

**THE GROWTH OF THE BELIEVER'S SPIRITUAL LIFE
IN FAITH, SONSHIP, SERVICE AND VICTORY
Timothy Lin, Ph.D.**

In Scripture God's truths are always taught by local illustrations, without which His full revelation would be much harder to grasp. Without Abraham having been justified by faith, justification in Christ would not be as understandable. Without the Israelites having been delivered from Egypt, God's salvation could never be as fully comprehended. Likewise, without believers who lead a godly life and walk in the light of Christ, God's light will never be realized by the unbelieving masses. A great need of the Churches in these last days is to develop spiritual patterns that will set good examples for Christians to live unrepachable lives in Christ. Such a pattern for the believers of the twentieth century cannot be found in any human writing, but only in those individuals whose lives are revealed by God in Scripture, and especially in the lives of the patriarchs of this period. Although most believers are familiar with the patriarchal stories, the majority ignores their essential truth that is God's revelation in their doings. In truth the lives of the patriarchs represent God's progressive revelation in reference to the believer's spiritual life, from conversion to reigning with Christ. For convenience sake they may be considered according to their chronological order in the book of Genesis.

1. Abraham - the Revelation of Faith (Gen. 11:27-25:10)

Faith may be classified as Divine and Human. To the former belongs faith in God's word, faith in miracles, and faith in Christ; to the latter all historical faith, dogmatic faith, and temporary faith. Divine faith is an "operation of God" (Col. 2:12 AV) within man's spiritual perception whereby man may see and have confidence in the reality of God's truth. In other words faith is spiritual "seeing," which results in giving assurance to our hope and making us certain of realities that we do not physically see (Heb. 11:1). It is not a dead substance but rather a living seed that grows "from faith to faith" (Rom. 1:17). Normally, faith is at first small and weak like a mustard seed and then takes time to grow. Only a superficial faith springs up quickly like Jonah's gourd and then withers rapidly, because it has no deep root (See Matt. 13:5,6). Faith has life that animates the just (Hab. 2:4), invigorates other graces (Gal. 5:6; 1 John. 5:4), and is developed by the Spirit's work in us (Gal. 5:22). While the means by which faith increases is entirely up to the operation of the Spirit within man's spiritual perception, one way to further its growth is to allow it to pass tests (James 1:3, 12). Abraham's faith grew by passing tests, and it should be this way for believers today. God is not partial. As He tested Abraham and made his faith grow, He will likewise do for His twentieth century believers. In other words God revealed His way of causing Abraham's faith to grow, to the end that we might follow Abraham's good steps and avoid his failures.

Redemption commenced with Abraham, culminated in Christ, and will be concluded at the end of the Millennium. Although Seth, Noah, and Shem were in the Messianic line, actual restoration of God's redemptive plan began with Abraham, for it was only in him that all the families of the earth were to be blessed. To be an expert or a

specialist in something, the individual needs specific training. Usually such training is a serious matter. How much more serious then should God's training be for one such as Abraham, the father of all those who would believe in the Lord after him? The training of Abraham's faith may be considered as follows:

A. Tested by God's Call - Faith in Repentance (12:1-9; Acts 7:2-4). God's business methods are different from man's. Man in general writes out a constitution and by-laws, organizes a committee or board, solicits funds, and then finds someone to run the company. God's method is just the opposite. He starts by training a man to do His work. If he finds no one to train, He prefers to let the business be postponed!

Having maintained a long silence since the construction of the tower of Babel, God finally found in Ur of the Chaldees a young man named Abram. In order to transform his mind from paganism to faith in the living God, He ordered him out of his country and from his kindred (Acts 7:3). He did leave his country, but instead of leaving his kindred behind, he took his father Terah and nephew Lot with him. Having arrived at Haran, Abraham for some reason decided to stop there instead of entering Canaan.

Haran was located on the border of northwest Mesopotamia, northeast of Canaan. It was about half way from Abram's old home to the destination that Yahweh wanted him to reach. This symbolizes Abram's partial obedience. He dared not disobey God's order by remaining at Ur; yet he did not have courage enough to enter Canaan itself. He was a border-line-believer! **Partial obedience is disobedience to God.** As a result he did not build an altar to Yahweh, nor did Yahweh appear unto him during all those years he was in Haran. **Fellowship with God is conditioned by obedience.** When obedience fails fellowship is automatically canceled.

After Terah's death Yahweh again said to him: "Get you out of your country, and from your kindred," and for emphasis added the phrase, "from your father's house" (12:1). Abram did depart from Haran as Yahweh had told him; however, he did not refuse Lot's request to accompany him. This time although he did not pass his test with honors, he did make it to God's designated place for him.

Repentance is one of a few biblical terms that has been both misunderstood and misinterpreted. It is a concept of New Testament revelation, translated from the combination of a Greek preposition *meta*, which is equal to the Latin prefix *trans*-meaning change, and a Greek noun *noia* meaning thought or mind; hence *metanoia* means "change of mind." Although this definition is not found in the Old Testament, the idea is surely there. The seed-form may be seen in the statement of Yahweh to Cain: "If you do well" (4:7). Its closest synonym is the Hebrew verb *Shuv* meaning "to turn" as it is expressed in Ezekiel's preaching: "Repent [turn] and turn yourselves [literally cause yourselves to turn] from your idols; and turn away your faces [literally cause your faces to turn away] from all your abominations" (Ezek. 14:6). *Shuv* however cannot fully express the concept of a "change of mind." Any change has to pass from one phase to another or to substitute one thing for another; it has to have a negative and a positive aspect. These

two aspects of *metanoia* may be found in Ezekiel's preaching in which he says, "But if the wicked will turn from all his sins that he has committed, and keep all My statutes, and do that which is lawful and right, he shall surely live" (Ezek. 18:21). This statement well explains the concept of repentance in the Old Testament. Negatively, it is to "turn from all . . . sins"; positively, it is to "do that which is lawful and right." In other words repentance is not just sorrow for what one has done, or is doing, wrong. It is not just a matter of lamenting one's sins or of expressing one's emotional agony for the past but is also a change of one's whole concept for the time to come.

It is true on the one hand that the word for repentance is not formed from the word for confession of sin, but from one denoting a change of mind. Yet on the other, biblically, it does include the confession of sins. Peter said to Simon the sorcerer, "Repent therefore of this your wickedness" (Acts 8:22). Or as the writer of Hebrews says, ". . . repentance from dead works . . ." (Heb. 6:1). Both passages stress the importance of confession of sins. Repentance however does not stop at the confession of sins, it goes on to reorient a person's mind until Christ's mind becomes his. In brief, repentance is turning to God from idols or sins to serve the living and true God (See 1 Thess. 1:9). In like manner Abram turned to God from idols by departing from Ur and served the living and true God by entering Canaan. Although at first he did not repent in full, he made it up the second time.

Abram, having crossed through the land of Canaan, came to Sichem. There Yahweh appeared to him and promised him the land in which he was sojourning; he in turn built an altar to worship Yahweh (12:7). When a test is passed, advanced revelation and fellowship is the reward.

B. Tested by Hardship - Faith in Sincerity (12:10-20; 20:1-18). Having passed the first test, Abram advanced to a hill between Bethel on the west and Hai on the east. Bethel means "House of God"; Hai means "pile of ruins". In the Old Testament East refers to "the front"; west denotes "the back". This then was the situation in which Abram found himself. In front of him was a pile of ruins; behind him was God's house. In other words the world before him was nothing but a pile of ruins; but the city behind him had "foundations whose builder and maker is God" (Heb. 11:10). Nevertheless, even such a believer as Abram has to be careful that he does not fall (See I Cor. 10:12).

