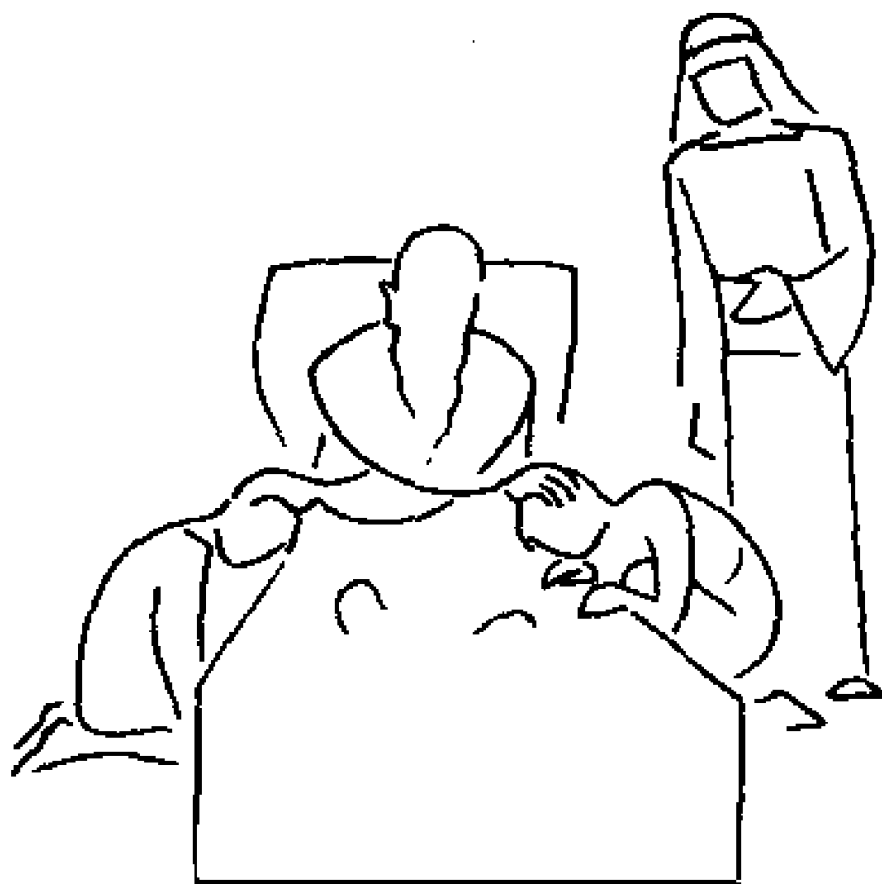
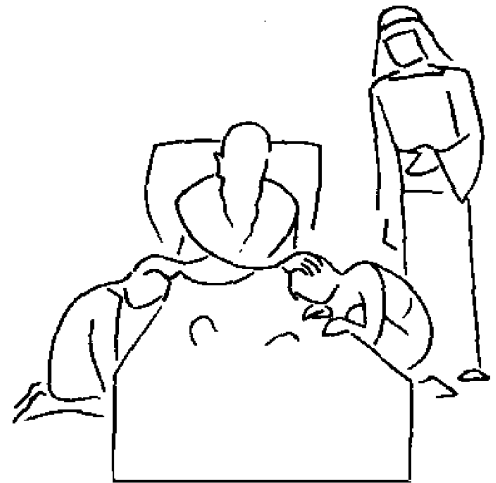


A Magnificent Sunset



A Magnificent Sunset

by Brian Johnston



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 (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 disguising 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? - one which he learned well, for this would become the turning-point of his 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'd 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? - 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 an 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. What's more, he did this in a very public way by giving Joseph a special coat - a totally inappropriate signal to the other siblings. It seems 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 half-brother) into a life of slavery and cover it up by faking his death was a horrible act of treachery - 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 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:

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 [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 this booklet, we aim to spend 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 11th 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 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 147. In
spiritual experience, our later years
can definitely be our best!

1. The devotion of

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. 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. (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 is appointed for men to die once and after this 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 in 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. 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.

So 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!

