wicked place and do evil in the Lord’s sight and are killed off. Judah then sleeps with a prostitute following his wife’s death and then discovers that was Tamar his daughter-in-law. A mixed web of deceit and sin.

Friends we are to live in the world but not to be part of the world. We are to stand out from the crowd. We are to live God’s way in this wicked and depraved generation. And that can be so hard. We are tempted from every side and so much of it looks so nice. We need to learn from Judah’s lesson and not blend in.

Pray: for help in swimming against the tide and strength not to blend in.

Reflect: where am I tempted most to blend in with the culture around? Take steps to remain out of temptations path.

How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God? (v.9)

Raul Corvalan, a taxi driver in Buenos Aires, earns less than \$200 per month, but he has something money can't buy: honesty. One day a woman left more than \$3,500 worth of antique jewellery in the back of his cab. He called the taxi company, got the woman's address, and returned the jewellery box in person. The Argentinean government was so impressed they awarded him and his family a paid holiday at a nearby beach resort. Corvalan said, "I did not expect anything in return because what I did should be expected from everyone."

Joseph was a similar man of integrity. He served the captain of the guard well and as the captain left everything in Joseph's hands so it prospered. The Lord was with Joseph and blessed Joseph. And Joseph was not like his father and brothers – he had integrity; he knew right from wrong. And so when the captain's wife approaches Joseph and tries to seduce him he runs a mile. He will have none of it. He is loyal to his earthly master and his heavenly Father. Think for a moment on the strength of character that Joseph showed. How many men would give in at the sight of a beautiful woman before them trying to seduce them?

Joseph is then unfairly accused and thrown in jail. He does not mump and moan, rather he keeps doing in jail what he did in the captain's house – served well and worked hard and lived with integrity. Joseph was still faithful despite all that had happened in his life. He had a faithful testimony in Potiphar's house and then remained faithful despite temptation (which he resisted), despite trial (which was unfair), and despite tragedy (ending up in prison instead of having freedom). Despite all this Joseph was still faithful to God. And God was faithful to him. We read in verse 21 that the Lord was with him and showed him kindness. God will never forget us nor forsake us.

Pray: for help in living a life of integrity when sin and temptation is all around us.

Reflect: is my life lived with integrity? Do I act with integrity at home? At work? Socially? In the Church?

The chief cupbearer, however, did not remember Joseph; he forgot him (v.23)

It must have been difficult for Joseph. Here he was stuck in prison doing his duties faithfully despite the circumstances when he sees the dejection of two new prisoners. They share their dreams with him and he remembers God and points them to him as he says God interprets dreams. And as he is given the interpretations of these dreams Joseph has renewed hope of freedom. He sees his chance. He puts confidence in this butler to get him released as well. But there is disappointment as the butler forgets all about him for a time. People let us down and they fail us. Even with their best intentions they will forget about us and neglect us. But God never will. He will never leave us nor forsake us and Joseph rested in that promise.

Joseph does not give up in prison. He may be forgotten by man but he is remembered by God. God had granted him favour in prison. He had given him interpretations for the dreams, and he was still with him. He would be released, just not in his time. He would be freed when God's plan was working its way out. This must have been hard for Joseph. He has been faithful and true to God but nothing seems to be happening. Unknown to Joseph the wheels are moving, just very slowly. God is getting everything in place for Joseph to be freed at just the right moment in history for God's plans to be fulfilled.

The same is true in your life as well. Some of you are looking at disappointments and discouragements and you do not know how to handle them. The best thing you can do is bring them to the Lord, learn to leave them in His capable hand and ask Him for the joy and grace you need to survive and thrive in the prisons of life. There is help for you in the Lord! You might feel forgotten, but I hope you know that you will never be forsaken by Him! You may be forgotten by man but you are remembered by God!

Pray: for God's grace in the current difficult situation you face.

Reflect: what is my biggest disappointment at the moment – how am I handling it? Have I brought it to the Lord in prayer?

I cannot do it...but God will (v.16)

Dr. Bruce Waltke was on the teaching team at Dallas Seminary. One day he was in the bank and the teller gave Dr. Waltke too much change. Dr. Waltke pointed this out to the girl, but was quick to explain to her that he didn't do it because he was an honest man, but rather, because Jesus Christ was his Lord. He didn't want the woman to think that his honesty stemmed from his own good nature (which it didn't).