God does not promise sunshine every day in our lives on the earth, nor has He promised His children that they should not have any trials or sufferings in this world. In fact for the training and goodness of His children, many a time trials and sufferings are necessary. Likewise, even in the promised land, there would be a famine, and it would be severe. One thing however is certain, no matter how severe the famine was in the promised land, the troubles in Egypt would surely be even greater. God's children, living in God's will may have hardship; nevertheless, outside God's will there will be even more trouble! Had Abram realized this, he would never have left Canaan. Unfortunately, he was quite immature then. When he saw a severe famine coming in Canaan, he probably doubted whether or not he had really been called by God to come there.

Otherwise, how could such a severe famine come upon him? He then looked unto himself for help. By doing so he forgot all that God had promised and done for him. When “if,” “maybe,” “suppose,” or “in case” are prefixed to a person’s thinking towards God, his faith will assuredly shrink. As a result he paid no further attention to his eternal calling but let his mind be crowded with his own immediate needs. His calling actually was very clear and impressive, and he should never have doubted it. Yet he doubted anyway! Now since he had lost the insight of God’s greatness and faithfulness, he “**went down** into Egypt” without hesitation. Abram failed to take hold of God’s faithfulness.

While in Egypt he built no altar unto Yahweh, nor did Yahweh appear to him even once. Famine was no more a threat to him there; yet his security in God was gone! Sin and disobedience are like the grave. They never say, “It is enough!” (See Prov. 30:16). When one sin is complete, another will follow up at short notice. Due to the lack of Abram’s obedience to and security in God, and the accusation of his conscience within, fear gripped his mind and lying was adopted as his defense mechanism. When faith goes out and fear comes in, defense mechanisms will automatically take the place of trusting in God. Had Yahweh not intervened, Abram might have been slain in Egypt. Nevertheless Yahweh still demonstrated His faithfulness toward him by protecting his wife from being ruined by Pharaoh. At the end God allowed him to be driven out by the Egyptian King. Abram passed his first test but failed this one; yet God never fails. Spiritual tests can be taken again and again until one passes, provided one **never gives up**. Abram failed the test of sincerity. Having discovered his insincerity, he refused to confess it before God and Pharaoh; therefore, he would have to take the test again. Those who have not learned from the mistakes of the past will be doomed to repeat them! If any person has failed a spiritual test in the past, he may be sure that the same test will sooner or later come to him again. Yet God is faithful. He will never let a person be tested beyond what he is able to bear. Have faith in Him!

After more than twenty years had elapsed and because of some unknown problem, Abraham again journeyed toward the south and sojourned in Gerar. Once more he introduced his wife Sarah to the people there as being his sister. So the king of Gerar took her. Had not the faithful God again intervened, King Abimelech might have defiled Sarah. God warned Abimelech in a dream by night, and in the morning Abraham was called in and rebuked (20:1-9). Although Abraham once more failed the test of truthfulness, he nevertheless did confess his insincerity before Abimelech and thus straightened himself out before God and man. He said, “And it came about, when God made me wander from my father’s house, that I said to her . . . ‘everywhere we go, say of me, He is my brother’” (20:13). It is evident that the root of Abraham’s deceit was not planted in Egypt, but in Ur. Any plant that has not been uprooted is bound to grow again. So it grew again in Gerar. However, Abraham did uproot it this time. As a result God let him pass the test.

Since he had barely passed this second test, God did not give him any new revelation nor did he build any new altar to Yahweh. A test barely passed does not have a great deal of honor before God! Nevertheless, God still honored the prophetic office that

He gave him. When he prayed for Abimelech's family, God restored the birth-privilege to the queen and the ladies in the royal family. A prophet who might have no children himself can still pray for others to have theirs. God is faithful to His appointment!

C. Tested by Gain - Faith in Meekness (13:1-18). A principle clearly disclosed in later revelation is true for all backsliders throughout all the ages, namely, "Remember therefore from whence you are fallen, and repent, and do the first works" (Rev. 2:5). In this principle there are three necessary steps for any backslider to take if he wants to restore his fellowship with God: first, to recognize his failure - confession; second, to turn from his failure - repentance; third, to resume the life and work that he had before the failure - restoration. This was exactly what Abram did for the restoration of his fellowship with God. First, he had to go "up out of Egypt," whereas he previously "went down into." Second, since he went down into Egypt from "the south," he had to first return "into the south" (13:1). Third, since he journeyed to the south from his camp between Bethel and Hai, he had to return to the very spot where he previously had pitched his tent and had his altar (13:3,4). Having accomplished these steps, he then "called on the name of Yahweh" for the first time since he had gone down into Egypt. In other words there is no shortcut to restoration. The point at which a person has fallen is the very point from which he must begin. In God all things must be done in order (See 1 Cor. 14:40). If any person comes to the Lord without genuine repentance, his belief in Christ will not be true, but rather a psychological escapism. He is deceiving himself!

Desire for possessions is inherited from birth, and gain is the very fruit of that desire. Rightful gain is undoubtedly a benefit to the gainer; wrongful gain however is not a benefit but a judgment upon the gainer, as well as three or four generations following him. Abram made his riches by telling a lie, yet at the same time he brought severe judgment into his family. At this time the judgments on his unjust gain began to find their way to him.

Riches often become the source of quarrels, envy, hatred, and even murder. The riches gained by Abram from Egypt were no exception. The herdsmen of Abram and those of Lot had constant quarrels from the time they left Egypt. Finally, Abram had to ask Lot to separate from him. According to the custom, Abram was senior and had the preference of choosing the best pastures. Instead, he gave the preference to Lot. This was Abram's victory. He, through his past failure, had learned that God's appointment is always better than his own choosing. He passed this test of meekness by giving no thought to his own loss but by considering instead Lot's benefit. He forfeited his own right for Lot's good. He unconsciously applied the "seed principle" later revealed by Christ during His earthly ministry, which is "Whosoever shall seek to save his life, shall lose it; and whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it" (Luke. 17:33). Accordingly, Yahweh awarded him not only the land in which he was sojourning but also all the land that he had seen, was seeing, and would see (13:15,17). He also promised him that the number of his descendants would be as the dust of the earth (13:16). Abram then moved forward to Hebron, a name derived from a verb meaning "to be united," hence "companion, association," which illustrates the fellowship between God and Abram very

nicely. Abram built an altar to Yahweh there. Whenever a new test is passed, new blessings and new fellowship are automatically added.

“Meekness” is an abstract noun that is not easy to define. It is not the equivalence of weak compliance, though it may look like it. The best place to find its definition is in Christ, since meekness was the essence of His life (See Matt. 11:29). Meekness in Christ’s life may be divided into two manifestations: toward God and toward his fellowman. Toward God He submitted Himself without reservation (See Phil. 2:6). Whatever came to Him from God, He would take without any complaint or murmuring (See John. 18:11). Toward man He was always peaceable in the face of personal provocation and wrong (1 Pet. 2:23). He often forfeited His own right and privilege for the good of others, and at last He died for the redemption of the world. Meekness after all is not an escapist mechanism of a feeble character but is rather a negative demonstration of a strong and victorious virtue. Indeed, to keep quiet is actually much harder than to speak out!

Meekness however does not mean the incapability of expressing one’s indignation. Whenever Christ saw the corruption of Judaism’s religious leaders and the wickedness of demons, His wrath was kindled, and His justice was demonstrated. Meekness is a lamb; yet it should be a lion, too! When people mistreated Christ Himself, He bore it with patience and compassion. However, when anyone wronged God’s Kingdom or mistreated God’s truth, He indignantly denounced the evil and fought it, even with His very own life. As a result God “has highly exalted Him, and given Him a name which is above every name” (Phil. 2:9).