2. The basis of his

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 appeared 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 indicating 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)

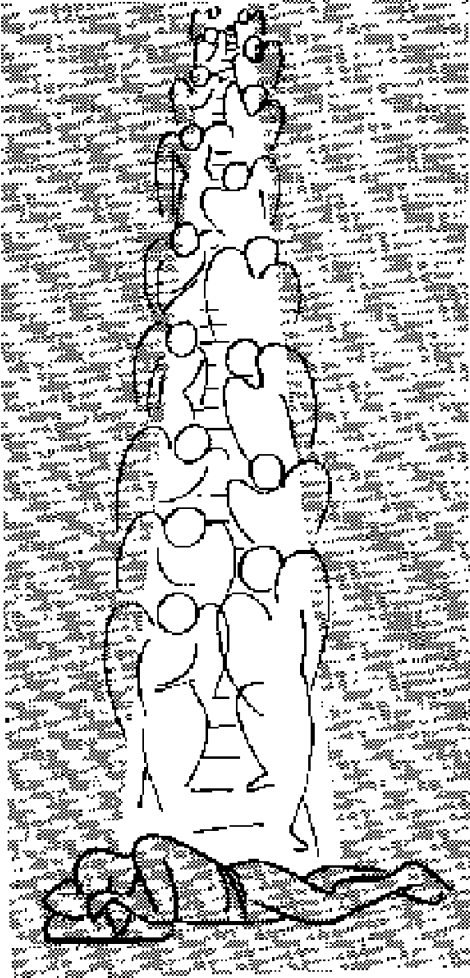
Jacob rehearsed how God Almighty had given him that personal reassurance (28:10-22). He'd never forgotten God's blessing, renewed to him in his generation, having been first spoken by God to his grandfather, Abraham. This was the whole point of being found gathered with his son and grandchildren, for 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 give this land to your descendants after you for an everlasting possession.'* (Genesis 48:4)

Jacob says, "And [God] said to me." God had spoken to Jacob. All 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 (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 clearly 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!

3. A testing of his

Fire officials believed the fire at Luz Cuevas' home was sparked by an extension cord. It was extinguished in 10 minutes but her daughter Delimar's room was gutted, and investigators concluded 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 10 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 6-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 4,000 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 booklet.

We're picking it up from:

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. Israel 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 retold 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 day-dreaming, 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 - 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 life 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 pleasant 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 - transformed it 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.

4. The maturity of

In this booklet, 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 11th 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 close 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)

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 Egyptians."

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!

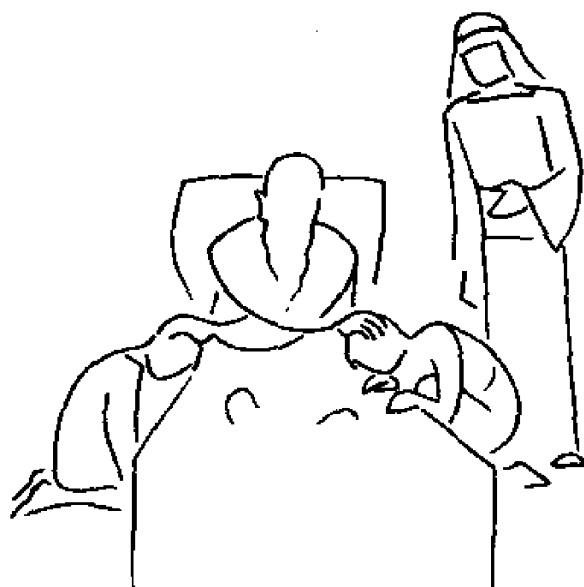
In bringing his two sons for his father's blessing, Joseph had thought it through. Aware that his father had failing eyesight, he'd considerably planned to make life easy for him. Therefore he guided Manasseh, the elder - the one in line for the blessing - with his left hand so that he'd be in the exact 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 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." So 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." (Genesis 48:18)

But it turns out, Jacob is actually a step ahead of Joseph.

[Jacob] 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 does indeed know 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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'Search for Truth',

P.O.Box 111, Leigh, England WN7 1WJ

P.O.Box 748, Ringwood, Victoria 3134, Australia

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e-mail: sft@churchesofgod.info