It is so easy at times to say something or accept something and not mention God. Joseph is eventually remembered and brought out of jail. Pharaoh has had these dreams and his finest men cannot help him solve them. Pharaoh calls for Joseph and says I've heard you can interpret dreams. It would have been so easy for Joseph to say yes I can and to do just that. And in our world today that is the culture around us. Bob the Builder said I can and we all think we can. We are self-sufficient. We think we can do it all by ourselves. But we can't.

Joseph knew this. He may have suffered being sold into slavery by his brothers, being falsely accused by Potiphar's wife and forgotten by the cupbearer but he knew God was with him. He knew that it was God who gave him the interpretations and so Joseph takes a deep breath and says it's not me. I can't do it. But God can! And so it is in our lives as well. We can't but God can.

Joseph's profession pointed to God and gave glory to God. Whatever circumstance we find ourselves in that is our role in life as well. The Westminster Catechism reminds us that the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.

Pray: giving thanks to God for the way he leads and guides us through life.

Reflect: what opportunities do I have to point people to God?

Surely we are being punished because of our brother. We saw how distressed he was when he pleaded with us for his life, but we would not listen; that's why this distress has come upon us (v.21)

This is a great chapter where we see the consciences of the brothers of Joseph being reawakened and God working in their lives to restore them. The brothers have gone to Egypt in search of food due to the famine. They come face to face with Joseph but do not recognise him. He accuses them of being spies – is that not what they thought of Joseph back in the fields of Canaan (37:2). They then threw Joseph down a pit – here Joseph has them placed in custody for 3 days. Joseph's actions paralleled their actions many years before, but he did not do it for revenge.

Memory is one of the most marvellous faculties of our nature. Often when a person receives the kind of evil treatment that he has dealt to others, he remembers his sin and is convicted. A step God used in awakening the consciences of Joseph's brothers was having them imprisoned. There God could bring even stronger conviction. Their guilt was beginning to strike home. Before reconciliation can take place there must first be the admission of wrongdoing. To date, the brothers had covered up their actions with Joseph and had forgotten about them. But now, when they were being so harshly treated, they remembered. A pricked conscience never harmed anyone.

They are reminded of Joseph and their treatment of him and confess it openly not knowing that Joseph can hear and understand them. Notice too that as their consciences are reawakened they acknowledge God in verse 28 – this is the first time in all of the years since they sold Joseph and started the lie that they have acknowledged God. When your conscience is pricked it is always a wise thing to act upon it – confess your sin before your gracious God.

Pray: confessing your sin before our gracious God.

Reflect: what is it my conscience brings to mind? If it is sin, confess it before God and deal with it.

And may God Almighty grant you mercy...as for me if I am bereaved, I am bereaved (v.14)

In this chapter we see trust and fear. Jacob has learned to trust God since his night of wrestling. It is hard here for him for he fears losing his youngest son Benjamin, but he agrees to let him go – only after a struggle mind you. His sons have had to convince him to let Benjamin go with them. In spite of all he has been through Jacob still wants to control matters himself. Here he lets go and let's God. So often in life we have to do the same – we cannot control everything ourselves. There are many times when we have to let go and let God. We have to trust and obey for there is no other way.

A by-product of sin is fear. It was with fear Joseph's brothers returned to Egypt. It was with fear they approached his home. It was with fear they related the saga of the returned money to Joseph's steward. It was with fear they sat at the table for dinner. No peace here. No quiet spirits here. They awaited the order for their arrest and expected to die and not live. Their hearts were troubled with fears that their web of deceit and lies had created. You know, when you get right down to it, sinning is not enjoyable for very long.

And so it is always better to avoid temptation to sin. And when we do sin it is always best to confess it quickly before God who is *'faithful and just to forgive our sins.'* (1 John 1:9). God pours out his richest blessing on each of us – even although we do not deserve it. We are a forgiven people. The brothers feared for their lives but then ended up feasting at the table of the Prime Minister of Egypt. They experienced a blessing they did not deserve – a feast.

Pray: asking God to help you trust Him more.

Reflect: do I trust God in all areas of my life? If there are areas of your life you like to retain control yourself then ask God to help you 'let go and let God'.