This was also what Abram had gone through in this test of his. In the personal conflict between him and Lot, he forfeited his right of seniority without any complaint. Yet when he had learned that the four kings of the east had wronged the local five kings, he risked his life to defeat the invaders and to restore the five principalities. Having returned from defeating the four kings, Abram, according to custom, could have had all the spoils that he recaptured from the invaders. Yet when he was offered the booty he rejected even a thread or the thong of a sandal. He must have realized his victory was beautified by the Lord (See Ps. 149:4), and that as long as he was meek he would “eat and be satisfied” (Ps. 22:26). Abram passed this great test with a perfect score and obtained an unusual reward from God. His faith was strengthened, personal justification was granted, the promise of the Land of Canaan was confirmed, and the coming four hundred years history of his descendants was revealed. Above all he was appointed to be the father of all who believe in God. What a great reward God has prepared for those who forfeit their legal rights for the sake of His name and for their fellowmen!

D. Tested by Waiting - Faith in Patience (15:1-17:27). Man likes to do things in a hurry; God likes to take things easy. Waiting patiently before God is certainly not the habit of man’s old nature. It is on the contrary an advanced virtue of a believer. Having given Abram the tests of obedience, sincerity, and meekness, Yahweh was now going to test him in regards to waiting patiently.

Yahweh's promise of descendants was made to Abram as early as Sichem, although the emphasis then was on the land rather than on his descendants (12:7). From that time on the same promise of Yahweh was progressively enlarged. Abram was further promised that his people would be "as the dust of the earth" (13:6) and, later, as numerous as the stars (15:5). Yet in reality the fulfillment of the promise was still far away. Ten years of waiting had now elapsed since his coming to Canaan (16:3), and his wife Sarai still remained childless. While both of them were advancing in age day after day, the hope of having such a child was getting dimmer every moment. He began to wonder whether or not God's promise was flexible, since God had only said, "he that shall come forth out of your own bowels shall be your heir" and did not verbally assert that the seed should necessarily be born to Sarai (15:4). In the meantime Sarai had been suggesting to her husband that he should do as his contemporaries did and take Hagar as a concubine, in order that she might have a child through her maidservant. Abram might have thought that this would not be a bad idea, since it was not wrong according to the standard of the social morality of his day. Finally giving up waiting on God, he consented to Sarai's suggestion and took Hagar in. Before long Hagar became pregnant, and the evil consequences, resulting from impatience in waiting before God, began in his family. This tragic mistake marked not only his family then but also his descendants' generations after him.

Believers are encouraged in the Scriptures to wait before the Lord. The imperative "wait on the Lord," the indicative "wait for the Lord," and the like appear often in the Poetic and Prophetic Books, especially in Psalms and Isaiah. Due to the impatience of our old nature, it is necessary for us to learn the lesson of patience by waiting before the Lord. Broadly speaking the difference between the life of Saul and that of David might be distinguished in this way: the former was impatient before the Lord, and the latter waited patiently. Accordingly, being patient in the Lord is the qualification for reigning with Christ, as it is disclosed in later revelation (See 2 Tim 2:12, "if we endure").

Waiting does not mean to sit still killing time, nor to merit God's favor by the prolongation of time, but to have faith in God's faithfulness and thoroughly believe that what He has promised in due time He will surely fulfill. It is like those blessed servants waiting for their Lord to return from the wedding, with their loins girded about and their lights burning (Luke. 12:35,36). In other words waiting is not being idle or inactive but is rather an attitude of confidence in God: resting in God's faithfulness, looking toward God's fulfillment, and accepting God's time. Accordingly, **waiting before the Lord is never wasting** but is the training of faith that works patience. Had Abram realized the importance of this training, the problem in his family then and the troubles between the Arabs and the Israeli people today would not be happening. Abram failed this test. From this time Yahweh had not had even one word for him, nor did he build any more altars to Yahweh until fourteen years had passed. Impatience can truly ruin a Christian's fellowship with God!

Having gone through a silence of fourteen years, Abram was now ninety-nine years old. He felt that he had really seen his day. He realized that his own body, as well as Sarai's womb, was as good as dead. All his natural possibilities for an heir were gone, and his self-confidence was on the wane. Humanly speaking he had come to an absolutely hopeless situation; spiritually however through all those years of silence, his confidence in Yahweh was developing. Later revelation tells us that he was then "fully persuaded that what He [the Lord] had promised, He was able to perform" (See Rom. 4:19-21). He began to realize that whatever the situation might be, God's promise would never fail; and however long Yahweh might delay fulfilling His promise, He would never forget His words. Eventually he made up his mind to wait hopefully and patiently before the Lord. In the end the Lord came to him as El Shaddai, to ratify the covenant with him, and changed his name from Abram to Abraham. We can thus say that this section is a picture of God's faithfulness and patience, set against man's unfaithfulness and impatience.

E. Tested by Other's Needs - Faith in Love (18:1-19:28). The three great virtues in the ancient Orient were hospitality, courtesy, and patience; among these hospitality was counted as the crown. This was why Lot would rather have his own daughters to be ruined than to see his guests harmed (19:8), and why Job would count it as an abomination if he ate his meat by himself alone and paid no attention to the needs of others (See Job 31:16-23). Even today among the nomadic Arabs, if a person neglects hospitality or allows a beggar to pass his door with empty hands, he is counted as an accursed one. In the New Testament Jesus says, "But when you make a feast, call the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, and thou shall be blessed" (Luke 14:13,14). Later, hospitality was also commanded in the New Testament and emphasized by quoting the passage under consideration to prove its importance (Heb. 13:2). Nowadays, discussions about love are quite noisy, yet the result of the inquiry is always left without comment! People would rather discuss love than practice hospitality that is the fundamental act of Christian love. As a result Christian love has seldom been substantiated.

The question of "what is love" has long been a puzzle in philosophical circles. To date there has never been a satisfactory definition given. In the New Testament there are two definitions: one is objective and the other subjective. Objectively, love desires only the best for the person loved (See John 3:16). Subjectively, love is laying down one's very self for others (1 John 3:16). Abraham demonstrated both of these aspects, at least this time.

Hospitality is a burdensome and tiresome task, especially during the summer season, on a hot day, and at the noon hour. Abraham however did not mind the discomfort. He considered only the needs of others. When he saw three strangers in front of his tent, he sensed that they needed some water to wash their feet, a shady place to rest, and some refreshment for their stomachs as well as their hearts (18:4,5). He disregarded the hot season, hot day, and hot hour and provided them with all their needs. He then stood as a servant serving them. Thus he passed the test of love nicely. At the end he was rewarded with his last confirmation of Isaac's birth, the reassurance of being the

dispenser of God's blessings, the instruction for family education, the revelation of the end of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the answer to his prayer for the two wicked cities, provided there would be ten righteous found. Unfortunately, there were not even ten righteous in both cities; otherwise, the sunken sites at the south end of the Dead Sea would still be in existence today.

F. Tested by Separation - Faith in overcoming the Flesh (21:1-34). God's revelation is progressive, so is God's training. Abraham passed the test of faith (11:21-12:8), failed the test of virtue (12:10-20), obtained knowledge of God's sovereignty through failure, and passed the test of temperance (13:1-14:24), failed the test of patience (16:1-16), passed the test of godliness (17:1-27), and brotherly kindness (18:1-19:28), and barely passed the retest of virtue (20:1-18). He then came to the two final tests of *agape*, which means to love God without reservation (See 2 Pet. 1:5-7). God has His own time; when His moment comes, He acts without delay. God's set time for Isaac's birth finally came, and Sarah gave birth to a son whom Abraham named Isaac, which means "he laughs," commemorating Abraham's (17:17) and Sarah's laughing (18:12) in the past and anticipating that those who heard it in the future would also laugh (21:6).

