

BACKSLIDING and RETURN:

coming back to the God you once loved



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Ic þohte þæt ge woldon þurh þa wundorlican race
eower mod awendan to Godes willan on eornost.

[I intended that you should wish, by means of the wonderful
narrative, to turn your heart earnestly to God's will.]

- *Ælfric*

Haws cynnau tân ar hen aelwyd.

[It is easier to kindle a fire on an old hearth.]

- Welsh proverb

Chapter 1 Backsliding

The word *backsliding* is used to describe the experience and condition of a genuine Christian who is no longer walking devotedly and closely with the Lord; whose spiritual ardour has grown cool; who probably seldom prays, reads his Bible, attends church, enjoys fellowship with other Christians in talking about their current spiritual joys and experiences, and about God's blessing in their lives; who no longer serves God as he once did. The backslider used to be a devoted and ardent Christian: now he has slidden back from that closeness to the Lord, and is distant from Him. His heart is rather like the fire I sometimes find when I get up in the morning: all the wood and coal have burned to ashes, and they are grey, though when I clean out the hearth I find deep within the ashes a faint glow still present. The fire has been going out overnight; it is choked with ash. This is the condition of the soul and life of the backslider.

There are backsliders who are not concerned about the state of their souls: they are probably not reading this book, but if you, reader, are one like this, read on and let God speak to you anew and draw you afresh close to Himself in love and zealous service. There are also backsliders who are sorrowful about their present sorry

condition, and would love to return to their God, though they may not know how, or they may ask themselves whether God would in any case wish to receive them back again. If you are a backslider and are worried about your spiritual condition, we hope this little book will help you.

There are many people who begin walking with God with joy and expectation, only to slide back later into unconcern and coolness. But there are also many who later on feel the guilt and shame of what they have done. They have turned their back on a Lord who loved them, came to this world, died for them, and having risen from the dead sent His Spirit into their lives bringing faith, salvation and the immense privilege of being both a child and a servant of the only true and living God. From all of that they turned away, and said by their actions and lives if not in words, that they now had matters which were more important or more strongly attractive to them. Then later they feel the burning guilt, the humbling shame, of how they have responded to their Saviour and their heavenly Father.

Sorrow for sin is always the best beginning in returning to God. Many have felt it. We earnestly hope you are feeling it now, if you are a backslider. But do not give way to loss of hope. There is a way back. God loves you, and is waiting to receive you back if only you will come.

It is not too late; it is never too late while you remain in this world.

We shall turn in the coming chapters to the pages of scripture and see people who backslid, and how the Lord called them and dealt with them.

But maybe ‘backslider’ is not quite the right word for some of them. Some may never have been true believers in the first place, but they know a lot about God, made an outward profession of knowing Him, and took some steps towards serving and worshipping Him. Then they turned away from Him, without ever having closed with Him personally in genuine inward faith, love and commitment. These too are called to come back to where they were, but this time not with outward words and deeds only, but with repentance and faith in the heart, a dedication of themselves to live and die in the true faith and to spend eternity then with the God who patiently called them to come.

May the Lord help us all to understand, and to come closer to Him in warm love and true devotion.

Chapter 2 Cain

It seems a good idea to begin with Cain, as he comes so soon in the Bible, in fact in Genesis chapter 4. The story we read of him and his family shows that he had parents who were imperfect but who truly believed in the Lord: rather like many people these days! They were called, of course, Adam and Eve, and it was their disobedience and sin which brought so much trouble, and even death, into our race.

Cain was no shirker: he had hard work, and he gave himself to it. He was a “tiller of the ground”, an agricultural farmer. I used to live on a farm in Sussex, and I saw something of the early morning starts to the work, of the long hours, of dependence on the weather and the need to persist when the weather was against the farmer’s work - of the physical tiredness.

Cain also believed in God, and had some measure of desire to acknowledge, worship and serve him, for he “brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground”. Now he might well have been very much like you, or like someone else whom you know and are praying for. He knew there was a God who deserved to be worshipped. But Hebrews 11.4 adds more to the details to the narrative. Cain had a brother, Abel, who was also a farmer, but not agricultural, rather he was a

shepherd. So he didn't bring God an offering from the fruit of the ground, but "of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions". The Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. That is, God accepted one man and his gift, and rejected the other.

Why? Why did God not accept Cain and his offering? Genesis doesn't tell us, but Hebrews does, when it records that "by faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain." Yes, Cain knew there was a God, and knew God ought to be worshipped; but he lacked true faith and devotion in his heart. This puts him in the secondary category we mentioned in Chapter 1 - not a backslidden believer, but a man who was near to true religion but never clinched an inward personal relationship with God.

I believe there are many like that today in all churches, Orthodox, Roman and Protestant; there are also a good number of people like it outside any church. Maybe you are one of them: you know God is real, you honour him to some degree, but you do not know him as his child. Cain backslid from that position of being close to true belief, though not in it, and went far from the Lord.

Many people in the state in which Cain started think God will accept them as they are. They think the mental acknowledgement of his existence and right to service is enough, without real faith, which is trust in God and

reliance on his promises and work. Going to church, using the sacraments, being a formal member of a denomination or church, is good, but it is not the inner essence of a relationship with God, of real Christianity: rather such activities should express that inner joining of the soul and God in Christ.

Cain was surprised and disappointed when God did not accept him and his offering, “and his countenance fell”. He ought, of course, to have stopped, examined himself, and made sure he found out what was the cause of God’s rejection of him. But he didn’t. Foolishly, he was angry at God - in fact, the Bible says “very angry”. There are many people today - certainly in Protestant churches, and probably also in others - who are quite unwilling to submit to God’s stringent requirements, and are angry that he will not lower them and will not accept people on a different basis from the one he has established: which is faith. For without faith it is impossible to please him.

Those who live and die without faith will be damned, but people are angry when they hear of judgement and hell, and they think God should accept something less, something which can be offered him with half the heart and not with the whole heart. Some offer religious works, which might even be quite astonishing works: “Did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?” But Jesus declares, “I never knew you;

depart from me, you evildoers" (Matthew 7.21-23). Some hope their goodness will be good enough, but again God tells us, though the Apostle Paul, that our salvation is "not of works, lest any man should boast" (Ephesians 2.8-9). What God looks for is repentance and faith. The very first chapter of Mark's Gospel has this command: "Repent, and believe in the Gospel." Repenting is being sorry for what you have done wrong, and turning from it to a new life. Faith is trusting reliance on God's promises and on what God does for you in saving your soul through his Son Jesus Christ. It is folly, as well as sin, to destroy oneself by being angry at God for requiring this, rather than to obey him with repentance and faith.

But God was kind and patient towards Cain, warned him of the danger he was in, and invited him to consider the cause of his anger and disappointment. He invited Cain to do well, and turn from sin, to be accepted (Genesis 4 verses 6-7). God is kind and patient towards us sinners, for it is not his will that any should perish.

But notice this: God didn't explain himself to Cain, and did not justify himself. God is God, and is not accountable or answerable to anyone - not to you, reader, nor to anyone, religious or otherwise. He has set his standards, fixed his requirements, and does not owe it to us, whom he created, to explain or justify them. He is kind and tells us what we must do to be saved, to be

forgiven and to be his children. He tells us: but it is his right to decide on what terms he accepts us, and these have been made abundantly clear. “Repent and believe in the Gospel.” The chapter in Hebrews which we referred to tells us plainly that “without faith it is impossible to please him” (11, verse 6).

So God didn’t justify himself, or “apologise” to Cain for setting so high a standard: but he did tell Cain what Cain could do about his plight. Patient, reasonable and kind - that is God. But Cain became irrational; he went further from God, and became openly more different from God’s character, more strikingly sinful. Instead of turning to God as God invited him, he became angry now at his brother Abel, in whom God did find faith and whom he did accept, and Cain murdered Abel. It may seem extreme, indeed it is extreme: but consider - are there not many today who would rather kill those who make them aware of the true God than obey God and become Christians in the Bible’s sense of that word?

So Cain took his brother out to the field, and there murdered him. God, seeing what had happened, invited Cain to confess what he had done: “Where is Abel your brother?” he asked, knowing full well the answer, of course, for he says in the next verse, “The voice of your brother’s blood is crying to me from the ground.” So God gave him another opportunity to come clean, to bring his wrongdoing into the open. But Cain spurned

that chance, and instead told God a blatant lie: “I do not know.”

That was very foolish and very sinful. Others have lied to God, and there is a severe penalty for it, if we do not repent. Then Cain went one step worse even than that. He continued his answer to God’s question with sarcasm. Imagine being sarcastic to God! Even *people* dislike sarcasm. Cain challenged, “Am I my brother’s keeper?”

Later the Bible says, “These men revile whatever they do not understand... Woe to them! For they walk in the way of Cain” (Jude 10-11). You can see why.

At this point I wish to write a very serious warning to any reader who has felt the power of God, and known that God requires our obedience and service. I want to say this: you cannot come near to God, turn away, and stay the same. It is impossible. Coming near to God will change you, one way or another. If you do not respond to his drawing and come nearer to him, you will worsen, you will fall lower. “It would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them. It has happened to them according to the true proverb, The dog turns back to his own vomit, and the sow is washed only to wallow in the mire” (2 Peter 2.1-22).

It is a shock that a man who began with imperfect but believing parents, worked hard, and took some steps towards God, should become a liar and a murderer. But these stories are not in the Bible just to tickle our amusement, to entertain us in our evenings, to be to us like Greek myths or Norse sagas which we may enjoy but not follow. They are there to warn and instruct us, for any one of us can go the way of Cain. 1 John 3.12-15 commands us to “not be like Cain who was of the evil one and murdered his brother... and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.” This is written to Christians because of the awful possibility that we can backslide away from our nearness to God, and become deeply and thoroughly sinful - more sinful than those who have never believed.

God’s next question to Cain comes to us all: “What have you done?” It is better that God should ask you now, and that you should reply honestly with truth, however bad the deeds you must acknowledge - better that, than waiting till you are 70 or 80 years old and waking up at night in sweat and anxiety asking *yourself*, “What have I done? What have I done?” Maybe you will ask, and know the answer, but will have forgotten where to find peace for your conscience in the only way that is eternally possible, that is, through the blood of the Cross.

Cain never did repent, as far as we know, and in Genesis 4.11-16 the opportunity for change has passed and been refused by Cain, and God's curse falls upon him:

And now you are cursed from the ground... it shall no longer yield to you its strength; you shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on earth... Then Cain went away from the presence of the Lord and dwelt in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

A footnote tells us that “Nod” means wandering.

But there is an amazing addition to the narrative. Even then God in kindness and mercy saved Cain from what might have been the worst consequences of his sin. For Cain said, “My punishment is greater than I can bear,” and he became afraid that he himself would be murdered by someone he might meet on his wanderings. God did not leave him to this fate, but “the Lord put a mark on Cain, lest any who came upon him should kill him.”

Cain went on to achieve great things. He and his wife had a son, and Cain built and named a city. But his family life and his civic achievements were marred by his estrangement from God. He was a fugitive. We never read of him coming back to God. Yet I think the story tells us that God's mercy is open to the sinner all the time he remains in this world.

If you know God is alive and real, worship and serve him through his Son the Lord Jesus Christ. This is God's call to all mankind, and to you.

If you once knew God and knew that by faith you were his child, but you have slidden back from that love and fellowship with your Lord, come back and put the rest of your life in his hands.

If you are praying for someone to come back, keep at it while that person remains in this world, ever remembering that God's mercy welcomes the sinner and backslider all the time till their eyes close in death. But after that, the judgement.

Chapter 3 Jacob

Psalm 24.5-6 promises blessing, vindication and salvation from a personally interested God for those who “seek the face of the God of Jacob”. But this might not really help you, unless you think you are something like Jacob. So we shall turn again to the book of Genesis and study Jacob’s life and experiences. In doing so, I think many of us will see ourselves mirrored in parts of his story, and maybe in his whole story. It is then that we shall feel we have the right to seek the same God as Jacob worshipped, and will be able to look for blessing, vindication and salvation from him.

Genesis 25.23 tells us that God knew about this man and had plans for him even before he was born. As he grew up, his life began to show a mixture of faults in his character and disadvantages in his circumstances. Let us look at them in order.

First of all, he “was a quiet man, dwelling in tents.” In a society where there was often tribal warfare, and where hunting was enjoyed and valued, here was a quiet man who preferred to be at home. Even physically his body demonstrated this side of his character, for whereas he had a strong, macho brother who loved hunting outdoors for game and whom the Bible describes as ‘a hairy man’, he himself was ‘a smooth man’. Not surprisingly, his

father Isaac preferred Esau, Jacob's brother over Jacob; but Jacob was his mother's favourite. People's children are different from each other, and it often happens that one is more easy to appreciate and to like than another. But it is a bad thing when parents show their preferences so that they allow active favouritism to creep into family life.

My grandfather and grandmother had fourteen children. When one of them died, my father remembered his father coming down the stairs with the dead child in his arms, and saying that though he had a number of other children, he felt the loss of one as keenly as if it were not so, for he loved them all equally. This is how parenthood should be. So Jacob was at a disadvantage because of the character with which he was born and grew up.

He allowed his character to become unpleasant: sly and grasping are words that describe him. Once, when he was boiling pottage, Esau came in from the field very hungry and said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red pottage, for I am famished." Jacob answered, "First sell me your birthright." Sly, and quick-thinking.

What was the birthright? It belonged to the oldest son, who was Esau, and it consisted of a double portion of the father's inheritance after his death. The firstborn son became head of the family and thus succeeded to the charge of the family property and to a considerable authority over younger members of the family. He also

received the father's dying blessing, placing him in a close relationship with God.

Esau was not interested in serious matters like what happens after a father's death; all he wanted was something immediate to stave off his hunger. "I am about to die," he said, "of what use is a birthright to me?" But Jacob pressed him to promise on oath before giving him any pottage. So he swore to him, and Jacob gave him lentil pottage and bread, and he ate it.