Please let your servant remain here as my lord's slave in place of the boy and let the boy return with his brothers...do not let me see the misery that would come upon my father. (v.33-34)

God's plan is still working out as Joseph sets the brothers up. His silver cup is found in one of their sacks of grain and they are brought back before Joseph, Prime Minister of Egypt, second in line to Pharaoh himself. The cup is found in Benjamin's sack and he demands that Benjamin be kept as a slave in Egypt. Benjamin is now the father's favourite. Remember Jacob did not want Benjamin to go with them.

What a change of heart Joseph's brothers now take toward their younger brother Benjamin. They are fully aware that he is their father's favourite – just like Joseph before him was. But over the years God had removed their spirit of jealousy. Maybe it was the daily sorrow they saw in the eye of their father that reminded them how hurtful jealousy could be. Maybe it was in knowing that although Joseph was gone their lot in life had not improved. Now, when Benjamin's life is threatened, they did not sell him to the slave merchants. Instead, Judah was willing to sell himself in the place of his brother. Oh the transformation that occurs when God works within a heart.

Judah has changed. You can hear the anguish in his voice here as he pleads to take Benjamin's place. Gone is that arrogant attitude he had concerning Joseph. Then he gladly sold his brother into slavery; now he begs to be a slave himself in the place of his brother. It was this attitude of repentance that signalled to Joseph that his brothers had changed. Perhaps it was for this reason that Judah was chosen to be the one through whom the ultimate substitute for our slavery would come.

Pray: thanking God for his work of restoration in your life.

Reflect: have I changed as a person – am I more Christ-like in my attitude? If so, thank God for that change. If not, ask God to continue that work of change in your life.

It was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. (v.5)

A seminary student earned his way through school driving a bus on Chicago's south side. One day a gang of young thugs boarded the bus and refused to pay the fare. The young man spotted a policeman, stopped the bus, and reported them. The officer made them pay, but then left. After the bus rounded a corner, the thugs beat the driver severely.

The gang members were rounded up, brought to trial, and found guilty. As soon as their sentences were announced, however, the student asked the judge if he could serve their jail terms for them. The judge and gang members were astounded. "It's because I forgive you," he explained. The request was denied, but in the months that followed, the student visited the young men in jail and led several of them to faith in Jesus Christ.

Joseph had been wronged by his brothers – thrown down a pit and sold into slavery. His father was told he was dead. Joseph could have gone after revenge – he had the power now. But he chose to forgive his brothers. In the recent encounters with them he has noticed the change in them as they have been convicted of their sin and shown they have learned from it. Joseph reveals himself to them and they are afraid – afraid because they know the power he has and what anger and hatred can do. Joseph throws his arms around them, forgives them, and tells them all will be well.

Joseph does this because he has recognised that God was at work behind the scenes. All that has happened was due to God's planning. Joseph had been sent to Egypt to save the people. Joseph knew a truth we desperately need to see - that God moves behind the scenes to accomplish His purpose in our lives. It can be so hard at times to see and recognise God at work but we are called to trust in a God who is faithful – he will never leave us nor forsake us.

Pray: thanking God for his work in your life even when you are struggling to see it. Ask him to show you the way ahead.

Reflect: what is happening in my life just now? See God at work. Trust God to work out his plans in your life.

As soon as Joseph appeared before him, he threw his arms around his father and wept for a long time. (v.29)

What a reunion. Joseph reunited with Jacob after 22 years – years in which Jacob thought Joseph was dead and Joseph endured the heartache and pain of having been sold into slavery by his brothers. But the dream God gave to Joseph all those years ago was working its way out. Joseph was in a position of power and authority. More than that he was in a position to help save his family during the terrible famine. He could provide for them.

One can almost feel the overwhelming emotion of an aged Jacob as he gazed on the face of his son whom he had mourned for so many years as being dead. Could this actually be Joseph? It was too good to be true. God often delights in bringing surprises into our lives. That for which we had given up hope becomes a reality. The impossible becomes the possible. Oh what a great God we serve!