At about four or five years of age, Isaac came to the time when children are weaned. Abraham gave a big banquet for this unusual occasion in his family. Sadly, Ishmael "the son of Hagar the Egyptian," as the Scripture points out, mocked such a celebration. As a result Sarah was annoyed. Such mocking, according to later revelation, was in reality a persecution of Isaac. Sarah demanded that Abraham cast out both Hagar and Ishmael (Gal. 4:30), which was something very evil or grievous in the sight of Abraham (21:11). God however encouraged him to do what Sarah had demanded and told him that only through Isaac would his descendants be called. The following morning he obediently sent Hagar and Ishmael away. It is very painful for any father to bring about such a separation, yet he did it without complaint. He probably sensed that God's way is always the best. Thus he passed the test of separation and was rewarded with the following blessings: in the family, not only would Isaac be blessed but Ishmael as well; among the nations, Abimelech, who was inspired by God's presence with Abraham, came to be his ally. And in his spiritual perception, Abraham was shown that Yahweh is not only El Shaddai but also El Olam - the Eternal God (21:33).

The narrative here is very simple. The symbolic significance of the same however is not as simple as one might think. According to the progressive revelation in the New Testament, both Isaac and Ishmael symbolize the different natures of man (Gal. 4:29). Isaac represents the nature of the Spirit; Ishmael the nature of flesh. Both had different origins, lives, and destinations. Isaac was born by promise; Ishmael was born because of Abraham's sensual desire. Isaac's life was free; Ishmael's was in bondage. Isaac became the sole heir of the family; Ishmael was cast out of the family. Thus we have a picture of both the new and old nature of man. They could not stay together, nor could they take each other's place. The old nature had to be cast out. Accordingly, the revelation in Romans tells us that flesh is enmity against God and can neither be subject to nor please God (Rom. 8:7,8): God has to do away with it. The way to deal with the flesh is not to

change it for the better, but to let it be cast out, that is, to allow it to be crucified with Christ and made dead to man forever (Gal. 5:24)!

“Flesh” here does not refer to the atoms of our body, of which most are renewed every year. It is the sinful and perverted nature which man inherits from Adam. It hates what God loves, and loves what God hates. Within it there is nothing good. Some say that even in the flesh there are some good things. That is a mistake! Paul was well educated, highly cultured, and deeply trained in religion. Morally speaking he was blameless; yet he said that in his flesh there dwelt no good thing. He knew that flesh as a whole is enmity against God, and no part of it can please Him. Flesh is like the Canaanites who were doomed to be totally destroyed. Whoever saves and exploits it will be in trouble!

The steps of having the flesh crucified with Christ may be as follows: no man can have his flesh crucified unless he is willing to renounce his flesh, that is, the old nature; no man will renounce his old nature, unless he hates his very self; no man will hate his old nature, unless he has seen the wickedness of his very self; and no man can see the wickedness of his very self unless the Holy Spirit illuminates his inner eyes. In brief, it is entirely the operation of the Holy Spirit within that person who would obey Him without reservation. He will lead him to see the reality of his flesh, and by seeing it, to hate his very self. He will then compel him to the very center of despair (which is the place of death) enable him to plunge himself into the death of Christ, and make him one with Christ. As Lightfoot says: “I have no longer a separate existence, I am merged in Christ.”¹

G. The Final Test - Faith in Perfect Surrender (22:1-19). Having passed all preceding tests (as the Scripture says, “. . . after these things . . .”) Abraham was going to take the final test. In the Authorized Version, the verb tempt in the clause “that God did tempt Abraham” is misleading. It is an intensive form of the verb meaning “to lift”; hence “to test,” “to try,” or “to put someone to test,” but not “to tempt.” Theologically, it is inaccurate to say that God tempts man, since the later revelation says, “God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempts He any man” (James 1:13). The difference between “to tempt” and “to test” is the difference in motive. The former is to do others harm, while the latter is to do others good in the end. God never tempts man, but He does test man for the purpose of developing man’s faith in Him and love to Him. He had tested Abraham in many ways in the past, now He was going to give him the final test. This final one was indeed a severe test.

To cast out Ishmael was a preliminary stage of this test. The case of Ishmael might be justified, since he was born after the flesh and not by God’s promise and thus was not ordained by God to be Abraham’s descendant. Since Isaac however was the son for God’s redemptive plan, there was no reason at all to burn him as a sacrifice. Abraham from the very beginning was satisfied to have Ishmael in the family. When God again promised him that Sarah would bring forth a son, Abraham said, “O that Ishmael might live before you.” It was God who insisted that only the one whom Sarah gave birth to

should be his son (17:18,19). Now Ishmael was gone, and God was demanding that he give up Isaac also. How could God justify Himself? Abraham, however, instead of questioning God, demonstrated his faith in an unusual way. He believed that what God had promised, He surely had one way or another to fulfill it. Why should he be worried about it? His heroic faith was also confirmed by his various steps of preparation that were so minute and orderly. Six *waw* consecutives (and's) in verse 3 indicate that his mind was not disturbed, nor was he emotionally upset. His heart had perfect confidence in God. He believed that, even if Isaac were burned on the altar, God could raise him up from the ashes (Heb. 11:19). So he said to his servants that he and Isaac would come back to them after they had completed their worship there (22:5). Abraham passed the test!

Having reached the place that God had told him about, he built an altar and laid Isaac upon it. As he lifted his knife to sacrifice his only son, he was dramatically stopped by the angel of Yahweh and then found a ram caught in a thicket behind him. He took the ram and offered it in place of his beloved son (22:13). The vicarious atonement was clearly revealed here for the first time in Scripture and served as an anticipation of the firstborn who, later on the Exodus-Eve, were redeemed by the substitution of lambs. Isaac was dead, not personally but substitutionally. Thus Abraham's love to God without reservation was beautifully demonstrated. He had indeed overcome his own flesh and blood! Once again, God summarized all His blessings that would be upon Abraham's descendants and with His own name assured him of the immutability of His faithfulness.

He enumerated the blessings which He had stored up for Abraham's descendants as follows: First, He would multiply his descendants like the stars of the heaven, as He had previously shown him following Abraham's defeat of the four kings from the east (15:5), and as the sand upon the sea shore, which was similar to "the dust of the earth" that He promised him after the departure of his nephew Lot (13:16). According to later revelation, the former refers to his spiritual descendants and the latter to his physical descendants (Rom. 4:18), since "stars" were not mentioned in Isaac and Jacob's covenantal promises (See 28:14; 32:12).

Second, He wished that his descendants might overcome their enemies (22:17). To "possess the gate of their enemies" means to be rulers over their enemies, since in ancient times the gate of a city was the governmental center of that city. "Shall possess" is not a perfect with *waw* consecutive, but an imperfect with *waw* conjunctive, and would be more accurately translated as a jussive: "And may your seed possess" In other words this was God's wish rather than His promise. Had the Israelites been obedient to God, they would have been rulers over the nations a long time ago. Unfortunately, they have rejected such a heavenly honor again and again, and now this honor has come to the Church. May His redeemed Church never reject Him!