In Chapter 27 this promise regarding the birthright begins to work itself out. Isaac is old and his eyesight is failing. Not knowing how long he still had to live, he called Esau his firstborn and asked him to go and hunt game, and then to prepare savoury food such as he loved so that he could eat it as a sacred meal and bless Esau. But his wife Rebekah was listening, and she sent Jacob to the flock to fetch two young goats for her to make a meal from, such as Isaac loved. Rebekah prepared the meal, and Jacob, with her help, disguised himself as his brother, using Esau's clothes which smelt of the field, and took the meal to his father saying lyingly, "I am Esau your firstborn. I have done as you told me; now sit up and eat of my game that you may bless me."

Isaac is suspicious, even though he cannot see properly, "How is it that you have found it so quickly? he asks Jacob. And now Jacob sinks even lower: not only is he cheating, defrauding his brother, and lying to his own

elderly father; now he disobeys one of the Ten Commandments and takes the Lord's name in vain. He says, "Because the Lord your God granted me success."

Do you think God ever blesses sin, and grants us success in it? But this outrageous claim is what Jacob is asserting.

Isaac asks again, "Are you really my son Esau?" He answered, "I am." So Isaac blessed him, and you may read his wonderful blessing in Genesis 27.27-29.

As soon as Isaac finished blessing Jacob with what should have been Esau's blessing, Jacob left him, and Esau came in from his hunting. He prepared food, brought it to Isaac, and said expectantly, "Let my father arise, and eat of his son's game, that you may bless me." Isaac began to realise he had been deceived, and it made him tremble violently. He knows that he cannot revoke the blessing given, even though it was acquired by deceit. And Esau had forgotten that he despised his birthright in the matter of the lentil pottage. What was lost was lost, and could not be regained, and he cried out with an exceedingly great and bitter cry.

"By our sword you shall live, and you shall serve your brother," Isaac told him. His birthright was irretrievably lost, and now he hated his brother Jacob, and he decided to kill Jacob once Isaac was dead. He said this to himself, but he must have been speaking aloud and told it later to his friends, for Rebekah got to find out about it

and she urged Jacob to flee to her brother Laban in Haran, south-east of present-day Edessa on a tributary of the River Euphrates. He should remain there until Esau's fury should die down, then she would send for him to come home. In fact she arranged for Isaac to send him there in search of a wife, so that he would not marry a foreigner, that is a native of Canaan where they were sojourning, and he went to his uncle Laban's home.

All of this gives us a very unpleasant picture of Jacob's character, but to our astonishment, when he stops for the night on his journey, to sleep out in the open with only a stone for a pillow, God speaks to him: "I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land."

How could God love a man like that? Indeed, how could God love you, or me, after all we have done in our lives against him and against other people - maybe even our own families? This is a mystery in God's character. It is written that "God is love." And God also makes promises:

- the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your descendants
- your descendants shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south
- and by you and your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed.

It was from Jacob that the Jews descended, and among them were Kings Saul, David and Solomon, and later from them came Jesus, the Christ. They dwell in the land of Israel, as promised here by God to Jacob; they had their time of glory under those kings; through their Messiah, Jesus Christ, all the families of the earth can receive blessing, indeed, the very blessing of forgiveness and eternal life. God keeps his promises!

But despite God being with him, despite these true and strong promises, Jacob has hard times to face yet. He fell in love with Laban's daughter, Rachel, and agreed to serve Laban for seven years in exchange for the hand of Rachel in marriage. Laban agreed - but on the wedding night he brings him his older daughter Leah, whose "eyes were weak", the Bible tells us. Ah! Now Jacob knows what it is to be cheated! Laban gave him Rachel also in return for the promise of a further seven years of service, so Jacob ended up with two wives, but he loved Rachel more than Leah. History is repeating itself: having come from a family with favouritism, he is now establishing one of his own, with the same pernicious fault built into it.

Not surprisingly, there was strife in his home, as he had caused strife in his earlier home. Leah was hated but she gave Jacob sons. Rachel was barren, and was envious, and said to Jacob, "Give me children, or I shall die!". This made Jacob angry with Rachel, and he points out,

perhaps rather tactlessly, that it is God who has withheld from her the fruit of the womb.

Jacob worked hard for Laban; as he puts it in 31.6, “You know that I have served your father with all my strength.” He was successful in his work with Laban’s animals, and grew very rich, with large flocks, camels, donkeys and servants. Laban’s sons began to complain: “Jacob has taken all that was our father’s.” So Jacob fell out of favour with Laban, his father-in-law. On the other hand, Jacob felt he had been unfairly treated by Laban, saying he had cheated him and changed his wages ten times during the twenty years he served him - fourteen for his daughters, and six for the flocks.

In all, it was not a happy story: cheating, plotting and strife on every hand, even though, looking back, he could say, “But the God of my father has been with me” (31.5).

In the end, God spoke to him again: “Now arise, go forth from this land, and return to the land of your birth.” So he set out, with his family and livestock, to return home., and finally, as told in Genesis 32, a deeper meeting with God awaited him on the journey, one which would change his life for ever. It happened like this.

First he sent a message ahead to his brother Esau, who had wanted to kill him, ‘in order that I may find favour in your sight’. He wanted to restore peace with his brother; he did not want to be killed! The messengers

came back to Jacob with the news that Esau was on his way, with four hundred men. Jacob was both afraid and distressed - and this ungodly man prays:

O Lord... I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness which thou hast shown to thy servant.

How deeply and truly we all need to come to that same realisation about our own lives! Then his prayer continues:

Deliver me, I pray thee, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I fear him, lest he come and slay us all.

And then he reminds God of God's promise:

But thou didst say, 'I will do you good, and make your descendants as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.'

Then he sent lavish gifts ahead for Esau, and then he sent his wives and children across the stream where they were lodging.

And that night he wrestled with the Lord, and his strength was broken. The story is told in Genesis 32:24-31. Do you ever feel like that? Your strength is broken,

you have come to the end of your wanderings, backsliding and sin, you lack to strength to come back to God, and all you can do is hang on to him and cry out to him, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.” He was now limping because of his thigh. Yes, it can hurt to turn back to God; no, not “it can” - it *will* hurt. It is not easy to turn round, relinquish cherished sin, and start all over again with God. But God accepted Jacob’s wrestling, for he says in both the Old Testament and the New, “Jacob I loved” (Malachi 1.2, Romans 9.13).

Coming back to God does not mean that everything will now go all right in your life, that there will; be an end to pain, sorrow and disappointment, for God sends both his sun and rain on the just and the unjust, and in this world man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upwards. We must enter the kingdom through much tribulation. But as with Jacob, so with us: God is with us, and never leaves nor forsakes us.

In the next seventeen chapters (33-49) Jacob experiences more blessings - and surely you will - and more sorrows - as is also our lot in this world. But at the end he speak of

The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has led me all my life long to this day, the angel who has redeemed me from all evil.

Where did we start? We started with those who “seek the face of the God of Jacob” mentioned in Psalm 24.5-6. The psalm promises them blessing, vindication and salvation from God. If your past record, and your present life, is anything like Jacob’s, if you have been a sinful, scheming and unpleasant man or woman for whom not everything went according to your schemes, you may seek the same God as Jacob found and knew, and you will find blessing, vindication and salvation from him if you seek him sincerely till you find him.

There is a further aspect of this story which I would like to draw to your attention, and it concerns Esau, the brother. He had every reason to be angry at Jacob, as surely God has just cause to be angry at sinners. For twenty years Jacob was away from Esau, as we, if we backslide, can remain a long time away from God. When Jacob knew it was time to return, he was afraid of Esau’s wrath and expected Esau to take revenge. Are you afraid now to come back to God, fearful that he will view you with just anger, and reject you for your many years of sin and disobedience?

So Jacob tried to appease Esau with his gifts. Do you hope that you can do something (other than be truly sorry, and change your ways from now on) to make God more willing to accept you? to soften him up? to appease or at least reduce his anger at your sins? You could try,

by being good or by religious devotion, but we all know that it would and could never be enough.

What in fact happened was that Jacob was overwhelmed by a joyful surprise:

But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. (33.4)

That is exactly how God receives us back when we return to him in sorrow for wrongdoing and a determination, if he will help us, to start again in the true Christian life.

Seeing all Jacob's gifts offered to appease him, Esau said, "I have enough, my brother." And God looks at the ransom Jesus Christ paid for us when he died at Calvary, and likewise says, "I have enough." God's anger has been poured out on our Substitute on the Cross, and is spent. He is satisfied. Full atonement has been made. You do not need to appease him before you come back: it has been done for you.

And so Jacob makes a startling statement, full of Gospel truth. To Esau he says: "to see your face is like seeing the face of God, with such favour have you received me" (verse 10). If you come back to God from straying and from a period of sin, repentant and longing to be clean and to make a new start, God will receive you in like manner with favour and with rejoicing.

Chapter 4 Bethel

We have been looking at the life and experience of Jacob, and have seen that he was a sinful, unpleasant character. He outwitted his brother; he lied to his father. That is like us; not that our sins are necessarily the same as his, but “all we like sheep have gone astray” and “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

But we have also seen - mysteries of mysteries! - that the blessing of God was upon him. God didn’t bless him because he was a good man, or because he had deserved God’s love and favour; He blessed him because of His own decision to do so, as we are told in Romans 9.10-16. We read there that it was “not because of works but because of his [God’s] call”, and it is certain that the same reason lies behind God’s blessing upon our lives, if we are his children:

We know, brethren beloved by God, that he has chosen you - 1Thess. 1.4

We are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God chose you from the beginning [or as the first converts] to be saved. - 2 Thess. 2.13

However, despite God's choice of Jacob as someone he was going to bless, Jacob had to come to a crisis, a turning point in his life, a decision to yield to God. It is like this with us. We must be converted; we must repent and believe the Gospel; we must acknowledge and submit to Christ's lordship.

In Genesis 28 we find Jacob leaving his home in Beer-sheba and travelling towards Haran. When night came, he slept out in the open, using a stone he found as a pillow, and God gives him a dream. Acts 2.17 tells us that dreams are one way in which God sometimes speaks to people. He dreamed there was a ladder from earth to heaven, with angels going up and down on it. And he saw the Lord in the dream too, and the Lord spoke to him. Likewise, our conversion, or our yielding to Christ's lordship over our lives, must involve a true, inward, personal experience of God. This is not just a theory; this is dealing personally with a heavenly Father and a Saviour who claims our lives and their service.

In the dream, God revealed something of His purpose for Jacob's life: "The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your descendants." It often happens, when God speaks to you and calls you to hand over your life to his direction, that he includes in his call some idea of where your life and work will lead you. Here was an astonishing revelation! This event took place nearly 4000 years ago, and in it God predicts that Jacob's

descendants, the Jews, will inherit the land of Israel. And today they are still there. God's words are strong and true.

It can be easier for us to respond to a specific direction than to a more general call to submission to Christ as Lord, and it may be that God's call to you will revolve around whether or not you are going to say 'yes' to what you know is his will for your life. Not always: it may be the sheer yielding to Christ as Lord, without knowing where it will lead. Either way, a crisis must come - as it did with Jacob.

Another promise God gave to Jacob at this time of intense, important personal dealings between them was this: "by you and your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed." It is from Jacob's descendants that Jesus Christ came into the world, and as his Gospel spreads throughout the world as a testimony to all nations, so the words of this promise are constantly being fulfilled more and more widely. I doubt that we ever know all that God's call will lead to; but if we understand clearly what we must do, and indeed what we must do as our next step of obedience, we can safely leave the rest with God. He will work it out, probably beyond all that we ask or think.

There was even more. God not only gave promises concerning Jacob's earthly and spiritual descendants -

Jews and Christians - but also vouchsafed some personal promises to and for Jacob himself (verse 15):

I am with you...

I will keep you wherever you go...

I will bring you back to this land

I will not leave you until I have done that of which I have spoken to you.

God promises to be always with every one of his children as they walk with him. He will never leave us nor forsake us.

Now see the change in Jacob - as there will surely be change in you if you meet God and respond to him. Jacob says, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it." He now knows God more nearly and more clearly than he did before this turning point. And so it is on occasions with us: we come to a moment in our lives when there is a special meeting with God - maybe in church, maybe when we are quite alone. God takes the initiative and draws near to us, and speaks to us powerfully and clearly. We can shrink away; but if we go ahead with God, we shall thereafter know him better than we did before, and feel that we are closer to him. Jacob now has a deeper reverence and a more vivid awareness of spiritual things: "How awesome is this

place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”

It is good and wholesome when our reverence for God and for things relating to God is deepened. It is a blessed step forward when we suddenly become more aware of spiritual realities.

None of this precludes the other aspect of our spiritual lives: our gradual persistence in devotion, obedience and spiritual growth. Our daily walk with God is just as vital as the special times God graciously sends us; indeed, perhaps more important, for it forms the sincere background against which the special calls and moments come.

The next morning, Jacob took the stone he had used as a pillow, set it up as a pillar and poured oil upon it, calling the place Bethel, which means The House of God. (Previously the place was known as Luz.) Note this: he was determined to remember, and he took this step to ensure he did remember. And he did remember! It was an event he never forgot, and years later when he was dying, he said (48.3): “God Almighty appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan and blessed me.”

My friend, my reader, my fellow-Christian: take steps to remember the call of God, the moment when he drew near to you and spoke clearly into your life, calling you to know him or to obey him. Keep photographs of the place where it happened; keep a diary; tell your friends

and ensure they know it is a moment never to be forgotten: but however you do it, remember when you met with God! Be like Jacob: when you die, look back on it, and rejoice with peace that you said Yes to God on that all-important day.

And now Jacob makes a vow, that if God will keep those personal promises for his life, “then the Lord shall be my God.” This involves trusting God, and obeying him. He also promised to give to God - a tenth of all that God would give to him. God calls us to yield our finances to him as well as the rest of our lives. It has often been said that “the last part of a person to get saved is his pocket.” That may just be a silly saying, but don’t let it be true of you. Trust, obey, give; let God be your God.

Finally, it was not Jacob only who remembered that vital night: God also took note and remembered Jacob’s response. Twenty years later... one moment: how old will you be twenty years from now? Will you be able to look back to this time in your life, and know that you and God see it as a time when you closed with God and made him your God? Twenty years later (31.13) God spoke to Jacob again: “I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and made a vow to me.”

What a change! From being a sinful, unpleasant character to being one whom God watched and blessed over all those years. May it also be so with you and with me!