In this reunion we see Joseph give his attention to his father. He was willing to care for him just as his father had cared for him all those years ago. We should be caring for our families and looking after them. He gives his affection as well as he stood and hugged his father for a long time. Don't be afraid to show affection to your family. Joseph also gives his acceptance. We should not be afraid to give our acceptance to our family no matter how strange they may be at times. We have to love them and care for them and lead them to Jesus as well. And our acceptance ought to go beyond family and reach out to all in society. The Egyptians did not value shepherds – there was a social stigma around them. Joseph showed his acceptance. We come across and encounter many different people – accept them all and love them like Jesus. And Joseph gives his acknowledgement. He acknowledges his responsibility and does something with it – he provides for and supports his family.

Pray: thanking God for the miracles he has worked in your life and in the lives of those around you. Praise him for being the God of the impossible!

Reflect: what is it that seems impossible in my life just now – ask God to surprise you and us.

The years of my pilgrimage are one hundred and thirty (v.9)

Joseph chose five of his brothers and brought them before Pharaoh. He is up front with Pharaoh and explains who they are and what he wants for them. As second in command, Joseph could just have given them land and left Pharaoh out of it. But he continues to show that great integrity he always has. I often wonder which five brothers he brought before Pharaoh as well – I guess one of them would likely be his blood sibling Benjamin.

As they come before Pharaoh he asks them what their occupation is. Here they are honest as well. They explain they are shepherds. Now shepherds were despised by Egyptians and looked down upon. Here we see God using this attitude to allow the Israelites to settle in a place where they would be separate from the Egyptians and give them space to continue to grow. Pharaoh allows them to settle in Goshen.

Jacob then comes before Pharaoh and blesses him. This could simply be a way of expressing a greeting but I suspect Jacob recognises God's hand at work in the life of his son and also through Pharaoh. Notice Jacob when asked his age describes it in terms of a pilgrimage. Jacob viewed his entire life on earth as a pilgrimage. In this regard, he identified himself with Abraham and Isaac.

Hebrews 11:9, 10 says that Abraham, like Isaac and Jacob, dwelled in tents, were heirs of the same promise and looked forward to the city whose architect and builder was God. Like Jacob we are pilgrims on this earth. This is not our home, our home is in heaven. We are but passing through. May our lives reflect that we are heading home.

Pray: thanking God for his many blessings and ask for his help as we journey through this foreign land.

Reflect: what does it mean to be a pilgrim on earth? Do I treat earth as my home or am I only passing through?

God who has been my shepherd all my life (v.15)

In his old age, Jacob fully realised that God had been his shepherd. It was God who had led Jacob to Laban's home in order to obtain a family. It was God who had guided him back to the land of his fathers. And now God had provided for him through his son whom he had given up as being dead. Another shepherd, centuries later, would write also of God, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." (Psalm 23) What a wonderful picture of God! I trust that I can look back upon my life in those moments before I die and acknowledge how the Lord has been my shepherd all the days of my life.

Jacob said that his grandsons, Ephraim and Manasseh, would be counted among his own sons, which was significant as far as the inheritance was concerned. Although Reuben was the firstborn of Leah, he had lost the birthright because of the gross sin of lying with his father's concubine. This birthright was then passed on to Joseph, the firstborn of Rachel (1 Chronicles 5:1, 2). Joseph had received the double portion of inheritance, and his two sons were numbered among the 12 tribes of Israel as the recipients. God rewards those who honour Him.

Sometimes God does things that are not exactly what we think to be correct. Joseph was somewhat frustrated that his father was bestowing the blessing upon Ephraim, although he was younger than his brother Manasseh. But God knew what He was doing. All we see is the present moment, but God does see into the future, a concept that is difficult for our finite minds to comprehend. As Joseph questioned his father's actions, so we question God's actions. But we must trust Him even as Joseph trusted Jacob.

Pray: thanking God for being your shepherd and ask him to help you trust him more.

Reflect: in what ways has the Lord been your shepherd? What is going on in your life just now that you do not understand? Learn to simply trust God.

When Jacob finished giving instructions to his sons, he drew his feet up into bed, breathed his last and was gathered to his people. (v.33)

Jacob has come to the end of his life. God has been with him and blessed him richly. He knows this full well. He is the man who wrestled with God. He has done much wrong but come to recognise how great God is – the Lord is his shepherd. Before he dies he wants to gather his children and bless them and tell them what lies ahead for them.

Jacob bestowed a particular blessing appropriate upon each of his sons. In order to do that a father must know his family well. That means spending time with them to know, not just their likes and dislikes, but their personalities, their temperaments, their disposition toward God. It is hard for parents to give blessings upon their children today because they simply do not spend quality time with them. Life is fast and busy. Time has to be made for our children – time to talk and read and play together. Make the time, don't neglect it.