Third, all the nations of the earth were promised that they would be blessed "in your [Abraham's] seed" (22:18). Twice before "in your seed" was phrased as "in you" (See 12:3; 18:18). So the preceding "in you" is actually the anticipation of "in your seed"

here. Seed can be either a singular or a collective noun and should be interpreted according to its near or distant context. The seed mentioned in verse 17 is doubtless a collective noun. The one here, according to later revelation through Paul, is a singular noun referring to Christ. **Only in one of his seed** shall all the people of the world be blessed (See Acts 3:25,26; 4:12)! “Shall be . . . blessed” has a different stem from the same phrase in the preceding passages (12:3; 18:18). Here it is an intensive reflexive while the preceding ones are passive, including the force of reflexive or reciprocal. Thus in all three passages when taken together, “Shall . . . be blessed” expresses the idea of “shall be blessed,” “shall bless themselves,” and “shall bless one another.” God’s blessing has both objective and subjective aspects. Without the believer’s subjective willingness and acceptance, objective blessing can never be substantiated. With subjective acceptance the Christian can be blessed and can also bless others.

After Abraham had taken all the tests (from Faith in Repentance to Faith in Perfect Surrender) he took no more. He was graduated and qualified to do the following business. First, he buried his dead out of his sight, and through the burial he possessed a piece of land in Canaan as a pledge of the future possession of that land by his descendants (23:1-20). Next, through his faithful servant, Eliezer, he found for his son Isaac a wife, who was one of his own native people. Without her God’s redemptive plan would have never been fulfilled (24:1-67). He then divided some of his property among his other children and sent them away from Isaac (25:1-6). At last he went back to be with the Lord whom he loved even more than his own life. He was indeed qualified to be the standard for all those who believe in the Lord.

2. Isaac - The Revelation of Sonship (Gen. 25:19-28:5)

The New Testament revelation says, “But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His name”(John 1:12). The purpose of Christ’s redemption, as the above revelation states, is not just to save a sinner but also to qualify him to be God’s son - His heir. This is exactly what God revealed through the lives of Abraham and Isaac. God, having revealed His ways in training a believer’s faith, was now going to reveal to all believers the life of a notable son, that they themselves might also know how to lead a life worthy of being God’s ideal sons.

The emphasis set forth by the revelation upon Abraham was different from that of Isaac. In Abraham’s life it illustrates the believer’s faith, but in Isaac’s it stresses the believer’s life. The former pays attention to the believer’s training, whereas the latter takes note of the believer’s witnessing. One concerns itself with “. . . **just** . . . by faith,” while the other is more concerned with “the just shall **live** by faith.” In Abraham the way for becoming God’s beloved is indicated, and in Isaac the behavior of being God’s beloved is described. These two are the same in God’s redemption but different in certain aspects. In short, the revelation upon Abraham shows the first aspect of redemption - faith, which upon Isaac marks the second aspect -sonship. A brief consideration of Isaac’s sonship follows.

A. The Life of Sonship. The promise of Isaac's birth was given at the time when Abram arrived at Sichern in Canaan, although the promise then was rather unspecific. It was one year before Isaac's birth that God's promise of a son was again given, along with his name and the date and purpose of his birth (17:19-21). Having waited for a quarter of a century for the promised heir of the covenant, the hearts of the hundred-year-old father and the ninety-year-old mother were understandably gladdened by the fulfillment of the divine promise in the birth of their son. The old age of the couple proved the supernatural origin of Isaac's birth, for by all known laws of natural generation, the birth of a child unto them was absolutely impossible. This peculiar birth serves as the revelation of the new birth which initiates the Christian's spiritual sonship. The believer, like Isaac, is born into the heavenly family by a miraculous birth that occurs according to the divine promise, even the Word of God. As against all natural circumstances Isaac was born into Abraham's family, so beyond all natural ability the depraved sinner is born again into the family of God. "This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes."

The life of this filial son was not only begun with his miraculous birth but was also graced with covenantal blessings. His birth was not only free from slavery, but he was also privileged to be the heir of the Abrahamic covenant and the successor in the Messianic line. His life may be summed up by the answer that his father gave him on the way to the Mount Moriah. After they had left their servant and while they were still walking, he said to his father, "Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" "My son," answered Abraham, "God will provide" God's providence was both the cause and the effect of Isaac's life. Whatever Isaac had God had provided through Abraham. He possessed all his father's riches and blessings as testified by Abraham's old servant, who said, "And Sarah my master's wife bore a son to my master . . . and unto him has he given all that he has" (24:36). It was also confirmed by the later revelation that stated that "Abraham gave all that he had unto Isaac" (25:5). Isaac never labored for the wealth he received. He simply took all the fruit of Abraham's work and enjoyed it. He need not come to Canaan as Abraham did, for he was born there; nor did he personally have to fight with Ishmael, since that problem was well taken care of by his parents. He did not even have to take care of finding his wife or of obtaining his own burying place: God provided his wife, and his father's old servant found her; and Abraham had previously provided for his burial site (49:30,21). Moreover, God's own word to him guaranteed such a provided life as Isaac experienced. When Isaac determined to go down to Egypt, Yahweh appeared to him and promised that He would give his descendants all those lands that He had previously promised in His Abrahamic covenant, and for Abraham's sake would multiply Isaac's descendants as the stars of the sky (26:2-5). In truth, the promised son's life was but the harvest of what his father had sown!

Believers likewise are the heirs of God, who need not fight or struggle for redemption, but simply claim what God the Father has done in Christ. They need not work for their own salvation but only accept what God has provided in Christ. Nor do they need to crucify themselves but instead claim Christ's crucifixion with them, as it is

written in the revelation according to Paul: “And they that are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts” (Gal. 5:24). However, none of these exceedingly great and precious privileges can be realized without obedience, which must be expressed in faith and willingness.

Isaac doubtless was the most obedient son in the Old Testament, although he was not an ideal father. In no place in Scripture is there any indication of sonship rebellion in him. His submission to his father and his confidence in what his father did are excellent examples for all the children of God. He as a young man might well have been curious at times: nevertheless, in all his life he never questioned his father’s motives and doings. Even at the moment when his father lifted the knife over him, he had confidence in his love. Although it was Abraham who offered Isaac, nevertheless, it was Isaac who had to dedicate himself willingly by submitting to be bound and placed on the altar by his aged father. Delitzsch says here: “In permitting himself to be bound and laid upon the altar without resistance, he gave up his natural life to death to rise to a new life through the grace of God.”²

Accordingly, no believer can enjoy the fullest rights of heavenly sonship unless his heart is absolutely obedient and his life is completely dedicated.

B. The Growth of Sonship. Growth is always accompanied by struggle. No success whatever can be achieved without striving. Whether the growth of a plant, of an organization, or of sonship, the principle is always the same. Problems, persecutions, and even failures may be necessary for a person’s growth. The growth of Isaac’s sonship could not be an exception.

Twenty years after Isaac’s marriage, his wife Rebekah was still without child. This drew Isaac to a closer fellowship with the Lord as he earnestly prayed for a son. Prayer may take a long time before it is answered, but no prayer has ever failed to be heard by the Lord. Before long Isaac’s petition was accepted, and Esau and Jacob were born.

The trouble between the twin brothers started before their birth. When they were still in their mother’s womb, they “struggled together within her.” The verb “struggled together” is an intensive and reciprocal form of the verb meaning “crush”; that means to “crush each other violently.” Although it was hard for them to have such violence within her, nevertheless, their movement must have been alarming; otherwise, Rebekah would not have been so discouraged. After their birth the quiet life for the contemplative thinker Isaac was disturbed. Both domestic problems and tribal persecutions invaded his peaceful life. His domestic problems sprang from the fraternal rivalry between the twin brothers, perhaps the result of the parental partiality of Isaac toward Esau and of Rebekah toward Jacob. Most parents unconsciously favor the child who most supplies their own needs. This was the true also with Isaac and Rebekah. Isaac loved the roving hunter because he represented pleasures that his own sedate life could never gratify. “He did eat of his venison” in the original is “for game was in his mouth.” It refers to Esau’s cooking

ability, for he knew how to fix game according to his father's taste. Rebekah favored the peaceful and industrious shepherd Jacob, since he could give her more of his company and filial affection. As a result there was a schism in the family, and the efforts of each brother to outdo his sibling were going on all the time. Cheating, lying, bitterness, and hatred took the place of brotherly love and mutual help. This surely pierced Isaac's tender heart!