Chapter 5 Tamar

This chapter looks at an example of how God views men and women who are his enemies, and how he wishes to treat them. It began when I read Genesis 28 in my daily time of personal Bible reading - got nothing at all from it! I decided I ought to think about the chapter again, and these are the thoughts which followed. I hope they help you.

Verses 1-10 tell us a story about two brothers, called Er and Onan. Er was the older, and they were the sons of Judah, one of Jacob's sons, of whom we read in chapters 3 and 4. Judah chose a woman called Tamar as the wife for Er. But Er "was wicked in the sight of the Lord; and the Lord slew him" (verse 7). We are not told what form his wickedness took, and it doesn't really matter to the story; what matters is that he left his wife Tamar a widow, and childless.

In the Law of Moses (Deut. 25.5-10) , if a man died childless, his brother was required to marry the widow and produce descendants for his deceased brother. Although the practice was formally included into the Law given by Moses, it existed before Moses' time. Not only do we find it in this chapter, but traces of the practice are also found among ancient Indians and

Persians, and has also been practised among Tartars, Afghans and Abyssinians.

It was the oldest brother who had this duty among the Jews, so although there was another brother, Shelah, Judah told Onan to “Go in to your brother’s wife, and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her, and raise up offspring for your brother.” However, Onan refused. The Bible doesn’t say why, but certainly Onan knew that the offspring would not be his, and any son whom Tamar bore to him (but legally deemed Er’s son) would destroy Onan’s chances of inheriting Er’s share of the family property. Maybe that was the reason: in any case, he refused in his duty to his brother.

It says, “He spilled his semen on the ground... and what he did was displeasing in the sight of the Lord.” You may hear this passage used as a text against birth-control, with the conclusion that birth-control is displeasing to the Lord. But this is a misuse of the text: the reason the Lord was displeased with Onan is that he refused to provide offspring for his deceased brother. So the Lord “slew him also” (verse 10).

God does not very often slay the wicked, rather storing up their sins till the Day of Judgement. But sometimes he does: the case of Ananias and Sapphira in the Book of Acts is another case. It is never right or wise to trifle with God, or to sin thinking you will be allowed to get away with it. Be sure your sin will find you out, whether

in this life or at the Day of Judgement. 1 Timothy 5.24 tells us that the sins of some men are conspicuous, pointing to judgement, but the sins of others appear later. Romans 15.4 and 1 Corinthians 10.11 tell us that the Old Testament stories were recorded for our instruction and warning.

There are however some verses of scripture which point to what God does to the wicked:

- The Lord's curse is on the house of the wicked
- He who hardens his heart will fall into calamity
- He who is often reproved, yet stiffens his neck, will suddenly be broken beyond healing
- Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."
- Proverbs 3.33; 28.14; 29.1; Romans 12.19

From this we can learn at least three things:

- We must not play with sin
- We ourselves must not take revenge on others: that is God's prerogative
- We must not fear that there is no justice in the universe, and that people who sin against others are allowed to get away with it.

But let us turn back to the story in Genesis 38. Judah was afraid that the third brother, Shelah, would also refuse to do the duty of a brother-in-law and marry Tamar, and rather than risking that, instead of telling Shelah to take Tamar, he tells Tamar to return to her father's house "till Shelah my son grows up". This was deceitful: he tells Tamar her return to her father's house is only temporary, but he intends it to be permanent. He wants to be rid of her, and of his family's duty towards her. He thinks he can outwit both Tamar and God. We sometimes find ways - don't we? - of sinning knowingly and thinking we can get away with it by putting God in a position where there is nothing he can do (or so we think). Deuteronomy 6.16 says, "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test." That is what we do when we act like that. We forget that God is God, and claims our obedience; or we put it out of our minds.

But Judah did not get away with it! In the course of time, after Shelah had grown to manhood, Judah went to visit a friend, who lived near Tamar, and Tamar heard that he was coming. Now *she* outwitted *him*.

She put off her widow's clothes, put on a veil, wrapped herself up, and went and sat 'at the entrance to Enaim', which was on the way by which Judah was coming. When Judah saw her, he assumed she was a prostitute, and he wished to make use of her as such, not knowing

that she was his daughter-in-law. Before she agreed, she struck a bargain with him: he would give her a kid from the flock, and as a pledge he gave her his signet, his cord and his staff. He gave her these pledges, and she let him have his way with her in the way of prostitutes. Then she left, still wearing her veil. As she had hoped, he had made her pregnant.

Judah got the promised kid from the friend he was visiting and tried to send it to “the prostitute” whose patch was “at Enaim by the wayside”, but of course he failed to find her. “No harlot has been here,” he was told.

Next we see something deeper about Judah’s own shifty character, his double-standards and show of self-righteousness. What ugly traits! For about three months later, he is told that Tamar has played the harlot and is pregnant from it. “Bring her out, and let her be burned,” he says. Do you ever have such double standards in your dealings with other people? He was happy enough to use a harlot, but he thought a harlot in his family should be burned.

Tamar sent word to him, together with the signet, cord and staff he had given her as a pledge for the kid. “By the man to whom these belong I am with child.” Finally he acknowledged his guilt: “She is more righteous than I, inasmuch as I did not give her to my son Shelah.”

She gave birth to twin sons, Perez and Zerah. Perez was a direct ancestor of Joseph, whose wife Mary bore our

Saviour Jesus Christ, and who brought up our Lord as his earthly father. We see this in Matthew 1.1-3.

I want to comment on two of the main characters in this story: Judah and Tamar. We have seen Judah's sins and deceits. We have also seen the wrongs done to Tamar. Like Judah, you are a sinner, as I too am; probably, like Tamar, people have wronged you - certainly they have me also.

Yet mercy came to the world even through this sad story in Genesis 38. God's purpose was worked out despite Judah's sins and deceits, and despite the wrong done to Tamar. And God's purpose will be worked out in your life, despite your past and present sins, if you turn now to him in sorrow and repentance and begin to walk with him.

And be assured that God's purpose will be worked out in and through your life, despite the wrongs people do to you - the ways they cheat and despicably use you - if you trust him.

Chapter 6 Manasseh

Does your personal name have a meaning? Mine does: “David” means *beloved*, and it is a good name to have. My parents actually chose it because I was born on Christmas Day, the day which celebrates our Saviour’s birth in Bethlehem, the City of David. In fact, I am often curious about the reason why parents chose the particular names they gave their children.

A man in the Bible was called Manasseh, and that means “making to forget”, almost as if an Albanian boy were called Harrim. Why was Manasseh given this unusual name?

His father was Joseph, and God made Joseph forget two kinds of things: bad ones, and good ones. As you read on, I think you will see that God in his kindness also makes us forget things. We shall look first at the bad things Joseph forgot, which he calls “all my hardship”. They centre round his brothers, his master’s wife, and a butler, their cruelty, lies and ingratitude respectively.

His Brothers

Joseph was his father Jacob’s favourite son. You would think Jacob would have had the sense not to have a favourite son, in view of all the trouble his own parents’

favouritism caused in his own life: not to mention his grandfather Abraham's preferential treatment of Isaac over Ishmael. It does seem that the same folly is sometimes repeated generation after generation in our families, even today. Joseph was the elder of two sons born to Rachel, the wife (you will remember from Chapter 3) whom Jacob really loved. But his brothers hated him because of their father's favouritism, and they were seldom if ever pleasant in the way they spoke to him.

He began to have dreams which meant that one day, although they were older, he would one day rule over them. That was fair enough: it was in any case true, and God was already showing him something of what lay ahead in his coming years. But sometimes it is not wise to tell too many people, too stridently, what God has vouchsafed to the secret of your heart. When he told his brothers, they said, "Are you indeed to reign over us?" (Genesis 37.8).

One day when his brothers were pasturing the flocks near Shechem, Jacob sent him to them to get news of how things were with them and the flock. They had moved on to Dothan, and after inquiries, Joseph found them there. They saw him coming whilst he was still a long way away, and they agreed to kill him, so intense was their envy and hatred towards him. They planned to kill him, throw his body into a pit, and tell their father

that a wild animal had killed him. “And we shall see what will become of his dreams.” But of course they could not thwart God’s purpose and working!

There was some goodness in the soul of Reuben, the oldest brother. Perhaps also, as the oldest, he felt a sense of responsibility: after all, he could expect one day to be head of the family. He said, “Shed no blood. Cast him into this pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand upon him.” He intended to come back later and rescue him, and restore him to their father. So they took Joseph’s robe - a special one Jacob had made for him as a gift - and threw him into the pit. It was empty, with no water at the bottom.

Astonishingly, and callously, they all except Reuben then sat down to enjoy a meal. Reuben had gone away from the group for a while, no doubt waiting to rescue Joseph. While they were eating, a caravan of Ishmaelites approached, traders carrying gum, balm and myrrh down to Egypt. Then Judah, whom we met in the previous chapter, suggested they should not kill Joseph but rather sell him to the traders. “What profit is it if we slay our brother? he asked. Even he had a residue of conscience, for he added, “Let not our hand be upon him, for he is our brother.” The other brothers accepted this idea, pulled Joseph out of the pit, and sold him to the traders for twenty shekels of silver. And the Ishmaelites took Joseph to Egypt.

Reuben was horrified when he returned to the pit and found Joseph gone, and exclaimed to his brothers, “And I - where shall I go?” no doubt meaning he would get the blame from his father for the disappearance of the younger brother. They agreed to kill a goat and dip Joseph’s robe in the blood, and to show it to Jacob, who, when he saw it, concluded (as they had wished him to), “Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces.” He was inconsolable.

Joseph was sold as a slave to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, in fact captain of Pharaoh’s guard.

Cruelty!

The next chapter of Genesis tells us the story of Tamar, and then Chapter 39 takes up again the story of Joseph.

His Master’s Wife

It can be summarised fairly easily. God was with Joseph - as he is with his people to this day, including in regrettable circumstances. God made him successful, and all that he did prospered. So Potiphar made him overseer in his house, in charge of all he had.

Joseph was a good-looking young man, and Potiphar’s wife was strongly attracted to him. She asked him to have sex with her, but he refused, both out of respect for Potiphar, and out of the fear of God: “How can I do this

great wickedness, and sin against God?" But she pressed him day after day, until one day she grabbed his clothing and tried to pull him to her. But he left the garment in her grasp and fled from the house.

She now felt spurned, angry and vindictive, and called the men of the household, telling them that Joseph had tried to have sex with her, that she had cried out with a loud voice, and that he had therefore fled, leaving the garment behind.

When she told Potiphar, who seems not to have known either his wife or his slave very well, Potiphar believed her and had Joseph imprisoned, and there he stayed for more than two years.

Lies!

The Butler

In prison with Joseph was Pharaoh's chief butler who had offended Pharaoh in some undisclosed way. The butler dreamed, and Joseph interpreted the dream for him:

Within three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your office; and you shall place Pharaoh's cup in his hand as formerly, when you were his butler. But remember me, when it is well with you, and do me the kindness, I pray you, to make

mention of me to Pharaoh, and so get me out of this house. For... I have done nothing that they should put me into the dungeon.

Sure enough, the interpretation was true, and the butler was restored. But he forgot Joseph, and made no mention of him to Pharaoh for two years.

Ingratitude!

And yet Joseph said later on, “God has made me forget all my hardship” (41.51). How does God make us forget the things it is best for us to forget? In three ways:

- nature
- providence
- grace

By nature, he has created us in such a way that our mind usually reduces or filters out unpleasant memories. I know a man in Christ whose wife left him for another man, and he had to bear not only the shame of it, but also the sense of a vacuum outside him in his empty home, sucking his very soul from him. When she came back, three years later, that period of time seemed as nothing, and he remembered most vividly the new friends and the new activities he had pursued with them during those

years. This is God's kindness active in creation, in the human nature he has given us.

In providence, God often gradually changes our circumstances, leading us on to new pastures and experiences. By Genesis 41.41 Joseph's skills had been so recognised by Pharaoh that Pharaoh said to him, "I have set you over all the land of Egypt." He became, one might say, prime minister. Later in the chapter he is happily married to an Egyptian woman, with two sons. It was their first-born whom he named Manasseh - Harrim - "making to forget": "For God has made me forget all my hardship."

In the realm of grace, God calls us to forgive and forget when we have been wronged. Within Matthew 5.43-48 are his words, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you," and Matthew 6.14-15 says, "if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

When Joseph's brothers were eventually forced to come to Egypt in search of grain because of severe famine, Joseph said to them, "Come near to me, I pray you. I am your brother Joseph... do not be distressed or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life... So it was not you who sent

me here, but God. Later he said, “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good.”

Those were the bad things God made Joseph forget; what were the good ones I mentioned above? For Joseph says, “God has made me forget all my hardship *and all my father's house*” (Genesis 41.51). There were good things he lost at home, and there were good things he would have had but never did, if he had remained with the family.

Genesis 30.1 tells us how earnestly Joseph was wanted before he was born. To be a child whose birth is really wanted and brings joy is a precious privilege whose value cannot be calculated. Such was Joseph's.

The, till he was 17, before he was sold, he was loved by both parents, and in Genesis 33.2 we see his father providing special protection for him and Rachel his mother.

As a son in a family with flocks to shepherd, he was working in a secure, healthy and prosperous environment.

All this he lost when he was sold by his brothers into slavery. But he reached the point of saying, “God has made me forget.” There are times in our lives when we must forget the good things God has taken from us, and accept with trust and gratitude the new circumstances

into which he has led us, and where he wants us to shine for his glory.

If Joseph had not been sold into slavery, he would have grown up and taken his place in the continuity of the family. Sometimes we need to forget our unfulfilled ambitions and futures and, like Joseph, be led by God into new, different and unexpected circumstances. In fact, God was involved from his very conception and birth, as he is in ours, for it is written, God remembered Rachel and opened her womb (30.22). God remained with him from the beginning to the end of his life, giving him in time fulfilling and worthwhile work (especially during the famine when he saved so many lives), a happy family life, and finally that strange biblical concept, a good death. He lived to see his greatgrandchildren by Manasseh, and perhaps one more generation of his descendants by his other son Ephraim (Genesis 50.23). When he died, he was so close to God that he was able to pronounce a true prophecy by the Holy Spirit, and he was at peace in the promise of a decent burial in the land of his birth. This is a wholesome death.