Notice that Reuben loses out on the birthright as first born due to his sin. Simeon and Levi miss out on it too on account of their sin against the people of Shechem. And so the blessing falls on Judah and he became that tribe through which the Messiah would come. And as Jacob speaks to Joseph he describes him as a fruitful vine and as one who stood steady despite all the troubles that beset him. Joseph remained faithful to God and God remained faithful to Joseph. That is an amazing testimony and Jacob recognised it and mentions it here. Joseph was able to stay strong because the Lord is his shepherd. The Lord is our shepherd too and will look after us and protect us and help us to grow.

Pray: asking God's forgiveness for the times we have been too busy to spend time with our children. Ask his help in rectifying that situation now.

Reflect: Many of Jacob's blessings were couched in terms of animals: Judah (lion's cub), Issachar (rawboned donkey), Dan (serpent), Naphtali (doe), and Benjamin (ravenous wolf). What kind of animal would describe me?

You intended to harm me but God intended it for good. (v.20)

When the Arthur Andersen accounting firm crashed in 2002 in the aftermath of the Enron scandal, Steve Stoner was one of thousands who lost their jobs. He saw his life savings, which had been invested in Andersen, evaporate. Yet he was able to say, “Losing my job was a gift from God.” Why? Because his career had been taking a heavy toll on his marriage, family, and spiritual life. He had been on the road to burnout.

In his own words: “The collapse of Andersen was a welcomed opportunity to reclaim portions of my life over which I’d lost control. . . . The Holy Spirit seemed to remind me that my wealth had little to do with markets or pension funds. It was in feeling loved and cared for by a heavenly Father who was in control of my life.”

Like Steve Stoner, Joseph trusted in God’s sovereign goodness, no matter what happened. Thrown down a pit, sold into slavery, thrown into jail on a false charge, and his family living as if he was dead, and yet Joseph was mightily used by God and he knew God’s hand with him always. That is why when his brothers come in fear of their lives once more Joseph reassures them by saying ‘*you intended to harm me, but God intended it for good.*’ Joseph trusted God completely.

His brothers were struggling though. Guilt is so very hard to lay aside. After all the years of life in Egypt, Joseph’s brothers had not really forgiven themselves for their actions of the past. Yes, Joseph had forgiven them, or at least they hoped he had. Perhaps the words were just because of his father and, now that Jacob was dead, Joseph would seek his revenge. The brothers, although forgiven by their brother, could not really live forgiven until they accepted that forgiveness and then forgave themselves. The key to the removal of guilt is forgiveness.

Pray: thanking God that his leading and guiding in your life.

Reflect: what guilt am I hanging on to? Do I need to forgive and accept forgiveness?

Then a new king, who did not know about Joseph, came to power. (v.8)

Exodus begins with a link back to Genesis. Joseph and his family are listed and we learn that although Joseph and his brothers are now dead, the Israelites were fruitful and multiplied. God had promised Abraham in Genesis 12:2 *'I will make you into a great nation'*. In Genesis 13:16 *'I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust then your offspring could be counted.'* And then in Genesis 15:5 *'Look up at the heavens and count the stars – if indeed you can count them...so shall your offspring be.'* God has kept his promise. There are many descendants now of Abraham.

Four hundred years have passed and there have been a few Pharaohs in that time. But now Joseph is forgotten about. Joseph is remembered no more. This new Pharaoh does not know him nor remember him. He has missed out on a huge chunk of his nation's history. Now this goes to show how easy it is to forget the good that has happened. We too easily at times forget our past as well. And sometimes that can be a good thing but at others it is not. It does us well to remember the way God has worked in the past. It is good to remember his leading and guiding and how he has saved his people before. What he has done in the past, he can and will do again.

This new Pharaoh is worried by the sheer number of Israelites. He wants to do something about it. He decides to work them hard but the more oppressed they become the more they multiply. And so he takes to drastic measures – he calls in the midwives and tells them that if a boy comes out they are to kill it but if it is a girl to let her live. The midwives fear God though and do not carry out the task. And God blesses them for it. Our task is to be like the midwives – to fear God and walk in His ways only. It does not matter what the world might tell you to, trust God and follow Him only.