Esau's neglect of his birthright could have been another sore grief to Isaac. Esau was the firstborn, yet he sold his birthright for a bowl of brown-red lentil stew. He never realized the importance of his right; nor did he consider the far-reaching consequences of his action, but instead forfeited this sacred right for a moment of sensual enjoyment. Having returned from hunting famished and weary, he saw the fresh pottage that Jacob had just cooked, and gave himself up to the temptation of the "red stuff." His statement: "Please let me swallow some of the red, this red" indicates how thoughtless he was. He did not even know exactly what that red stuff was! Instead of offering him some food as any good brother would do, Jacob demanded Esau's birthright in exchange for bread and lentil stew. Esau, instead of rebuking Jacob for his unkind demand, sold his honor and nobility without a second thought. In doing this he made light of his sacred birthright, and therefore, the New Testament revelation categorized him as a profane person (Heb. 12:16). Such an indifferent attitude toward his birthright proves Esau's unworthiness to be Isaac's first born, for the patriarchal birthright was a sign not only of the material blessings of the chieftainship but also of the covenantal blessings of Yahweh.

In addition to the sibling rivalry, the Hittite marriages of Esau were certainly another great sorrow for Isaac (26:34). "A grief of mind" (26:35) in the original is "bitterness of spirit." Every time he and Rebekah glanced at one of Esau's wives, it was inwardly painful because it reminded them that their firstborn had defiled the family's honor. This type of marriage endangered the spiritual heritage of the family and had therefore been forbidden by Abraham. Isaac's disappointment and broken heart can be completely shared only by those who themselves have had unprofitable sons!

Isaac's persecution from without came from the envy of the Philistines who greedily noticed his great wealth. Having been in Gerar for some time, the patriarch wanted to settle down from his nomadic life. When he began to farm, due to Yahweh's blessing upon him, he not only reaped thirty or sixty fold from what he had sown but one hundred fold, which was the highest productivity in the land. No wonder the Philistines envied him. Prosperity breeds envy, and envy often brings forth injury. It was the same in Isaac's life. The Philistines carried their envy into injurious actions. First, they stopped up the well which Isaac inherited from his father Abraham (26:15); second, they expelled Isaac from the city of Gerar (26:16); third, they took over the two wells which had been dug by Isaac's servants (26:19-21).

In response to his Philistine persecutors, Isaac not only maintained a good testimony but also overcame their envy and persecutions with persistent meekness. Evidently he had confidence in God and believed that, as long as Yahweh was with him

and blessed him, no one would be able to hurt or belittle him. Although he lost his fruitful farm and two wells to the Philistines, God made more room for him and let him have better wells and “be fruitful in the land” (26:22). In the end even Abimelech, the king who forced him to leave Gerar, came and made a pact with him for he saw that Yahweh was with Isaac and had blessed him (26:28,29). Thus we see that meekness towards man and persistence in service are the indispensable prerequisites for any measure of success in the growth of sonship.

Jacob’s deception in obtaining the paternal blessing intended for Esau was another domestic persecution for Isaac. This was brought about by the dimness of Isaac’s eyesight and his aged greed for the tasty game of his hunting son. The pathetic result was the fanning of the long-smoldering coals of bitterness between the twin brothers into an open flame of hatred, which caused a twenty-year separation between the brothers. The dimness of Isaac’s eyes was identical to the darkness of his spiritual perception. At the same time, he was troubled with thoughts of death (27:4). His spiritual perception was so dim that he failed to recall the divine prophecy given prior to the birth of his sons that “the elder shall serve the younger” (25:23). He also overlooked Esau’s negligence regarding his birthright and his Hittite marriages. All these evident facts should have enabled him to do the right thing. His vision however was clouded by his partiality to Esau and his tasty venison. Thus he ignored all the facts and gave his paternal blessings, supposedly, to Esau who was really the supplanter Jacob in disguise. Interestingly, he stopped short of bestowing the covenantal promise for the future possession of Canaan (Compare 27:28,29 with 28:3,4). It seems that although Isaac’s spiritual insight was dim, he nevertheless dared not give Esau the promise of the land of Canaan, which God intended to give to Jacob. This incident reveals clearly that greed can be an influential temptation to any aged believer or minister, who uses his ears in place of his eyes and listening instead of observation.

Isaac was backslidden, but only for a short time. Before long his clear insight was restored. When he learned that Esau was planning to put his brother to death, Isaac agreed with Rebekah to send Jacob to his brother-in-law’s home. He called Jacob to him, charged him to marry a wife from his uncle Laban’s family, and blessed him with the genuine covenantal blessings, in which God’s covenantal name El Shaddai was invoked, and the “blessing of Abraham” was transferred from himself to Jacob (28:3,4). Indeed, great is His faithfulness! In spite of Isaac’s grave failure, God’s grace was still sufficient to restore him, renew his spiritual perception, and make his heartstrings vibrate once more in tune with God’s heart. Just as Isaac, believers will never be rejected by God in a moment of backsliding but will be restored to fellowship by the power of the eternal Father, provided they are so willing.

3. Jacob - the Revelation of Service (Gen. 25:19-34; 27:1-35:29; 46:1-47:12; 48:1-49:33)

When God first revealed Himself to Moses at Mount Horeb, He called Himself “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (Ex. 3:6,15,16). This was

His covenantal title, taking the place of El Shaddai. But it also refers to what God is to His children and what He expects them to be. To Abraham He was the faithful God who brought him through all his trials of faith and allowed him to experience God's faithfulness, in order that he might realize the necessity of committing himself to God without reservation. To Isaac He was the providing God who provided him with all the needs of a son in order that he might have a rich life. But to Jacob He was a chastening God in order that through His discipline Jacob might mortify his wicked self, be delivered from his egocentric life and casuistic mind, and become a good and faithful servant. Likewise, God is the faithful God to those who have faith in Him, who will live up to their sonship, and who will serve Him as good and faithful servants. In other words, to believe in God is not just becoming a son of God and enjoying what God has prepared for him in Christ, but it is also taking on the responsibility of serving God through one's life and work as a servant. God is the God of Jacob because He is a working God. He has been working all the time, and He likes to see His children working together with Him.

As a son, Isaac was well provided for; as a servant, Jacob had to earn everything himself. He had to encounter all kinds of troubles in order to learn to be "good and faithful" (Matt. 25:23). Both of these aspects are necessary in a believer's life. Without provision he cannot stand trial, and without trial his spiritual life can never grow. Service is indeed indispensable for growth. Jacob, through his trials and service, had his selfishness, egotism, and casuistry burned out and in this manner strengthened his faith in God and reinforced his denial of self. Great is His loving kindness! Even Jacob, the supplanter, He molded into a precious vessel! The steps of his molding may be considered as: Casuistry Abandoned, Faithfulness Practiced, and Self Mortified.

A. Casuistry Abandoned (25:19-34; 27:1-29:22). Although Jacob's birth was an answer to his father's prayer, and although he was upright in his youth, yet as he grew older he turned out to be self-centered and had the habit of taking advantage of others. His self-centered character, in truth, was deeply rooted in his own nature. Before his birth he struggled with his brother in his mother's womb (25:22), and at his birth he tried to stop his brother from being the firstborn by holding him back by his heel (25:26). Consequently, he was named Jacob.