A third forgetting

It is not only we who forget, but God also makes us a firm promise that he himself will forget certain things: he promises to forget our sins:

- I will remember their sins and their misdeeds no more.
- I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more.
- I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.
- I, I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins.

- Hebrews 10.17; 8.12; Jeremiah 31.34; Isaiah 43.25

You may find it hard to forget your sins, and they may trouble you for years after you have made a full confession of them and, as it were, seen them carried by your Saviour Jesus Christ up to his Cross on Calvary. But if God has forgotten them, it is now time for you also to forget - to leave them where they belong, in the past and fully forgiven. You must of course have been sorry for them, confessed them, and trusted God for the forgiveness that was purchased by the precious blood of Christ shed for all our sins. You must have turned away from those sins, as far as lies within you, and if you wronged someone else when you sinned, you must have apologised (if the persons are still alive and you can

contact them) and you must have made restitution wherever possible to the persons wronged. But if you have sincerely done those things, God, who makes us to forget, has himself promised to remember your sins no more. Do not let them trouble you any longer.

So God wants to “make us forget” the wrongs people have done us; the wishes he never granted us; and the sins we have put behind us. There is one thing God has promised he will *not* forget: us!

Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb?
Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.
Behold, I have graven you on the palms of my hands.

- Isaiah 49.15-16

Chapter 7 Not entering God's Blessing

God's blessings come to us both as an invitation and as a call. A promise he made to his people of old, the Jews, was that he would bring them out of Egypt and give them the land of Canaan:

- I promise that I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt, to the land of the Canaanites ... a land flowing with milk and honey
- I will bring you into the land which I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob; I will give it to you for a possession
- I have said to you, "You shall inherit their land, and I will give it to you possess, a land flowing with milk and honey."

- Exodus 3.17; 6.8; Leviticus 20.24

God planned that the land of Canaan would be divided among the tribes of his people, each receiving an area allotted to it, as set out in the instructions God gave to Moses recorded Numbers 26.52-54.

Of course, they had to respond to the promise, regarding it also as God's call to them. They had to leave Egypt, journey through the wilderness, cross the Jordan into the

promised land, take possession of it, and settle in it. And by and large, they did.

But the tribes of Reuben and Gad thought they could take something better than God's promised territory. They looked at the land of Jazer and Gilead and saw that it was "a place for cattle", and they possessed a very great multitude of cattle (Numbers 32). But Jazer and Gilead were east of the Jordan, outside the land God had promised, and to which he had called them.

So the Reubenites and the Gadites came to Moses and to Eleazar the priest and to the other leaders, and made this request: "let this land be given to your servants for a possession; do not take us across the Jordan... we will not inherit with them on the other side of the Jordan and beyond."

They knew God's will and purpose; they knew the blessing and the future he promised them. But they chose something else. It reminds me of people who hear and accept the word of the Gospel, who begin to walk with the Lord, and then, as it says in Mark 4.19, "the delight in riches, and the desire for other things, enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful." You start well; you get so far; then you stop progressing.

They got their request, but it had implications both for them and for the other Jews.

Firstly, Moses asked them, “Shall your brethren go to the war while you sit here?” They could not advance the purposes of God in harness with their brethren, whilst they themselves chose to remain outside the blessing of God. So it is with you: if you do not move forward with God into the fulness of his promise and call as you know it, you will not be able to fulfil the part he wants you to play in the work of the Church and the Gospel.

Secondly, Moses says, “Why will you discourage the heart of the people of Israel from going over into the land which the Lord has given them?” If the Reubenites and Gadites held back, it would be a discouragement to all the others. And again, so it is with you: if you shrink back from fully entering the blessing and the work God has for you, your bad example will discourage others from moving forward. They will be tempted to follow your example, and to hold back themselves. Also, if they do attempt to serve the Lord in a work which ought to have you with them, their burden will be that much heavier, and this weight will cause weariness and discouragement.

Moses goes on to tell them that they are doing no better than their forebears: “Thus did your fathers when I sent them from Kadesh-barnea to see the land... they discouraged the heart of the people of Israel from going into the land which the Lord had given them.” Can you look back to people who have made a start in Christian

discipleship before you and have let the Lord down and failed to live up to expectations and hopes? And will you do no better?

Such hesitation, such backsliding, angers the Lord: “And the Lord’s anger was kindled on that day... And behold you have risen in your fathers’ stead, a brood of sinful men, to increase still more the fierce anger of the Lord against Israel!” God does not sit sublime and distant on his throne in heaven, uninterested in and unmoved by our obedience or disobedience. Refusal to move forward in his will angers him against us.

What’s more, your and my decisions affect other people. We are not isolated individuals; we are part of the body of Christ, the people of God. “If you turn away from following him, he will again abandon them in the wilderness; and you will destroy all this people” (verse 15).

One would have expected the combination of such promises and threats to persuade them to change their minds, but alas! they were determined to step outside of God’s call and to have their own way. So they arranged a compromise. That dreadful word “compromise”! Have nothing to do with it in your obedience to God. Go all the way; have no compromise with disobedience. They said in Numbers 32:16-18:

We will build sheepfolds here for our flocks, and cities for our little ones, but we will take up arms, ready to go before the people of Israel, until we have brought them to their place; ... We will not return to our homes until the people of Israel have inherited each his inheritance.

They would join in God's work, whilst keeping their own homes at a distance. Yes, you can join in the evangelism and other ministry of the church whilst your heart is far from the Lord. But it is a compromise. Moses accepted the arrangement, and told them that, once the Lord's work had been completed, "you shall be free of obligation to the Lord."

God, let me never be free of obligation to you! The sincere Christian longs to walk with God, to serve him, to enjoy his presence, smile and blessing, all the days of his life. To be free of obligation to the Lord? Where else should we go? He alone has the words of eternal life. But this thin, meagre arrangement was made for the Reubenites and Gadites. May it be always far from me, and from every reader of this little book!

In verses 33 and 40 Moses gives them the land they coveted; and the half-tribe of Manasseh joined them too, east of the Jordan, outside the promised land. They were

outside God's call, outside his blessing, and nearest to their enemies.

And surely, those enemies came. Turn to 1 Chronicles 5.26 and you read:

So the God of Israel stirred up the spirit of Pul king of Assyria, the spirit of Tiglath-Pileser king of Assyria, and he carried them away, namely, the Reubenites, the Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh, and brought them to Halah, Habor, Hara, and the river Gozan, to this day.

This is the first mention in the Bible of any captivity in the history of the people of Israel after they had left Egypt, and who were the first to fall? "The Reubenites, the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh." These were "carried away" into captivity and exile by the king of Assyria.

If you halt in your Christian walk and work and hold back from God's known will and promised blessing, you will be more vulnerable to the temptations that come from the world, the flesh and the devil. We cannot halt, and remain where we are: either we go forward in the Christian life, or we stop and our hearts are hardened, our resistance weakened, and our work and witness ruined. As you read this, you may be at any stage in your Christian pilgrimage: but if you have stopped moving

ahead with God, if you have held back, or have backslidden from where you once were, be warned by the example of the Reubenites and Gadites; repent; come back to a closeness to the Lord whom you once began to serve and to love; and enter the blessing to which God will lead you.

Chapter 8 Keeping the Soul

It is God who saves your soul, but in this chapter we look at some aspects of your part in responding to his grace. Consider these verses:

God's firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: "The Lord knows those who are his," and "Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity." - 2 Timothy 2.19

Be the more zealous to confirm your call and election, for if you do this you will never fall.
- 2 Peter 1.10

Only take heed, and keep your soul diligently, lest you forget the things which your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life. - Deuteronomy 4.9

We see here that there are two sides to our salvation: God saving us, and us working out our salvation in obedient and holy response. In 'keeping your soul diligently' there are two things to avoid, and three things to do. We need to avoid sin, and our own personal weaknesses or temptations. We need to pray, to feed on the scriptures, and to practise the things listed in Acts 2.42: sound Christian doctrine; fellowship with other

believers; holy communion, sometimes called the Eucharist.

Deuteronomy 4 warns us as to what may well happen if we do not keep our souls diligently.

Verse 9 warns us that we shall soon forget our conversion to Christ, the time when we first believed in him, and all it meant to us then. “Therefore take good heed to yourselves” (verse 15).

Verse 10 warns that you will probably forget God calling you into his covenant, that firm agreement between God and you that he will be your God and look after you throughout life and death, and that you will be one of his people, walking obediently with him; as it is written in Ezekiel 11.20, “They shall be my people, and I will be their God” and Revelation 21.7, “He who conquers shall have this heritage, and I will be his God and he shall be my son.”

Verse 14 warns us that we shall forget God’s standards, if we fail to keep our souls diligently - his standards in faith and morals, in family, at work, among our neighbours and friends. We shall discredit his reputation as people see us fall.

Verses 15-18 warn us that we shall also forget what God is really like, and will find a distorted picture of him forming in our minds - a faulty view of his character and

of the ways he acts. It will not be possible to serve him, if you forget what he is like.

Verse 19 warns of the danger of falling into idolatry, including the worship of stars, “things which the Lord your God has allotted to all the peoples under the heaven”. You must never look to a horoscope to foretell your way, nor to any similar form of divination, such as coffee grounds. God made all things, and he alone rules his universe. Your future is in his hand, and he alone determines the course of his world and the lives of men and women. Idolatry can be worshipping a false god; it can also be treating things God has created as if they themselves were God or possessed divine honour and power. Colossians 3.5 tells us that covetousness is also idolatry: something you do not own but desire comes to mean more to you than God does, or something you already possess means more to you than your salvation through Christ. This is idolatry too.

Leviticus 19.31: Do not turn to mediums or wizards; do not seek them out, to be defiled by them: I am the Lord your God.

Deuteronomy 18.10-11: There shall not be found among you anyone who... practises divination, a soothsayer, or an augur, or a sorcerer, or a charmer, or a medium, or a wizard, or a necromancer. For

whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord.

Jeremiah 10.2: Learn not the way of the nations, nor be dismayed at the signs of the heavens... the customs of the peoples are false.

Keep your heart with all vigilance; for from it flow the springs of life. Those are the words of Proverbs 4.23, and they are saying the same as our chapter in Deuteronomy. What do you want to flow from your heart to other people, and to God? Pure 'water' of praise, godliness and blessing. Then keep your heart with all vigilance.

The deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt is often used as a picture of our deliverance from the guilt, power and penalty of sin. Our Deuteronomy passage says in verse 20 that God "has taken you out of Egypt". We thank God for the salvation Jesus Christ purchased and wrought for us in his death and resurrection. The verse goes on to say "to be a people of his own possession". That is God's will and plan, the purpose of his work in you.

Walk closely with him in holiness. If you have wandered, tell him you are sorry, change your ways, and come back to the Lord. If you are walking with him, remain close to him throughout life.

Chapter 9 Absalom

In order to understand this story, you need to know a little about King David's family. I shan't tell you about all his family - only the members relevant to this one story. He had two wives, Ahinoam and Maacah. By Ahinoam he had a son called Amnon; by Maacah he had a son called Absalom and a daughter called Tamar. Thus:

Ahinoam = David = Maacah

Amnon

Tamar Absalom

Amnon became infatuated with his half-sister, Tamar, and forced her to have sex with him. Then his 'love' quickly turned to hatred: maybe he was horrified at the incest he had committed; maybe it was his reaction to her response to him. Be that as it may, he hated her.

Absalom, Tamar's full brother, therefore hated Amnon. This is normal enough: if someone hates your sister, you will hate probably him.

Two years later, Amnon became 'merry with wine'. It doesn't say he was sloshed out of his mind, but certainly he was in a relaxed mood of bonhomie. Absalom, still

nursing his hatred, saw his opportunity and got his servants to kill Amnon whilst he was in his cups.

Then Absalom, knowing that he had killed a son of the king, fled to Geshur in the north-east and stayed there for three years. How would any father feel about the murderer of his son? He could expect David's wrath.

However, Absalom was also the king's son. What a tangled situation! David tried to resolve it by sending his military commander Joab to bring Absalom back to Jerusalem - but Absalom was required to live apart in his own home, and not come into David's presence for two years.

This did not suit Absalom: he wanted full admittance to the court to be restored. He burned Joab's barley field, to put pressure on Joab, who had the king's ear, to persuade the king to readmit him. This course of action was successful, and Absalom came back into the king's presence.

Then (2 Samuel 15.1-6) Absalom - who is clearly a nasty piece of work generally - spends four years stealing the hearts of the people over whom David rules, wooing them towards a revolt against the king. At the end of the four years, he has himself proclaimed king in David's place, the ceremony being held in Hebron, which had previously been the capital of Judah.

David flees from Jerusalem, but places spies there. As David is fleeing, another unpleasant character called Shimei follows him, cursing him, throwing stones at him and flinging dust.

Absalom goes even further: in 17.2, 5 he seeks David's life, and in 17.24 and 18.6-8 he makes war on David. What kind of a man makes war on his own father? what kind of a man tries to kill his own father? Not only that, but more than 20,000 men lose their lives in this war started by Absalom: a lot of blood to have on one's hands; a lot of ruined and broken families, left without husband and father.

David's forces are victorious, and Absalom is accidentally - should I not rather say providentially - caught by the head in an oak tree. His mule goes on, and he is left hanging there helpless. Joab finds him and kills him (18.14-15).

Such was the life and death of a thoroughly rotten man. How did David his father feel about him? You may be surprised. You should definitely see how God feels about His children who leave his ways and go far away into sin.

2 Samuel 13.39, when Absalom was in Geshur: *The spirit of the king longed to go forth to Absalom.*

2 Samuel 18.9 at the start of the war against Absalom: *Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom.*

2 Samuel 18.29 after David's victory, the first thing David asks when learning of the victory: *Is it well with the young man Absalom?*

2 Samuel 18.33, when David hears that Absalom is dead: *The king was deeply moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept; and as he went, he said, “O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would that I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!”*

That must be one of the most astounding expressions of fatherly love in all literature! And remember that the Old Testament and the New Testament both call David a man after God's own heart (1 Samuel 13.13; Acts 13.22-23). David's love for the evil rebel Absalom is akin to God's love for his erring children, when they backslide: he longs for them to come back, to find forgiveness, restoration and peace.