Pray: thanking God for what he has done in the past and committing to follow him in the present and the future.

Reflect: *'count your blessings, name them one by one, and it will surprise you what the Lord has done.'* Consider the past blessings of God.

She got a papyrus basket (or ark) for him...then she placed the child in it and placed it among the reeds. (v.3)

Pharaoh has given an order that every male baby born is to be thrown in the river. A lady called Jochebed gave birth to a boy and disobeyed the orders of Pharaoh and kept the child as long as she could. When it became too difficult to keep him any longer she took bulrush or papyrus reeds and made a basket. Since it was to go into water, she covered it with pitch to ensure that it would not sink, and the baby would remain dry. Small Egyptian river boats were made in the same way. She even provided a covering for it to provide added protection for her baby. I believe it is significant that the reed basket was called an “ark” in our text, the same word that is only used elsewhere in reference to Noah’s ark. That’s because it served a similar purpose. Just as Noah’s ark saved lives, even so this basket was intended to save the life of Moses. Moses was saved and grew up in Pharaoh’s palace.

Although brought up in the home of Egypt’s king, Moses had chosen to identify himself with his own people, the oppressed Israelites. When he saw an Egyptian mercilessly beating an Israelite, Moses killed the man. But instead of being rewarded by God, he fled from Egypt and spent 40 years as a shepherd in Midian.

Eighty years after Moses left Egypt, he finally knew why God had allowed him to be humiliated. He understood why the Lord had permitted the Israelites to go through 40 more years of oppression and then 40 years of wilderness wandering. Just before the Jews crossed the Jordan River into the Promised Land, Moses told them that God’s goal was to humble them and strengthen them through the long years of testing (Deuteronomy 8:2) so they would know God in a new way and rely fully on Him. The Lord places a higher value on our long-term moral and spiritual development than on our short-term happiness.

Pray: asking God for patience as we follow his leading in the here and now.

Reflect: what have I learned in my days of testing?

I have indeed seen the misery of my people...I have heard them crying out...I am concerned...I have come down to rescue them...now go I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt. (v.7, 10)

Positioned in front of a Hollywood backdrop, with staff in hand and a stoic expression on his face, Charlton Heston made a formidable Moses in the classic movie *The Ten Commandments*. More recently, the story of Exodus received an animated face-lift in 1998's *The Prince of Egypt*, complete with awe-inspiring special effects. While both movies take liberties with the biblical account of the Israelites' flight from Egypt, they draw attention to an event so significant that its memory permeates the whole of the Old Testament and the history of the Jewish nation.

God responded to the Israelites' cry because of His covenant with Abraham and His ensuing relationship with the patriarchs. But He was also motivated out of compassion for their sufferings, which included infanticide and forced labour. To set His people free, God called upon the reticent Moses. And through the battle of wills with Pharaoh, the escape, and the establishment of society in the wilderness, God's role in the lives of the Israelites moves from that of distant deity to personal and present provider. "*What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him?*" (Deuteronomy 4:7).

Down through the years as we read through the Scriptures we see God continue to hear and help his people. Ultimately he showed this most when he sent Jesus to the earth to die on the cross of Calvary to save us from our sin. Our God has not changed. He is still interested in his people today. And he is still near us when we pray to him. Prayer is such precious gift. To think that the God of the entire universe gives us his ear and listens to us as we pray.

Pray: thanking God for the gift of prayer and for being near us.

Reflect: consider your recent prayers...how has God answered them and shown his concern for you.

What is that in your hand? (v.2)

Moses is looking for a sign – and it is so obvious that he is missing it completely. He has been offering excuse after excuse as to why he cannot serve God and save his people. Here at the start of chapter 4 he says what if they don't believe me or listen to me. He doubts his ability. He is afraid and fearful of Pharaoh. He doesn't trust God fully. And so often we do the same in life don't we. And so God says to him '*What is that in your hand?*'

And Moses looks and sees a staff. This staff defines who he is. This staff is a problem to him for it reminds him of his failure before when he killed an Egyptian and had to flee for his life. This staff reminds him he is a shepherd – stuck in the wilderness looking after sheep. He is held back by his past and by his failures. God tells him to throw it on the ground and suddenly it turns into a snake. Moses reaches out and picks the snake up and it turns back into a staff. The staff is now becoming his potential. By using the staff as God has directed it will become a sign to the people of God's power. In time to come Moses will use that same staff to stretch across the waters and God will part the Red Sea. In time to come Moses will strike a rock with that staff and water will gush forth. But the staff only becomes useful when Moses hands it over to God.