Jacob, like Isaac and some fifty other Hebrew names in the Old Testament, is a verbal form. Nominally, it means "he who takes hold of by the heel," essentially, it means "supplanter" as Esau interpreted it saying, "Is not he rightly named Jacob? For he has supplanted me these two times" (27:36). This was indeed an illustration of Jacob's character which plagued him most of his life and was the cause of all his future sufferings.

In his adolescence Jacob led a good life as was evidenced by the phrase "a plain man" (25:27). "Plain" is *tam* in Hebrew which means "sincere," "upright" or "simple." The same adjective is used to describe Job's spiritual maturity (Job 1:1) and was also used to portray a virgin's peerless virtue (Song 5:2). Jacob's quiet and meditative life as a nomadic tent dweller brought him into constant fellowship with the devout elders of the

family, who could influence him to be sincere and upright. Unfortunately, he soon developed the philosophy of casuistry, which is, the end justifies the means. He certainly knew the promise of the Lord. Instead of waiting upon Him patiently, he adopted casuistic means to attain both political and spiritual ends by seizing the opportunity at Esau's moment of weakness. When Esau returned from hunting and was hungry for food, instead of sharing his lentil stew with his brother, Jacob ever the opportunist took Esau's need as a means to achieve his own ambition for obtaining the birthright, in order that he might become the chief of the clan and inherit the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant. In the beginning Jacob might have had some struggle between his emotions and conscience; gradually however his emotions became master of the situation until finally his will, disregarding the objection of conscience, gave consent to the casuistic suggestion and seized the advantage. True, Jacob did secure the coveted birthright of the firstborn. However, since the heirship was gained by ungodly means and not received according to God's time and procedure, it brought upon him divine judgment instead of divine blessing

Jacob's insecurity was not done away with even after he had secured the birthright. He was still afraid that his brother might take the promises away from him through their father's paternal blessing. In order to gain more self-confidence and security, he accepted the insincere suggestion of his narrow-minded mother, Rebekah, to deceive his aged father in order that there might not be any blessings left for his simpleminded brother. It is to be noted that Jacob's conscience did express a deep concern about the possible evil consequences of the scheme (27:11-12); nevertheless, his strong willed mother's persuasion and guarantee overpowered his inner warning. Subsequently, he carried out his mother's advice and pocketed his father's blessings. At the same time he began to reap the fruit of his ill-gotten gain.

Threatened by Esau's murderous conspiracy, Jacob obeyed his parents' suggestion and without delay fled to his maternal uncle's home in Haran (28:5). Indeed, "haste is waste!" From that point Jacob was separated from the redeemed family for twenty years, and his birthright, which he had hastily gained by casuistic means, was not realized until he had gone through a series of divine disciplines and had come to understand that God's end must be attained by God's means. Thus from Jacob's casuistic life, God reveals an eternal truth that **spiritual ends must be attained by spiritual means**, and that God's blessings attained by ungodly means will surely bring upon the obtainer the chastening rod of God, who will continue the discipline until he dare not apply his own ingenuity and deceit but rather seek only God's way of doing things. Then, and only then, will he be spiritually prepared to faithfully serve the Lord.

B. Faithfulness Practiced (28:10-31:55). The service of a faithful servant must ever find its origin in genuine love, without which, faithfulness and sacrifice may be only the compensations of an inferiority complex which can never have any spiritual value. Thus Jacob's training was needful and not revengeful.

Having arrived at Bethel, Jacob, the heir apparent, was fully prepared to become the family successor to the Abrahamic covenant. Yahweh appeared to him in a dream and transferred the covenantal blessings to him. God's omnipresence was here progressively revealed and His faithfulness further assured. Jacob however was not at all excited. He asked God only for journeying mercies, food and clothes, and a safe homecoming. This indicates that after his three days' lonely journey, he began to realize the vanity of life. After all, without home, love, and security what good was the birthright? It is true, that at the conclusion of his fellowship with God at Bethel, he was still quite businesslike toward Him, yet although it was immature conduct, that might have been an indication of his having faith in God.

Jacob began his labor of love by helping his cousin, Rachel, and watering her father's flock (29:10). He, who had not long ago refused to give his own brother a bowl of lentil stew, now willingly served a female cousin whom he had never before seen. The long weary journey most certainly had done Jacob good! Suffering always matures a person. The supreme demonstration of Jacob's labor of love however was his fourteen years of hard work to obtain Rachel for his wife. Time in love is always much shorter than in reality, and labor in love is always an enjoyment. This was also true for Jacob. For the sake of Rachel whom he loved, seven years of labor seemed to him but a few days (29:20), and even another seven years were a just short period to him (29:30). This proves that no service unto God can be really faithful and enjoyable unless it springs from one's genuine love to the Lord.

Jacob himself testified to his faithfulness in service when overtaken by Laban on Mount Gilead. After Laban had searched in vain for his pagan idols in Jacob's tents, Jacob rebuked him and said that during his full twenty years of service, he had never once neglected his duty as a shepherd. He had never lost any of Laban's flock, nor had he ever enjoyed a ram chop from them. Whenever any of the flock was stolen or torn by the beasts, he himself paid for the loss. He had never taken a day off for vacation but labored in the heat of the day and the cold of the night. Besides, he often had to keep vigil during the nights. In spite of all his hard and faithful work, Laban managed to cut his wages ten times. He however never laid aside his responsibility as a caretaker of the flock. What a faithful servant Jacob was. This is the kind of servant whom God has looked for throughout all the ages and is still looking for today!

Worldly ill treatment often drives a man closer to his heavenly call. Having gone through all those afflictions and abuses, Jacob realized that man might ill-use him and take advantage of him, but the God of his father (even the "Fear of Isaac") had never forgotten him. On the contrary He paid him abundantly (31:42). When Laban told him that his wages would be the speckled cattle, then all the cattle were born speckled. When Laban said that only the striped cattle would be his hire, then all the cattle bore stripes (31:8). He never overlooks the faithfulness of His servants, nor does He let them go away empty-handed. Their sufferings, ill treatments, and even tears are all recorded (See Ps. 56:8). We can therefore say that this was an anticipation of the later revelation: "Servants . . . whatever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men; Knowing that of the

Lord ye shall receive the reward of the inheritance: for ye serve the Lord Christ” (Col. 3:22-24).

C. Self Mortified (32:1-35:29). The purpose of God’s work, strictly speaking, is for the workers rather than for the work itself. God is the Creator and has great power. All creation, visible and invisible, is under His sovereignty, as are all His heavenly servants who excel in strength, hearken to His voice and perform His commandments. If His purpose were His work only, He could either do it Himself or send angels to accomplish the job. He does not need anyone to initiate His doings, nor has He the need for man to add a final touch to His work. After all He is the beginning and the ending of all things! His purpose for letting His feeble and ignorant children carry on His work, instead of doing it Himself, is for the training of His children rather than for the good of His work. If the average parents do not neglect their children’s training (and many of them make even sacrificial efforts for the sake of their children’s education), then how much more will our Father in Heaven do for His children’s training. Many a time He chooses to allow His work to be defective or even delayed in order that His children might have enough training. Likewise, what God did for the remainder of Jacob’s life was for Jacob’s own good rather than for His work. First, He used circumstances to train Jacob to be faithful and then trained him to do away with his egotism and casuistry. As a servant, faithfulness is necessary; yet as long as egotism is there, true faithfulness to God will always be in question. Whenever ego is on the throne, faithfulness will always be loyal to ego instead of to God. Therefore, without the mortification of self, a servant’s faithfulness will never be genuine. God, having finished Jacob’s training for faithfulness, now turned all the circumstances against him in order that his egotism might become as gold and precious stones.