But there is a difference between David and God. David said "*Would that I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!*" but it was not possible for David to arrange that. He would have died instead of Absalom, but he couldn't. But for God, it was possible: he sent His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, as a man, and Jesus did die instead of us. As it is written in 1 Peter 3.18, "Christ also died for sins, once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God."

As Isaiah puts it, in the first text I ever preached on, “He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities... the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (53.5-6).

What then should you do? If you were once living as a Christian, loving and obeying God in Christian service and pure living, and if you have subsequently fallen away from that sort of life - come back. You are invited; the way is open. God will receive you. Return to him, tell him all that you have done; tell him you are truly sorry; ask him to forgive you, and to give you by his Spirit a new beginning in following Christ. And determine from now on to live close to Christ till the very end of your life.

Chapter 10 Josiah

We can often see ourselves, our experiences, our lives and our situations in the pages of scripture, and this is certainly true of the story of King Josiah of Judah, who ruled in the 7th century BC. We read about him in 2 Chronicles 34 and 35. In fact, he started as a boy king, aged 8; he reigned for 31 years in Jerusalem.

In the eighth year of his reign, when he was aged 15 or 16, like so many teenagers, he began to think seriously about God and life, about God's purpose for his life - or, as the Bible puts it in 34.3, "he began to seek the God of David his father" (i.e. his forebear).

Before Josiah came to the throne, there had been a good king and two bad kings. Much was accomplished for good under the good king, Hezekiah, but the evil king, Manasseh (696-642), reversed it all, and it was lost. Manasseh desecrated the Temple; he introduced Assyrian ways in religion; he brought in astral worship, spiritism, divination and human sacrifice. He "shed very much innocent blood" (2 Kings 21.16).

His long reign was followed by that of King Amon (642-640), who followed his example.

All this meant that Josiah came to the throne at a time of national ruin in religion and morals. As we saw, in his mid-teens he began to seek God. At the age of about 19,

he began seriously to *serve* God, purging Jerusalem and Judah of false, pagan religious practices. His work spread beyond Jerusalem and Judah, reaching the tribes of Manasseh, Ephraim, Simeon, Naphtali and “all the land of Israel”.

It was in my mid-teens that I sought and, by God’s mercy, found the Lord, and when I was about 18 when I began to find opportunity to serve him seriously. I wonder whether you, reader, or someone you know or are advising, is similar.

Ten years after he turned to God, now aged about 25, he is still serving God. Having spiritually purged the nation’s religion, he now begins physical repairs on the Temple. During the course of this work, Hilkiah the priest found the book of the Law of the Lord given through Moses, and Shaphan the secretary read it to the king. Hearing the Bible read to him, Josiah comes to a deep commitment to scripture. He expresses this is the age-old Middle Eastern way of tearing his clothes, and he sends men to make earnest prayer to God about the words of the scripture, because he knows that “our fathers have not kept the word of the Lord, to do according to all that is written in this book” (ch. 34 v. 21). A few verses later, he himself makes a covenant, that is a solemn agreement and commitment, to walk after the Lord and to keep his commandments with all his heart and all his soul.

Again, how similar this is to the experience of many Christians! We come to a moment, even though we are already believers, when our experience of God leaps a great and significant leap forward. Pentecostals may call it being ‘baptised in the Holy Spirit’; Nazarenes and many Methodists use the word ‘sanctified’; others have no specific theological definition for such experiences, but they know that at one moment maybe weeks, months or years after their conversion, they met God in a new, deeper, fuller way which lastingly affected their inner life and their outward ministry.

Nor do I mean in any way that such an experience comes only once. There may well be, and often are, a number of such life-changing turning-points in a believer’s life.

Now look to the end of the chapter (verse 33) and see the blessing Josiah’s service and leadership were to others:

Josiah took away all the abominations from all the territory that belonged to the people of Israel, and made all who were in Israel serve the Lord their God. All his days they did not turn away from following the Lord the God of their fathers.

So why am I putting all this grace and blessing in a book on backsliding? Well, as so often is the case, the pattern of Josiah’s life and service for God continued along these lines for a good many years: actually, another

thirteen years. He is now aged 39. And my point is that **nothing particular, nothing special, is recorded during those years.** It can well be that you find God's direction and calling for your life, as Josiah did, when you are a young man or woman, and that you are called upon to exercise the same service faithfully and consistently, without flagging, for a long time. Then there comes a moment when once again God speaks to you, but your inner ears have grown dull of hearing, and you do not hear, or recognise, or follow God's voice.

This is what happened to Josiah. When he was about 39 (ch. 35.20-24) he fails to recognise what God is saying to him, and things now go terribly wrong. Neco, King of Egypt (610-594 BC), went up to fight on the River Euphrates with intention, made clear from the Babylonian Chronicle, of helping the Assyrians who were making a desperate stand against the Babylonians at Harran.

Josiah went out to war against Neco, attempting to block the advance of the Egyptian forces. Neco sent envoys to Josiah saying that this war had nothing to do with Josiah; Neco was not fighting Israel. He even said, "God has commanded me to make haste. Cease opposing God, who is with me, lest he destroy you."

Now of course, lots of nations do battle against each other and believe God is on their side! It is not always true. But in this case, Josiah was meddling in a war that

did not concern him, and the words of Neco had the truth in them. But Josiah does two things:

1. He does not turn away from this war which is nothing to do with him
2. He disguises himself and fights incognito against Neco.

Why did he resort to subterfuge? The Bible does not say, but his attempt to use deceit was folly. The scripture says: *He did not listen to the words of Neco from the mouth of God, but joined battle in the plain of Megiddo.*" Had he grown so accustomed to serving God year in and year out in the way he was called to, that when God spoke to him he failed to hear? Or was it that he had grown so used to living in God's favour that he became complacent or over-confident, believing that God would protect him, come what may? Whatever the reason, it is plain that he was no longer close enough to God to know his voice.

In the battle the archers shot him and he was carried back badly wounded to Jerusalem by his servants, in a chariot. And there he died; there his service to God was brought to an end. This was a sad loss not only to Josiah himself, but also to the whole nation: "All Judah and Jerusalem mourned for Josiah" (v.24).

His son Jehoahaz reigned in his stead for three months, and then the king of Egypt deposed him and laid tribute on the land. This loss of their independence was the first major tragedy to overtake the kingdom of Judah.

There is much to learn from this tragic ending to a good man's long and faithful service. We must keep our walk with God close, intimate, alive and real, as long as we live, ready to hear and obey when he speaks to us.

You may need to hear God's voice at any time during your service and your life. He may have some new call, direction or prohibition for you in a short or maybe, like Josiah, after a long period of your service. Our only safety lies in walking close to him day by day all the days of our life.

Chapter 11 The End of Summer

You shall say to them: Thus says the Lord,

When men fall, do they not rise again? If one turns away, does he not return? Why then has this people turned away in perpetual backsliding? They hold fast to deceit, they refuse to return.

I have given heed and listened, but they have not spoken aright; no man repents of his wickedness, saying, “What have I done?” Everyone turns to his own course, like a horse plunging headlong into battle...

How can you say, “We are wise, and the law of the Lord is with us”?

We read those words in Jeremiah 8.1-8, and then we read what the scribes and wise men had done:

They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, “Peace, peace,” when there is no peace.

You and I need to beware, when we have backslidden away from the Lord in sin, or disobedience, or in spiritual coldness, that a friend or religious leader does

not “heal our wound lightly”: does not tell us that matters are not as serious as we had thought, thereby encouraging us not to be really sorry for our ways, and not to undertake a deep and radical repentance and return to the Lord. If we have turned away from the Lord, our returning to him must be with sorrow for the past and a sincere, thorough and heart-felt intention to mend our ways from this moment on.

Towards the end of this chapter in Jeremiah we read these stark and appalling words: “The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved.”

May this chapter be a warning to us all: when we sin, whether for a short or a prolonged period, we have to return deeply to the Lord in a way that encompasses and affects all our way of life.

The Lord help us to do so!

Chapter 12 Baal-peor

When visiting Albania I always enjoy it when someone in the summer, invites me into his court-yard, cuts some of his grapes from his vine, and invites me to sit down to conversation with him in the yard, in the sunshine, over grapes, followed by raki and Turkish coffee. It is one of the memorable pleasures of my work. But I have never been to a desert. If grapes are so enjoyable when they are eaten merely for friendship and pleasure but without a sense of actual need, how much more they would mean to us if we were travelling across a desert and came upon some inviting, lush grapes hanging from vines which we were free to eat from!

This is how God describes his early relationship with his people. He says that he found them “like grapes in the wilderness” (Hosea 9.10). Those who say God lacks emotions don’t seem to read their Bibles very well, for here is God enjoying the covenant and relationship he has set up with his people in the early days of that covenant.

The next thing he says is, “Like the first fruit on the fig tree, in its first season, I saw your fathers.” I live in Britain, and we import food from all over the world, so that there is hardly a time when a particular food is unavailable because it is out of season - and some which

are, like locally grown asparagus, cherries or tomatoes, are so costly that one tends to shy away from buying them. The only exceptions which come to mind as I write are turnips, swedes, parsnips and brussels sprouts, which are deemed better once they have had the frost of winter, and are not expensive, and fruit which grows in the wild, such as blackberries and chestnuts. But in countries like Greece or Albania, where there is a much stronger habit of eating local produce when it comes into season, people are in a better position to understand the import of these words from Hosea, “like the first fruit on the fig tree, in its first season.” It is something you look forward to, make plans for, and enjoy when it comes because you are delighted after waiting for it. That is something like God felt when he had chosen, called and received his people in the Old Testament, and set up that relationship and covenant in which he says, “I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” It was like tasting the first figs when they come into season.

But the very next words in Hosea introduce a jarring note of disappointment and sadness: “But they came to Baal-peor.” What is Baal-peor? and what happened there that was so destructive of God’s joy in his people?

The first three verses of Numbers 25 tell us:

The people began to play the harlot with the daughters of Moab. These invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate, and

bowed down to their gods. So Israel yoked himself to Baal of Peor. And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel.

In other words, God's people intermarried with pagans and were drawn away from God to worship false gods. The passage tells us that this is like playing the harlot: the believer, in this simile, is married to God, and any worship given to another god is likened to harlotry.

Please also note this very seriously indeed: if you are a Christian and are not already married, you must marry only in the Lord. It may cost you dearly to take a stand and to insist on this principle for your life, but if you marry an unbeliever, your Christian life and service will be hindered or may well be altogether choked. You and your future husband or wife will walk together in agreement, and your lives will be a sweet sacrifice to God and your service for him as a married couple in your home and shared way of life will be a blessing to others and a pure joy to your Lord, only if you share a common faith in Jesus Christ.

Psalm 115 tells us idols of false deities "have mouths but do not speak, eyes but do not see, hands but do not feel, feet but do not walk," and goes on to add: "Those who make them are like them; so are all who trust in them."

You will without any doubt become like the god you worship. And so Hosea says, “They consecrated themselves to Baal, and became detestable like the thing they loved.”

Just like the people of God, so today there are many people who make a good start in following Christ, but later on they are far from God, not like God, and growing more and more like the very things which have drawn them away from God.

So Hosea 9.1 says, “You have played the harlot, forsaking your God... They have deeply corrupted themselves... and became detestable like the thing they loved.”

But note also God’s amazing patience. It was perhaps 500 years from the time of Moses, when the people were like grapes and new figs to the Lord, to the time of Hosea. During that time, “in many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets” (Hebrews 1.1), calling them back. Jesus himself expressed his emotion for their capital city in Luke 13.34: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!” See God’s love, patience and persistence in sending his messengers and calling, inviting these wayward people to come back to him.

Is he calling you to return to him?

Five hundred years... but eventually the time comes when God says, as he does in Hosea 9.7, “The days of punishment have come... Israel shall know it.” Proverbs 29.1 tells us that “he who is often reproved, yet stiffens his neck, will suddenly be broken beyond healing.” This is a stark and solemn warning which we dare not risk taking lightly. It is after all in the Bible! Back to Hosea 9, where God says, “Woe to them when I depart from them!” and Hosea echoes it with, “My God will cast them off, because they have not hearkened to him” (verses 12, 17).

God said he would punish them, but what was the punishment to be? 9.17 tells them: “They shall be wanderers among the nations.” They were to be driven from their land, Israel, and scattered throughout the world. You only have to know a little bit about the National Socialist (“Nazi”) period in Germany to find out whether the Jews had to take God’s promise of punishment seriously. It is estimated that 6,000,000 of them died.

What drove them from Israel? There were three main causes: emigration, trade and persecution. For example:

- In 722 BC many were carried off into exile by the Assyrians

- In the 6th century BC there was the exile in Babylon and Egypt
- in Ptolemy's time (322-285 BC) many went to Alexandria
- in the time of Antiochus (223 BC ff) many went to Phrygia and Lydia
- In Pompey's time (1st century BC) many went to Rome
- Tiberius deported 4000 to Sardinia
- By the time of Christ, many were in Greece: you can see a memorial to the Jews of Yannina to this day
- From 70 AD, when the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, they were spread throughout the Mediterranean world
- During the early Christian era, many moved to Gaul, Spain and North Africa
- In the period ca 1000-1500 AD many migrated to Poland, Hungary, Russia and the Ukraine
- In 1190 there was a massacre of Jews in York, England
- In 1217 the Jews in England were forced to wear yellow badges to denote their Jewishness
- In 1290 all Jews were expelled from England - about 16,000 of them
- In 1492 about 200,000 were expelled from Spain and fled to Portugal, North Africa and the Balkans (I have visited the Jewish cemetery in Prishtina)

- Following this many emigrated to north-western Europe and to the United States of America
- In the Second World War only Albania protected its Jews during the Holocaust and sheltered Jews who escaped from Serbia, Austria and Greece; in 1991 almost all emigrated to Israel.

Here is a list of the countries which had more than 10,000 Jews in 1991:

Argentina	Latvia
Australia	Mexico
Azerbaijan	Moldova
Belarus	Netherlands
Belgium	Romania
Brazil	Russia
Canada	South Africa
Chile	Spain
France	Sweden
Georgia	Switzerland
Germany	Turkey
Great Britain	Ukraine
Hungary	Uruguay
Iran	Uzbekistan
Israel	USA
Italy	Venezuela
Kazakhstan	

“They shall be wanderers among the nations,” God said. That word came true, and holds true to this day - though from the late 19th century He has begun drawing them back to Israel for his own purposes.