Throughout the Bible we see small and insignificant items used greatly by God. Moses used a staff; David used a sling; Jonathan used a sword. What is it that you have to hand? What will God use in your life if you will but hand it over to him?

Pray: asking God to help you trust him. Pray for him to use you as He will in His service.

Reflect: *What is that in your hand?* What is it you hold on to? What is it you are carrying that defines you? What are you holding on to that holds you back and keeps you from being everything God saved you to be?

O Lord, why have you brought trouble upon this people? (v.22)

So often we hear our weather forecasters say “things will get worse before they get better.” This is certainly a true reflection of what happened to the children of Israel. They are excited by Moses and Aaron and all that they have shared. They recognise God has heard their cries for help and is concerned. But now they are wondering if it is all a wind up – a cruel laugh at their expense. Moses and Aaron have gone to Pharaoh and asked him “to let my people go”. Pharaoh asks in verse 2 “*who is the Lord that I should obey him...?*”

Pharaoh refuses. He can't bear to think of losing his workforce. The people of Israel are numerous and they are great workers. Worse than simply saying no to Moses, Pharaoh then increases the burden on the people of Israel. He punishes them for Moses and Aaron's daring request. Instead of providing them with straw to make the bricks they are sent away to find their own straw. There is to be no decrease in the number of bricks made each day, so they have more work. The slave drivers pushed them harder and harder and we read in verse 14 that they were beaten as well. Things have got a whole lot worse.

The people come and complain to Moses and moan at him. He has caused them more distress than they had before. They can't see how he will save them and help their situation. Moses cried out in bitterness to the Lord for an explanation. He found it hard to believe that a glorious exodus could be just around the corner.

The plans of the Lord were not being frustrated, however. Before conditions would get better for His children, God tested them by allowing their suffering to increase. Sometimes we simply have to trust that God will bring us through the suffering and out the other end.

Pray: for God to strengthen you to endure your present situation.

Reflect: on how often we give up at the first hurdle. Ask God to give you perseverance.

I will be your God (v.7)

Moses has come in fear before God complaining that he tried to do as he was asked but Pharaoh had not listened and the people of Israel now blamed him for causing them even more distress. God moves to reassure Moses and the people. It can be frustrating for us when we do not see the promises of God coming to fruition before us. Of course our problem is we like instant results. We live in the age of the instant – instant coffee, instant families, instant results. The words to Moses here in chapter 6 are that God does care and he has not forgotten his promises.

God reminds Moses he has heard his people's cry for help and he has remembered his covenant. His covenant with his people is a big thing throughout the Old Testament. God keeps his promises. And we can trust him to do likewise. Go through the Bible and consider every promise God makes – then check through the Scriptures to see him answer them all.

God says in these verses that he is concerned about their freedom and their future. He reminds Moses he is coming to rescue them and set them free. He is their God and is going to take them as his children. Of course the great picture we have here before us is of that redeeming act of Jesus. God is looking forward to the coming of Christ and the ultimate bringing of freedom – freedom from sin and slavery. Each of us are sinners. We are caught up in it. We have rebelled against God and gone our own way. In a sense we have cried out to God because of our slavery to sin and he has answered by sending his Son. And yet in another he had that all worked out beforehand. The Scriptures remind us that *'whilst we were still sinners, Christ died for us.'*

Take heart, God says, *'I will take you as my own people and I will be your God.'*

Pray: thanking God for your redemption.

Reflect: on the promises of God.

Since I speak with faltering lips why would Pharaoh listen to me (v.30)

Moses is still not sure about being of any use to God. He is still afraid about going to Pharaoh. He is unsure of his own ability and therefore God's ability to use him as he is. In life we get in the same state don't we? We lack courage and so make up excuses. The great news is God takes us in our weakness and uses us for his purposes. All we have to do is yield our lives to him.