How does this apply to you and me? We must come to terms with the fact that God’s word is true: his promises of blessing, but also his promises of judgement. This is always true, in every age and every place, in all circumstances. Heaven and earth may pass away, but his word never will.

With regard specifically to Hosea 9 and yourself, are you like God’s people here? Did you once make a good and promising start at following the Lord, and have now let him down and gone back on your profession of faith and your commitment to Christ’s lordship?

If God is calling you back, do not leave it too late. Do not allow the words of Jeremiah quoted in the previous chapter ever be true of you: “The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved.”

Chapter 13 Gibeah

You may wonder why there is so much in this little book from the Book of Hosea. The answer is simple: Hosea was a prophet to whom the theme of backsliding and return had a very deep meaning. His wife deserted him, and God said that was how God's people had treated God. But Hosea loved her and took her back; God said this is what he wished to do with his own people.

Just as we saw in the Chapter 10 that our Christian experience can take a sudden and important leap forward, so also it can take a sudden new turn backwards, a turn which can affect us deeply and seriously for a long time afterwards. In Hosea 10.9 God says, "From the days of Gibeah, you have sinned, O Israel." Does this mean that the people did not sin before the events at Gibeah? Were they all uninterrupted living lives of purity, devotion, commitment and obedience before then? No! Of course not, for if a man says he has no sin, he deceives himself. But the events at Gibeah marked a new phase, a new beginning, in the development of their sinfulness. Let us look at what took place.

The story is told in Judges 19-21. It is a long story, and you can read it for yourself, slowly, thoughtfully and

prayerfully in your Bible. I shall summarise it fairly briefly:

A certain Levite took a concubine, they quarrelled, and she left him for four months. Then he went to fetch her back, with kindness: he was not harsh and condemning, but invited her pleasantly to return to their home with him. She agreed, and towards evening they set off for the return journey to their home. That night they got as far as Gibeah, but they could not find anywhere to spend the night. Eventually, an old man offered them overnight accommodation, and they went to his home, where they washed, ate and drank.

Then the town homosexuals appear on the scene, and said to the old man (ch 19 v. 22): Bring out the man who came into your house.” The old man answered them, “No, my brethren, do not act so wickedly... do not do this vile thing.” The homosexuals were breaking at least three of God’s laws:

- Deut. 26.13 requires that kindness be shown to Levites
- Leviticus 19.33 requires that “when a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong”
- Leviticus 18.22 bluntly calls homosexual sex as an abomination.

But there followed a night of terror, of gang rape and murder. In the words of scripture:

The men would not listen to him. So the man seized his concubine, and put her out to them; and they knew her [i.e. raped her], and abused her all night until the morning. And as dawn began to break, they let her go. And as morning appeared, the woman came and fell down at the door of the man's house where her master was, till it was light.

And the master rose up in the morning, and when he opened the doors of the house and went out to go on his way, behold, there was his concubine lying at the door of the house, with her hands on the threshold. He said to her, "Get up, let us be going." But there was no answer.

Everyone comes out of this story badly, except the old man who took them into his home. The town homosexuals were corrupt violent men, quite capable of normal sexual activity with a woman despite their choice of what the Bible calls abomination. The Levite obviously had no concern for his concubine, and his actions in these verses clearly give the lie to his kind words earlier on. Maybe it was because of his poor character that she had left him in the first place and gone back to her father's house in Bethlehem.

He put her on his donkey, left Gibeah and returned home. There he took a knife and cut her up limb by limb, into twelve pieces, and sent the pieces throughout the territory of Israel. And all who saw it said, “Such a thing has never happened or been seen from the day that the people of Israel came up out of the land of Egypt until this day.”

Gibeah, where the rape and murder had taken place, belonged to the tribe of Benjamin. The other tribes assembled, and sent men to Benjamin demanding that the men who had committed the wickedness should be given up to be put to death, “that we may put away evil from Israel”. They wanted their society cleansed of this wantonness and the men who had committed it. But the Benjaminites refused.

War followed, and “the Lord defeated Benjamin before Israel.” So great was the slaughter that 25,000 men of Benjamin were killed; only six hundred Benjaminites survived the battle. The town of Gibeah was put to the sword, and later other towns, “and the men of Israel smote them with the edge of the sword, men and beasts and all that they found. And all the towns which they found they set on fire.”

War can escalate into unmeasured cruelty, brutality and bloodshed, as we saw in Kosova in 1998-1999. Men have not changed.

There is now a danger that the tribe of Benjamin will be lost entirely, for the other Israelites had taken an oath not to intermarry with them. “One tribe is cut off from Israel this day. What shall we do for wives for those who are left?”

The horror continues. They remember that no-one from Jabesh-Gilead had come to the assembly which decided to demand the surrender of the rapists, nor joined the war against Benjamin. So the excessive cruelty wrought on Benjamin is now compounded by further sin, and another massacre and a mass kidnapping takes place. They sent 12,000 soldiers to Jabesh-Gilead, killed all the men, children and women who were not virgins. The 400 virgins were taken captive and handed over to the 600 remaining Benjaminites. But that was 200 to few. The number was made up by the capture of a further 200 young women who came to dance at an annual festival at Shiloh.

There is a final comment by the writer of Judges. The very last verse of the story, and indeed of the book, says, “In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes.”

Now let’s come back to Hosea 10.9, where you will remember the words, “From the days of Gibeah, you have sinned, O Israel.” The verse continues: “There they have continued.” In fact, they ‘continued’ for about 300 years before Hosea preached to them. That is a long time

for God to chastise, forgive, punish and call them. But eventually the time for patience ran out and judgement was promised. In the next verse God says, “I will come against the wayward people to chastise them; and nations shall be gathered against them.” We must take God’s threats and his words seriously and act upon them. For judgement did come. In 722 BC the Assyrians invaded Israel. You can read about it in 2 Kings 17.5-8:

The king of Assyria invaded all the land and came to Samaria, and for three years he besieged it... and he carried the Israelites away to Assyria.

Verse 7 explains that “this was so, because the people of Israel had sinned against the Lord their God, who had brought them up out of the land of Egypt.” What does the reference to Egypt mean? God had set them free under Moses from hard slavery to the Egyptians and had brought them to the land he promised them, a land flowing with milk, honey and divine blessing. But they had turned their back on God’s earlier blessings.

Has God blessed you in the past in some way you know is true and real? And have you turned away from him and his ways and blessings? These records are in the Bible because people today are like people then.

Notice the two ways in which God describes the judgement he will send. He says:

- I will come
- Nations shall be gathered against them.

God is behind the judgement; it is his doing. But he chooses his instrument in imposing it. So it is today. If God disciplines or chastises his backsliding children with judgement, it is his work, but the form it takes, the ‘tools’ he uses, are of his choosing.

Even in this chapter where judgement is promised, the next verse but one repeats God’s call to them to repent and return to God:

Sow for yourselves righteousness, reap the fruit of steadfast love; break up your fallow ground, for it is time to seek the Lord, that he may come and rain salvation upon you.

“Fallow ground” which, like their lives, had borne no fruit for a long time. In metaphor, it is time to break up such ground; in plain appeal, it is time to seek the Lord. There is once again the promise of salvation if they do. But they ignored it, continued in their backsliding and unfaithfulness, and the promised judgement came.

To sum up then:

- Sin can move ahead into a new ‘gear’ or phase in your life.

- You may have turned your back on God's rich blessings in the past.
- You may have refused to put sin away, and have added further sin.
- We can ignore God's invitation to repent, return to him, and be forgiven and accepted for a new beginning in Christ.
- We can persist in this till God sends judgement.

“Sow for yourselves righteousness... for it is time to seek the Lord.

Chapter 14 The East Wind

Ephraim ... pursues the east wind all day long.

- Hosea 12.1

If you live in England, the east wind comes from Russia, where there is little to hinder it between the Ural Mountains and where you are. It can be bitingly cold in winter. But if you live in Israel, the east wind comes across the Syrian desert, and is scorchingly hot. This is the wind that Ephraim was pursuing: hot, dry, destructive. It is called the sirocco, and you find it mentioned in a number of places in the Bible:

- Genesis 41.6 seven ears, thin and blighted by the east wind
- Isaiah 27.8 he removed them with his fierce blast in the day of the east wind
- Jeremiah 18.17 like the east wind I will shatter them before the enemy... in the day of their calamity
- Ezekiel 17.10 will it not utterly wither when the east wind strikes it?
- Jonah 4.8 God appointed a sultry east wind, and the sun beat upon the head of Jonah so that he was faint.

Ephraim was the dominant tribe among the ten northern tribes which made up Israel, and here he is a cipher for

the whole of Israel. The verse is a little fuller than quoted above; it begins:

Ephraim herds the wind, and pursues the east wind all day long; they multiply falsehood and violence; they make a bargain with Assyria, and oil is carried to Egypt.

The nation is engaged in four things of which God disapproves: falsehood, violence, links with Assyria, links with Egypt. And they are doing it “all day long”: that is, they are persistent in doing the things God disapproves of. As you and I can be when we begin to backslide, doing things we know a Christian ought not to do.

In their folly, they think they can get away with it. “Ephraim has encompassed me with lies, and the house of Israel with deceit” (11.12). They think they can deceive God; that God will not will not notice what they are doing, will not realise how serious it is, will quietly let them get away with it.

I do not know how things stand where you live, but in Britain, where the culture and implicit ambient philosophy is basically thoroughly atheist, people feel there is no god, therefore no externally imposed standard of right and wrong, and no judgement to come. People do not say there is no god; most people profess to

believe there is. But he is not remotely like the God of the Bible, for they have invented him to suit their own wishes. Their invention is a god who winks at sin, doesn't interfere, and lets you off at the final judgement, either because he is too kind to punish anyone (except maybe those considered *really* bad, like Adolf Hitler) or because you have done enough good things to balance out your lapses. Society is modelled accordingly, and we have lenient laws which often make life harder for the victim of crime than for the criminal; we have soft, risible sentences passed down by judges; there is a widespread parental and school attitude that discipline and punishment is inappropriate and outmoded. As a result, people do dreadful things and, in society, they get away with it. They build up so much experience of this over the years, that they come to feel that they can act the same before God (if there is any god anyway). It is a perilous way to think and act, because there is a God, and he has set standards of right and wrong. His Son is to be our judge. Let us never take this lightly.

In reality, our sin is like the east wind in Israel: it injures, it is destructive. We should shelter from it, not chase it.

Meditate also for a moment on just what Ephraim is described as doing. Have you ever seen anyone herding the wind? You can herd sheep or cattle; you cannot herd the wind. You can pursue and catch an animal or another person; you cannot pursue and catch the wind. Ephraim

is doing a foolish thing. We are foolish when we sin, and especially when we persist in sin, like Ephraim was doing.

Now let us move on to Hosea 13.15:

Though he may flourish as the reed plant, the east wind, the wind of the Lord, shall come, rising from the wilderness; and his fountain shall dry up, and his spring shall be parched; it shall strip his treasury of every precious thing.

What has happened?

The metaphor has turned round: now, the wind is chasing Ephraim! And this is just what happens when we persist in sin and backsliding. At first, we are in control, making the decision to slide backwards into sin and away from the Lord. Then sin takes over, and we are driven before it. It is now ruling us.

Please notice also that it is the Lord's wind. God sees our persistent backsliding, and eventually underlines our choice and enforces it. We choose sin: He grants it to us, and that in fuller measure than we foresaw. We lose mastery over ourselves and our thoughts, plans and behaviour.

If you turn away from your Lord and go into sin, persisting in it, eventually sin will chase and drive you.

The next verse (13.16) tells us that God will now punish and chastise: “Samaria [another name for the north] shall bear her guilt... they shall fall by the sword...” In fact terrible things were prophesied: “...their little ones shall be dashed in pieces, and their pregnant women ripped open.”

What Hosea was predicting was the Assyrian invasion, but they were “the Lord’s wind” which we read of in 13.15. When chastisement comes, we are wise to recognise both the instrument, and the hand of God behind it.

God gave them their choice, and it was far worse than they had foreseen. It has been said, by C S Lewis, that eventually there are only two types of person. Using the words of the Lord’s Prayer, one type says to the Lord, “Thy will be done,” and he walks with God. The second type is the reverse: he refuses God’s way, and eventually God says to him, “Thy will be done.” God gives him what he has chosen, with all the terrible consequences of living and dying far from God.

If you are far from God, it is time to seek the Lord. Return to him now, before it is too late.

Chapter 15 God's Dilemma

I like to preach or write about God and his dealings with us from what I know from experience, but I have a problem with the Book of Hosea, because this Book maybe takes us more deeply into the heart of God than any other book of the Bible. It is a sacred place, and one comes to it with awe. I confess that I have not entered by experience into all that I see in Hosea, but I point to it from a distance, as it were, to show where we are bidden to come to in our relationship with God.

In Chapter 11 it is as if we overhear an inner dialogue which God holds within himself, because he has a dilemma. He is drawn in two different directions, one which would go ill for his people, one which would be good news for them:

ill

verse 1

verses 3-4

verses 8-9

good news

verse 2

verses 5-7

Let us consider them in turn.

In 11.1 God looks back to when he saved his people from their slavery in Egypt: “When Israel was a child, I

loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.” Here we hear God meditating upon his love for his people, and his past acts of mercy and guidance.

But in verse 2 he says, “The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and burning incense to idols.” Here God is turning his mind to their infidelity, their ‘harlotry’ as it is called elsewhere - for they have left him, their true ‘husband’, and turned to false deities.

Then his mind turns back to the love and relationship which operated in the past:

Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of compassion, with the bands of love, and I became to them as one who eases the yoke on their jaws, and I bent down to them and fed them.

It is written in very human terms, to help us understand. Think with what proud delight parents see their children take their first steps, and how patiently they help them to learn to toddle and then to walk securely! When they are still learning, or are tired or hurt, parents take them in their arms for a while. All of this God says he did for his people, plus leading them, easing their burdens, feeding them, and - as any loving parents must in caring for their

children - bending down to them. What a picture of tender, patient love!

But then, in the next three verses (5-7) God thinks again of their persistent and stubborn sinfulness, and decides they must be punished for it:

They shall return to the land of Egypt, and Assyria shall be their king, because they have refused to return to me. The sword shall rage against their cities, consume the bars of their gates, and devour them in their fortresses.

Why? Clearly, not because there is no love in God's heart towards them. Rather, as verse 7 has it: "My people are bent on turning away from me; so they are appointed to the yoke, and none shall remove it."

Please note seriously those final words. When God lays judgement upon a man, "none shall remove it." Only God is able to end his own chastisements of his erring people.

So God has come, it seems, to a final decision. But he considers further in verses 8-9; the inner dialogue, the dilemma, continues:

How can I give you up... How can I hand you over...
My heart recoils within me, my compassion grows

warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger...
I will not come to destroy.

Now all this, as I wrote above, is more than I can take in. It gives me a glimpse into the love of God which make me feel like and intruder. I ought not to be hearing God debate and anguish within himself. But there it is in scripture! He wants us to read, and to learn more of his loving heart.

What in fact did happen? Chapters 12 and 13 bring us to God's final decision: he will indeed punish and destroy:

I will again make you dwell in tents... his Lord will leave his bloodguilt upon him, and will turn back upon him his reproachers... I will be to them like a lion, like a leopard... like a bear robbed of her cubs... I will devour them like a lion, as a wild beast would rend them. I will destroy you, O Israel... Samaria [the northern kingdom] shall bear her guilt, because she has rebelled against her God. - 12.9, 14; 13.7-9, 16

Chapter 13 closes with the appalling picture of “their pregnant women ripped open.”

Yet even after this decision of chapters 12-13, God extends his patience and again invites them to return. Here are some words from chapter 14, the last chapter of Hosea's book:

Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God, for you have stumbled because of your iniquity... say to him, "Take away all iniquity; accept that which is good, and we will render the fruit of our lips."

I will heal their faithlessness, I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them... They shall return and dwell beneath my shadow, they shall flourish... It is I who answer and look after you.

God knew that they would even reject this final call, this invitation so lovingly expressed in chapter 14. But the invitation, the call, was sincere.

There is also a call to us Christians in this wonderful book. Back in chapter 11.10-11, we read that after the promised destruction upon which God decided in view of their refusal to repent, there was a promise of return for a future generation:

His sons shall come trembling from the west... from Egypt... from the land of Assyria; and I will return them to their homes.

In Christ the judgement is reversed, and resurrection is brought in. For Hosea 13.14 calls for death and hell: "O Death, where are your plagues? O Sheol, where is your destruction? Compassion is hid from my eyes." God calls for death and hell to bring his judgements upon his

people. The Apostle Paul takes up that very verse in 1 Corinthians 15.55-57 and turns it back to front, making it into a rhetorical question, mocking death and hell because they have lost their sting for those who have taken refuge in Christ: “O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?... But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” As Saint Athanasius wrote in his *De Incarnatione Verbi Dei* (On the Incarnation of the Word of God):

Death has been conquered and branded for what it is by the Saviour on the Cross. It is bound hand and foot, all who are in Christ trample it as they pass and as witnesses to him deride it, scoffing and saying, “O Death, where is thy victory? O Grave, where is thy sting?”

In Christ, however long and however far you have wandered, you are called to return and once more find mercy in him: mercy, not judgement, because he bore our judgement in our stead at Calvary. And that mercy is followed by the assurance of victory as you pass through death, and through eternity. Well did Paul write, Thanks be to God!

The very last verse of Hosea issues a call to all readers of his book: “Whoever is wise, let him understand these things; whoever is discerning, let him know them; for the

ways of the Lord are right, and the upright walk in them,
but transgressors stumble in them.”

Chapter 16 A second Chance

There are principles of general Christian behaviour, which apply to all God's children, and there are means whereby he gives personal guidance to the service to which he calls us individually. For these latter, you might do worse than read *Where next? – some biblical principles for finding God's guidance*.¹ God does not accept alternatives: we cannot say to him, "Lord, I want to serve you, but I won't do that: give me a different calling." We must obey. If we persist long enough in disobedience, as we have seen in previous pages, God will underline our choice and let us have it, with all its disappointment, lack of fulfilment and its other regrettable outcomes.

Some of us - perhaps many of us - to our deep sorrow get it wrong first time round. We disobey.

Or maybe we genuinely attempt to obey, but we make serious mistakes, and it goes wrong.

I say "first time round": maybe we do it more than once. Later, when we realise and acknowledge that we have missed our way and are not doing his will, we wish we could have another chance; we wish we could start all

¹ Weston Rhyn: Quinta Press (2008) available from www.primitivemethodism.com (paperback, 107 pages)

over again. Is it possible that God will grant such a second chance?

I want us to look at three Bible characters: one rushed ahead of God and got it wrong; one knew God's call but ran away from it; one denied the Lord altogether. They were, in that order, Moses, Jonah and Peter.

Let us start with Moses. In Exodus 2.11-15, he sees an Egyptian beating a Jew, so he killed the Egyptian and buried his body in the sand. He thought no-one had seen him. The next day, he saw two Jews fighting, and in an attempt to reconcile them he asked the one who started it why he was hitting his fellow Jew. The man answered, "Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?"

Moses was, of course, right in thinking he should do something to free the Jews from the oppression of the Egyptians: but he was wrong to attempt to do it in this way. Yet "he supposed that his brethren understood that God was giving them deliverance by his hand" (Acts 7.25).

When he realised that the murder had become known, he was afraid. Things got worse: Pharaoh heard about the matter. So Moses fled from Pharaoh and settled as an exile in the land of Midian. There he found a wife, started a family, and remained for forty years (Acts 7.30).

Forty years is an awfully long time to be away from the work God wants you to do. But in Exodus 3 we read of the second chance he got to deliver the Jews from their oppression. It was God's time, and he was told God's way. In verse 10, God says to him, "Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring forth my people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt." In the next chapter (4.20) we read that "Moses took his wife and his sons and went back to the land of Egypt." The following chapters tell of his obedience, his struggles and his success in completing the release of the Jews from their slavery to the Egyptians. God had given him a second chance, after he had rushed ahead before the right time, and before the right method had been made known to him.

One well-known Baptist preacher in England, Stanley Delves, was so eager not to make the mistake of running ahead of God to do something he himself wished to do, that when he felt God's call to preach, following the end of the First World War, he wrote:

There was the insistence of this word upon my mind in such a way that I could not but feel that it was from the Lord, "Behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it." ... I felt, "Now I will say nothing whatever about this. I will keep my counsel, because if this word really is from the Lord, He will open a door for me into the ministry without my touching the matter."

Some weeks later, in September 1919, when Stanley was back home in Sussex, a letter came from a man he did not know, a Mr Lancelot Vinall, concerning a chapel which had been closed during the War and was being re-opened. Mr Vinall, inviting Stanley to come and take a Sunday service. Stanley wrote:

I knew no one who attended there. I had said nothing to anyone and this letter came along to ask me if I would speak at this chapel.

He asked his pastor's advice, who replied that he expected him to be called to the ministry and that others thought the same. He went and preached that Sunday and the small congregation of five or six people wished him to come again. That was the beginning of a ministry which included fifty-four years as pastor of a church in Crowborough, concluding with his retirement at the end of 1977.

I am not saying that everyone must follow the pattern which Stanley Delves felt was right for him, in seeking to serve God; but I feel strongly that he is an example of a principle of trusting God to confirm his call by opening a door for us as we move forward to serve him.

* * *

Moses, then did not wait God's time and way, but was so eager to do God's work that he rushed ahead at the wrong time and got it wrong. The next man, Jonah, was quite the opposite: he knew exactly what God wanted, and when, but was so reluctant to do it that he ran away in the opposite direction. You can read about it in Jonah 1.1-3:

The word of the Lord came to Jonah..., "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it..." But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord... and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid the fare and went on board... away from the presence of the Lord.

As might be expected, things went terribly wrong for him. One disaster followed another, until Jonah had the sense to pray:

Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God..., "I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to thee; what I have vowed I will pay." - Chapter 2

Then God's call came to him a second time. It was the same call; God had not changed his mind. "Arise, go to

Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.”

He had learnt his lesson; learnt it the hard way, through suffering the sad and uncomfortable results of disobedience. He arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. At his preaching, the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and expressed deep sorrow for their sins. Even the king joined in with true repentance, and published a decree that the city should fast and cry mightily to God, turn from their evil ways and their violence, in hope that God would turn from his anger and they should not perish. And God responded according to their prayers.

There was a gipsy in England, born in 1860 and named Rodney Smith. He became a Methodist evangelist. My father heard him speak in a church built to hold 850 people, and the Gipsy had become so well-known as a preacher that the church was filled for a men’s meeting. Once in 1893, a well-educated man asked the gipsy to pray for him several times, but seemed to get no relief or blessing. The man was a backslider who had once been a Sunday School teacher, but he had given up that work in a fit of anger.

“Ah, there it is,” said Rodney Smith. “You threw up the work that God had given you. You must return to it before you will find peace in your heart.” The man followed this advice, and a few days later came back to

see Rodney Smith again. “I did as you told me, and all the old joy came back!” he said.

An English hymn contains the question, “Where is the blessedness I knew, / When first I saw the Lord?” Gipsy Smith used to tell people that it was where they had left it, and the theme became established in his sermon, “The Lost Christ” which was heard by thousands and also preached over the radio: “it is because you have left Christ, not because He has left you. And He is waiting for you just where you left Him.”

* * *

Moses rushed ahead; Jonah ran away; but Peter denied he knew Jesus at all. His very words were, “I do not know him” (Luke 22.57). In fact, he denied Christ three times. Surely if anyone is going to be rejected from God’s purpose and denied a chance to do better in future, it will be Peter.

But no! In fact, Jesus knew ahead of time that Peter would do exactly that, and had predicted it. Peter had just boldly stated, “Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and death.” (verses 33-34). After these three denials, Jesus turned and looked on Peter, and Peter remembered the prediction. He was broken-hearted at his weakness and disloyalty, and (verse 62) he went out and wept bitterly. He must also have felt that he had lost his opportunity to serve Jesus for the rest of his life; that he

would be set aside, rejected as unworthy, left in shame and regret.

Almost at the very end of Mark's Gospel, an angel at Jesus's tomb, after Jesus has risen from the dead, says to the three women who come to the tomb, "Tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him." Astonishing words! He has not been rejected as worthless because of his fall. He is to be reinstated. And again in the last chapter of John's Gospel, Jesus personally re-commissions Peter: "Feed my lambs... Tend my sheep... Feed my sheep... Follow me" (John 21.15-19). He did follow, and gained the reputation of a pillar of the church (Galatians 2.9). Patience, grace and mercy drew him back into the Lord's work. He was allowed a second chance.

Thomas Cranmer was Archbishop of Canterbury in England in the 16th century. He was imprisoned in London and Oxford for his faith. After 2½ years of imprisonment he signed a recantation of his beliefs, but the Queen signed his death warrant anyway, committing him to death by fire: that is, to be burned alive. Then he was briefly released from prison, and promised his life and restoration to office as Archbishop if he would sign a further statement, a real recantation of his beliefs: "I do renounce, abhor, and detest all manner of heresies and errors of Luther and Zwinglius... I acknowledge the Bishop of Rome to be supreme head in earth... and

Christ's vicar, unto whom all Christian people ought to be subject." After the imprisonment, the release, the promises, the threat of death if he refused to recant, his nerve broke. Overcome by loneliness and human frailty, he signed the document, which had already been drawn up by others in advance.

There his hope of freedom ended. He was at once sent back to prison in Oxford. On 20th March 1556 the Queen sent orders that he should die by fire the following day. Morning came with angry skies and driving rain, but crowds gathered. The archbishop was dressed in a ragged, threadbare gown. It is said that he made this pronouncement:

Forasmuch as my hand offended in writing contrary to my heart, therefore my hand shall first be punished... it shall be first burnt.

The stake had been set up in the street, and he was bound to it by a steel band. Fire was set to the 250 faggots of furze and wood at his feet. As the fire leapt up, he stretched out his arm and held his right hand in the flame until it was burnt to a stump. And as he died, he cried, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!"

There is mercy even for those who have denied their faith and their Lord, if they are truly sorry.

* * *

Maybe you have been like one of these. You have been eager to serve God, but misinterpreted the time and way and have made a horrible mess of things. Maybe you could not bring yourself to obey him when you knew what he wanted, when you heard his call, and you are far from the work to which he directed you. Maybe you have denied that you are a Christian at all, and now you feel that Christ will not grant you the hoped-for part in his work that you longed to play. Maybe, like Peter's denials, it happened recently and you have quickly regretted your fall; maybe it was a long time ago - remember, with Moses it was forty years. But whether long or short, if God is now stirring you afresh to tell him of your sorrow and to be willing now to obey him wherever he sends you, to do whatever he puts into your hands, make the prayers you know you need to make, repent, and offer him again the loyal service of your life, of all the remaining days or years he may grant you to live and work to his glory.

Chapter 17 Bethel again

For our last meditation from the Old Testament we turn to the Book of the Prophet Amos. In Chapter 5.4-5 God says through his prophet: “Seek me and live, but do not seek Bethel.” We shall try to understand what these words mean.

Amos’s hearers were living in the glory of their past, but not in a present reality of God. True religion involves a turning from sin and a present experience of the Lord and devotion to him in the heart. A denomination can do this; an individual church can do it. A servant of the Lord can live in the success and blessing God gave him in the past; a Christian can live in memory of the blessedness he once knew, perhaps when he was first converted and in the early months or years of his Christian life. Living in the past is always a temptation, and its associated temptation of letting the standards of the present be a lot lower.

Bethel was one of three places to which the northern Jewish tribes made pilgrimages. In Genesis 28 Jacob had a real meeting with God there, received a striking promise from God, and made a vow to God.

Twenty years later, in Genesis 35, he met God there again, and God gave him the name Israel, from which the ten northern tribes were still named when Amos was

preaching to them. Once again, he received a remarkable promise from God: “I am God Almighty... The land which I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you, and I will give the land to your descendants after you”: a promise which holds good to this very day.