God tells Moses he is going to use him and Aaron to get the Israelites out of Egypt. He goes on to say that he will harden Pharaoh's heart and then stretch out his hand to rescue his people. In the fascinating encounter in the middle of this chapter Moses and Aaron do the snake trick. They throw down the staff and it turns into a snake. Pharaoh is not impressed. He calls for his own magicians who somehow or other manage to replicate the act. The only difference being Moses and Aaron's snake eats all the others. God is already hardening Pharaoh's heart in order to bring out his plans and purposes.

And so on account of Pharaoh's heart being unyielding, the first plague comes upon Egypt. That staff that had been holding Moses back is about to be used by God. Aaron is to stretch it across the waters and they turn to blood. Everything in the waters died and the people could not drink the water. This lasted a whole week. Pharaoh's magicians are again able to replicate the miracle but notice they cannot reverse it – surely that will have been the priority.

God is at work but Pharaoh is unrelenting – he wants to retain the power and the people. His heart will change...eventually. We cannot stop God's plans.

Pray: asking God for courage to serve him and witness for him.

Reflect: on the areas of life you are not willing to yield to God. What is it that stops you yielding that? Ask God to help you let go.

This is the finger of God. (v.19)

The next three plagues arrive on Pharaoh on account of his hard heart. The second plague is of frogs. They were everywhere. The magicians of course replicated the miracle but they could not get rid of the frogs. And the Egyptians would not kill the frogs for they were worshipped by them. They were not allowed to kill frogs because they were a symbol of fertility. This time however, Pharaoh asks Moses and Aaron to remove the frogs. Pharaoh said he would let the people go, but once the crisis was gone, so was the promise. It's much like the promises many people make who say, "Lord, if you get me out of this situation I will be in church every Sunday." As soon as the crisis passes, the promise is forgotten. Does that kind of promise ring a bell with you?

And so the plague of gnats happens. Gnats are little insects similar to midges – they are small biting insects. Throughout the summer in Scotland we are attacked by midges whenever we step out. We try and put sprays on to protect us and sometimes they work and sometimes they don't. Nothing worked for the Egyptians. The gnats were everywhere – on human and animal alike. This time the magicians cannot duplicate the miracle. The power of Satan is vast, but also limited. Look at the words the magicians use too in 8:19 '*This is the finger of God.*' They cannot explain it nor can they duplicate it and so they recognise God at work. Guess what though – still a hard heart from Pharaoh.

And so another plague, this time the flies. But the flies only affect the Egyptians. Goshen, the land where the Israelites reside, is fly free. Again Pharaoh tries the bargaining – if you stop the flies I'll let the people go. Of course he doesn't! Let us not be so hard hearted we cannot recognise God at work. And let us not make promises we have no intention of keeping.

Pray: asking God's forgiveness for the times we have asked for his help, made a promise and then not kept it.

Reflect: on promises you have made to God. Have you or do you intend to keep them?

He sinned again; he and his officials hardened their hearts. (v.34)

Sin is habitual. The more we sin, the more we go on sinning. It entraps us and overtakes us and overwhelms us. We get caught in a downward spiral. This is certainly true of Pharaoh here. Three more plagues in this chapter and his heart is still hard. The plague of livestock and then the plague of boils.

There is an interesting addition to this story. In chapter 9:12 we read for the first time, ‘*But the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart and he would not listen.*’ It seems that the best way to understand this is to see it as God strengthening the rebellion of Pharaoh’s heart. It would have been easy for Pharaoh to let the people go . . . not because he wanted to, but because of the public outcry. Pharaoh is not repentant but he is facing political heat. God takes this hardened man and strengthens his rebellion so that God might use Him for his purposes. This is a frightening passage because it shows that our unbelief can become so hard that all that is left is for God to use our hardness for his purpose. God now is going to use Pharaoh to teach others about His power and grace.

Seventh plague – *hail*. With Egypt’s fish and meat supply already destroyed, God turned his attention to the crops and vegetation – the bread basket of Egypt. He sent the worst hail storm in the history of Egypt. So powerful they struck down people and animals, even trees (v. 25). This plague prompted a momentary repentance and another promise to release the Israelites (v. 27-28). But when the storm’s ceased verse 34 tells us, Pharaoh sinned again and hardened his heart.

We have to watch that our hearts do not become so hard that we cannot stop sinning and rebelling against God.

Pray: for help to stop those habitual sins in your life.

Reflect: on the habitual sins in your life. How can you stop them and guard against them?