In 2 Kings 2, we find the prophets Elijah and Elisha at Bethel - two of the greatest prophets in both word and deed who were ver born in Israel.

And now God says, “Seek me and live; but do not seek Bethel.” Strange! The very name means “house of God” - a place where God had been known and had given his blessings. It is good to know about what God has done in the past; we can learn ever such a lot from it for our own lives and service. But these people, in Amos’ day, lacked the present reality. They were *only* looking to the past. In 4.4-5 and 5.21-22 Amos preaches to them:

Come to Bethel and transgress... for so you love to do... I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies... I will not accept them.

They had not put away their sin: “The eyes of the Lord God are upon the sinful kingdom” (9.8).

Here was their mistake: they thought that because they stood in that tradition, they partook of that blessing. But it is never like that. You may belong to the Orthodox Church and look back to the great days of Athanasius

and Chrysostom. You may be a Catholic, and look back to Gregory the Great and Bernard of Clairvaux. As an Evangelical, converted in the life of the Methodist Church, I look back with astonished admiration and gratitude to God for the tide of His Spirit which was poured out in the days of John Wesley. But neither you nor I can draw on a ‘deposit account’ stored up for us by past generations. Nor can we live on the blessings of our own past Christian life, as if they had built up like a deposit account in a bank for when our current account grew thin. Today is when we need to know the Lord. Or it may be a place which God has blessed signally in the past, and you belong to that place by birth. What land has been more gloriously blessed in revival power than Wales? Here is an extract from “The Wrexham Leader”, a local news paper in the town where I currently live:

In 1904-5 a religious revival swept Wales. Chapels were open 24 hours a day and places were set apart at the [coal-mining] pit bottom where services were held before start of work. Salem Chapel, Penycae, admitted 46 new members on one Sunday and during a month’s campaign, four baptismal services were held, and at Tabernacl, Brymbo, the Rev. E. K. Jones admitted 60 new members in one day. The converts at Sion Chapel, Cefn, numbered 82 in three weeks and at Tabernacle 14 people were baptised in one day. Drunkenness practically disappeared from

Coedpoeth. “Many of the worst characters in the village,” wrote one correspondent, “have been converted.

Scenes of glorious praise, power, repentance and conversion were witnessed during that revival throughout Wales; nor was it the only time when Wales was so powerfully blessed by God. But today Welsh people must walk with God for themselves, and cannot merely look back to the glory their forebears knew and live in the memory of that. As the psalm says, “Today, when you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts” (Hebrews 4.7).

We understand now what God meant when he said through Amos, “Seek me and live; but do not seek Bethel.” First-hand, present, personal reality in your experience of the Lord and your walk with him - that alone is the heart of real religion. Not your own past, not your church’s past.

God adds (5.14): Seek good, and not evil, that you may live; and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you, as you have said.” Notice it is always about *living*: the Christian life is abundant life. Jesus said, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10.10).

If your present experience of God is thin, weary and dull, “Seek the Lord and live” (Amos 5.6). He is always there waiting for you to come, and to give you a fresh, new beginning in his blessing.



Salem chapel, Penycae

Chapter 18 Simon

Turning now to the New Testament, and to Acts 8, we find a man called Simon. Previously, before the story opens, he had practised magic in the city of Samaria and had amazed the whole nation. Magic, of course, is strictly forbidden in the Bible. He told people that he was somebody great, and they all gave heed to him, saying he was “that power of God which is called Great”.

Philip, an early Christian preacher, came to the city and preached the Gospel, and Simon believed, was baptised, and continued with Philip. He was amazed at the miracles he saw Philip perform in the name of Jesus, and he wanted to have a part in this ministry and power given by the Holy Spirit.

The Apostles Peter and John heard about the work in Samaria, and came themselves. Simon saw that people received the Holy Spirit when the apostles laid hands on them, and he wanted to exercise this power himself. So he offered the apostles money, saying, “Give me also this power, that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.” His name was Simon, and it has given rise to the word *simony*, which means buying a religious office with money. Simony is wrong: it is God

who gives spiritual ministry; it cannot be bought with money.

Peter said to Simon (v. 21), “You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God.” Simon has no real concept of serving the Lord because of His call and His enabling: his thoughts were at the rather sordid level of money. Peter tells him to repent and ask forgiveness, adding, “For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity.” The Old Testament (Deut 29.18) tells us that turning away from the Lord to serve the gods of the nations can give rise to “a root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit.” This seems to be the dangerous position Simon’s soul is in, and Peter flatly calls it a ‘bond’: it holds him tightly. No wonder he calls upon him “to repent of this wickedness” (v. 22).

True religion is no soft, easy matter, and Peter adds these disturbing words: “that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you.” He does not let Simon utter a few brief words of “I’m sorry,” but points out that this wickedness holds him strongly and has embittered his soul, and he must seek God’s help seriously.

In verse 24 Simon does ask for prayer: we are not told the outcome.

Does this story have relevance for us? Yes! For it is God’s word. Simon believed the preaching, was baptised, and continued for a while with the preacher. He

still needed real repentance. I have been saddened by the number of people I have met over the years, who have open professed to believe all the right things about themselves and about Jesus Christ; who have perhaps followed this ‘conversion’ with baptism; and have continued for a while in the life of the church. But months or years later, they are never seen among God’s people, and have quite forsaken their Christian walk and service. If you are such a person; if you made such a short-lived profession and beginning in the life of Christian discipleship - now is the time to repent truly and to make a permanent and thoroughgoing commitment to Christ as your Saviour and Lord.

There is also a temptation for churches to soften the Gospel message of deeply life-changing repentance and faith to make it easier for people to join. They hope this will draw people to the church, and lower any barriers to their becoming Christians. But such work all too often produces only fake, short-lived conversions.

Chapter 19 What is Repentance?

“God... commands all men everywhere to repent,” Acts 17.30. But what is repentance?

First of all, we should notice that it is a command, not something optional which one can include or leave out of one’s Christian life, according to one’s wishes or preference. It was Jesus’s first message in Mark’s Gospel: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel.” But God does not command us to do things which we cannot, with his help, perform: so it must be possible. It includes two elements: recognition or sin, and renunciation of sin.

First of all, we need to recognise and acknowledge that what is wrong is wrong. If God forbids it, and we have done it, it is sin. “Cleanse me from my sin!” wrote the psalmist (Psalm 51), “For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.” We mustn’t make excuses for ourselves, explaining away our guilt, or trying to lessen it, by reference to surrounding circumstances, or to what other people did to us, or to our own physical or emotional state at the time we sinned. We acknowledge that what we did was forbidden, was contrary to God’s will and to Christian behaviour, and we confess it as such.

Society gives softer names to what God calls sin; euphemisms which mask its true nature in the sight of God and which give a false impression of going some way to excusing sin. But breaking God's law is sin: "Every one who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness" (1 John 3.4).

Sin is breaking God's law; it is not breaking local religious or cultural conventions. Some people try to load a sense of guilt upon you by ascribing their own ideas to God, but if God has not pronounced on the matter, then it is not sin. However, if they persuade you that it is sin, or that it might be, and you do it anyway, thinking you are doing wrong or at least thinking you might be, then for you it is sin. This is the plain teaching of Romans 14.23.

So: sin is doing those things which God has forbidden, or omitting those things which he has commanded. In such cases, we have sinned, and we need to come to God and say in the words of Luke 15.18-19, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called you son."

Then we turn away from our sin; we put it out of our lives - of course, asking God's help to do so. "Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow... Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me... Restore to me the joy of thy salvation" (Psalm 51.7, 10,

12). Saint Athanasius in his *Letter to Marcellinus on the Interpretation of the Psalms*, wrote:

To repent means to leave off sinning... Suppose now that you have sinned and, having been put to confusion, are repenting and begging for forgiveness, then you have the words of confession and repentance in Psalm 51.

Repentance is turning round and starting to go in the opposite direction: turning away from sin, and walking with the Lord in inward and outward Christian living. The Apostle Paul called it “repentance toward God” in Acts 20.21.

But there is another dimension to it as well. It may be that in sinning, you wronged someone else as well. In this case, you need to put things right with the person you wronged as well as repenting toward God. Think of the words of our Lord in Matthew 5.23-24:

If you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

Jesus spoke those words in the days when worship and sacrifices continued at the Jewish Temple. Transposing

the principle to our own day, it would be very wrong and very foolish of you to come to the Lord's Table, and to take the bread and the wine of communion, if you knew that there is someone with a just cause to hold something against you, to whom you have not apologised and , if possible, made amends. Have you stolen something? First give it back. Have you spoken angry, unkind and maybe untrue words which you need to retract and correct? Go and do it. That is wiser than coming to the Lord's Table unworthily. You can never be worthy in yourself, but you can be forgiven and cleansed, and made welcome in Christ at the communion.

The same principle is required in the Old Testament. Ezekiel (33.14-16) writes:

Again, though I say to the wicked, "You shall surely die," yet if he turns from his sin and does what is lawful and right, if the wicked restores the pledge, gives back what he has taken by robbery, and walks in the statutes of life, committing no iniquity; he shall surely live, he shall not die. None of the sins that he has committed shall be remembered against him; he has done what is lawful and right, he shall surely live.

For those who thus repent toward God and make amends towards those they have wronged, there is forgiveness, acceptance and life. Psalm 130 says:

There is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared... For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with him is plenteous redemption.

Turning once more to Athanasius's Letter on the Interpretation of the Psalms, we read:

Having thus shown that Christ should come in human form, the Book of Psalms goes on to show that He can suffer in the flesh He has assumed... For He did not die as being Himself liable to death: He suffered for us, and bore in Himself the wrath that was the penalty for our transgression... This is the further kindness of the Saviour that, having become man for our sake, He not only offered His own body to death on our behalf, that he might redeem all from death, but also, desiring to display to us His own heavenly and perfect way of living, He expressed this in His very self .

Or, in the words of 1 John 1.9: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

Chapter 20 The Deceitfulness of Sin

Exhort one another every day... that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. Those words are found in Hebrews chapter 3. Why is sin called deceitful?

In his book “God’s Smuggler”, Brother Andrew tells a story which he heard from a Franciscan nun about how monkeys are caught in the forest. She said: “A monkey will never let go of something he wants even if it means losing his freedom.”

So the natives make a hole in the end of a coconut, just big enough for a monkey’s paw to get inside. They drop a pebble into the coconut through the hole, and wait in hiding with a net. A monkey comes along, finds the coconut, rattles it, and wonders what is inside. His curiosity leads him to look inside. Then he puts his paw in and grasps hold of the pebble. But he can’t get his paw back out again without letting go of the pebble, which he wants to own. While he bends his mind to the struggle to retrieve the pebble, the natives easily capture him in their nets.

The nun asked Andrew, “Are you holding on to something - something that’s keeping you from your freedom?”²

² *God’s Smuggler*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1967

There was a man in the Bible who was born according to a special promise from God, at a time when the people of Israel were living evilly and the Lord, as chastisement, had given them into the hand of their enemies for forty years. The man was called Samson. His mother had been barren, but the Lord sent an angel to her with the promise, “You shall conceive and bear a son... and he shall begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines” (Judges 13.1-6). There was also a command: “He shall be a Nazirite to God from birth.” Nazirites were men specially set apart for God to be separate and holy. You can read about Nazirites in Numbers 6.

One way Nazirites showed their dedication to God was by not cutting their hair during the time of their vow, and so Samson’s mother had this command also from the angel: “No razor shall come upon his head.”

In chapters 14 and 15 Samson accomplishes works of astonishing strength, and judges Israel for twenty years. He himself knew the significance of not cutting his hair as a sign of his dedication, and in chapter 16 the woman he foolishly loved - for she betrayed him - pressed him three times to reveal to her the secret of his great strength. Each time, she revealed his answer to his enemies, but his answers had been lies. But on the fourth time, he told her, “A razor has never come upon my head; for I have been a Nazirite to God from my mother’s womb. If I be shaved, then my strength will

leave me and I shall become weak, and be like any other man.”

You see, he knew the truth in his mind, but he did not take it seriously. After all, it was the fourth time Delilah had asked him this; he had no reason to believe she would keep the secret from his enemies now he has revealed the true reason for his unusual strength.

The enemies came, and Delilah said, “The Philistines are upon you, O Samson!” But he said, “I will go out as at other times and shake myself free.” He did not know that the Lord had left him.

What starkly memorable words: “He did not know that the Lord had left him. They can become true of any one of us. They are there as a warning for us.

The Philistines seized him, gouged out his eyes, took him captive, and set him to grinding at the mill in the prison.

This was his deception. He thought he would get away with abandoning his dedication to God. After all, he was even born with a promise over his life! So he broke his vow, and though nothing would change. But God left him.

Now see him in 16.21, blind, bound with bronze fetters, and forced to work in a foreign prison. This was the man who had judged the nation for twenty years! His betrayal of his commitment to God ruined his life and his work.

At a feast the Philistines start to get drunk, and send for Samson to make sport for them. He is standing between two pillars in a house with all the lords of the Philistines in it, and about 3000 people on the roof looking on as he is made to make sport for their amusement.

Finally, in 16.28, he turns to God in prayer: “O Lord God, remember me, I pray thee, and strengthen me, I pray thee, only this once, O God, that I may be avenged upon the Philistines for one of my two eyes.” He no longer cares about himself: “Let me die with the Philistines.” And with that, he bowed with all his might, and the house fell upon the lords and all the people inside. Samson himself dies in the collapse. But the Bible tells us, “The dead whom he slew at his death were more than those whom he had slain during his life.”

In his few final minutes of calling out to God, he fulfilled the promise of his birth, “He shall begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines.” It reminds me of the words of Joel 2.25: “I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten.”

If you are being tempted and led away from God by the deceitfulness of sin, be seriously warned and called back by the words of Proverbs 29.1: “He who is often reproved, yet stiffens his neck, will suddenly be broken beyond healing.” Break off your sin, and return to your former devotion to your Lord.

If you have already been hardened by the deceitfulness of sin, then like Samson call out to God in earnest prayer; put self behind and let God have his way whatever the cost may be to you; and believe that God can and will still hear your prayer and use you in his service.