Every trial has its definite period. When its time is up and its destination is reached, God will not let it linger on any longer. When the additional six years of Jacob’s labor were over, God on the one hand caused his environment to become unbearable, and on the other He told him in a dream that he should return to his father’s land. Having talked it over with his wives, Jacob packed up all that he owned in Haran and without informing Laban of his departure fled to Canaan. This was the first time in Jacob’s life that he had acted upon God’s word. After twenty long years of labor, Jacob began to learn the importance of waiting before God and doing His word, instead of his own. Whenever Jacob acted upon God’s word, God’s presence was very real to him. After he had been pursued and overtaken by Laban, a divine warning came to Laban in a dream and warned him that he should not touch Jacob nor anything belonging to him. Jacob, in order to express his gratitude to God, offered a sacrifice to Him as his thanksgiving and for the conclusion of his training of faithfulness.

“Now Jacob went on his way” (32:1) to begin another series in his training. First, Esau was coming to meet him. “Your sin shall find you out” is ever true. When Jacob had learned that Esau was coming with four hundred men, he was “greatly afraid and distressed.” For safety he divided his belongings into two camps (32:7). After he had arranged everything, he called upon the name of his fathers’ God for deliverance instead

of relying upon his own cunning (32:9-12). Evidently Jacob's faith in God was considerably developed, although his egotism was still on the throne. In order to mortify Jacob's "self," God came in person to wrestle with him at Peniel that was the place where Jacob expressed his egotism the most, and thus where God dealt his ego a mortal blow.

Wrestle means seeking to subdue the other in order that the other may not be able to struggle any longer. So God tried to subject Jacob in order that he might not be able to struggle against Him anymore. Jacob's ego was surely stubborn. Even God could not overcome him with natural power. At the end God had to apply supernatural strength to end the wrestling. When supernatural power was applied, just a little touch was enough to dislocate Jacob's hip joint. Consequently, he was lame, his fighting ability vanished, and his self-pride and self-dependence were all together ended. In commemoration of this occasion, God changed Jacob's name into Israel. However, "Israel" was then only a name. The reality of this name was not substantiated until he went to Bethel to pay the vow that he had made at the time of his flight from Esau (35:9,10).

"Israel" in general means "God's prince," or as the Scofield Bible states, "A prince with God." Nominally, however, this is hardly a correct meaning. Such a misinterpretation may be due to the incorrect translation of the Authorized Version which says: "Your name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel: for as a prince have you power with God and men, and have prevailed" (32:28). "As a prince" is not in the original. The clause "as a prince have you power . . ." is the translation of a Hebrew verb which means "to strive," it has nothing to do with "as a prince." The same verb is used twice in Hosea 12:3,4, of which the first one is in *Qal* (general form) perfect, and the second is an imperfect with *waw* consecutive. Both were translated as "had power" but without "as a prince" added in either verse. Evidently, "as a prince" here is an interpolation and not a translation. Further, the first part of Israel (*Isra*) is simply a short form of *Yisreh* - *Qal* imperfect, meaning "he who strives." In other words, it is a verbal form just like Isaac, "he who laughs," or Jacob, "he who holds by the heel" and not a noun form that means "a prince." The meaning of Israel therefore can be either "he who strives with God or for God." However, it may also be translated "God's son," as later revelation defined it (See Hos. 1:10).

The next morning as Jacob passed over the ford, much to his surprise, Esau with his four hundred men was already on the other side. Instead of attacking him, however, Esau came forward to embrace him and be reunited. This indicates that his prayer for deliverance was answered and that his self-defense scheme was wasted! It surely taught him the lesson that to put trust in the Lord was much better than to have confidence in himself. Consequently, when he arrived at Shechem, he built an altar and named it *El-Elohe-Israel*, (God is the God of Israel). Now Jacob realized that God was not just the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac but also his God.

After the disgraceful incident involving Dinah and Shechem (34:1-31), God told him to go up to Bethel and build an altar there (35:1). Jacob first charged his household to put away their strange gods and physically cleanse themselves; then he took them to

Bethel. He built an altar there and named it *El Bethel*, which nominally means “God of Bethel.” Essentially, however, it may mean “God, the faithful God,” for he wanted to witness that whatever God had promised at Bethel, He fulfilled accordingly (35:7). In response to his faith, God granted him His covenantal name El Shaddai and reaffirmed the Abrahamic covenant to him (35:11-12). Finally, he went to Hebron and stayed there until he went down to Egypt.

Having gone through all these trials and afflictions, Jacob now approached what later revelation calls, “. . . the path of the just is as the shining light, that shines more and more unto the perfect day” (Prov. 4:18). Jacob’s last forty years of life were in reality a shining period. His splendor, comparatively, was even greater than Abraham’s or Isaac’s. Moreover, his fear of God was also much more progressive than his fathers’. When he found that Joseph was still alive in Egypt and had become the second to Pharaoh, he was naturally overjoyed to be able to visit him there. He nevertheless was afraid that his going might not please God. This indicates that Jacob’s fear of God was much more than Abraham’s and Isaac’s; for both of them had taken leaving Canaan for granted without first seeking God’s will. But Jacob first offered a sacrifice and then sought God’s will before leaving the promised land. He went down to Egypt only after God appeared to him in a vision and promised to bring him back to Canaan. The formerly egocentric Jacob turned out to be one who dared not move without God’s order. Jacob’s self was mortified, his ego dethroned, and thus he was free from the dominion of his old nature.

Jacob, having arrived in Egypt, testified before Pharaoh that his life was a pilgrimage, short and evil, in comparison to the lives of his forefathers (47:9). He was not giving his own biography to Pharaoh, as much as preaching projectively in order that Pharaoh might have some idea of the vanity of life. Before his death Jacob was very feeble, yet he was able to reaffirm what El Shaddai had promised (48:3,4) and predict that God would lead his children back to the promised land (48:21). At the end he even predicted the future of his twelve tribes (49:1-28). The rewards for a good and faithful servant may come late, but they assuredly are great!

4. Joseph - The Revelation of the Victorious Life (Gen. 37:1-36; 39:1-45:24;47:13-31; 49:22-26; 50:1-26)

During the Patriarchal Period God gave us four main characters. Each of them discloses one part of a believer’s spiritual life. In Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob God revealed the importance of faith, sonship, and service. These aspects however are not the end of the believer’s pursuit but rather the means for reaching the end. The end result of Christ’s redemption is the same as God’s purpose for man’s creation. Man was not created by chance; he was created to have dominion over God’s creation, which has not yet been realized, nor will it be realized until the coming of the Lord. The necessary preparation for the believer’s future dominion was revealed in Joseph’s life. In Abraham we learn how God makes a believer’s faith grow, in Isaac how God provides the believer’s spiritual needs, and in Jacob how God trains a faithful servant. It is only in Joseph that we find the culmination of God’s preceding revelations. The faith from God

revealed in Abraham, the life from Christ in Isaac, and the discipline from the Holy Spirit in Jacob are all means to qualify a believer to reign with Christ, in order that God's purpose for man's creation might be finally realized.

Salvation (a new creation) is like the physical creation - it is unconditional. But reigning with Christ is conditional. "Whosoever believes in Him should not perish" (John. 3:15) but "if we suffer, we shall also reign with him" (2 Tim. 2:12). "Suffer" here is translated from the Greek *hupomeno* that means to "endure." The verb is used altogether seventeen times in the New Testament, and this verse is the only passage in which *hupomeno* has been translated in the Authorized Version as "suffer." The exact meaning of "endure" here may be explained by the revelation in the last book of the New Testament: "And he that overcomes, and keeps my works unto the end, to him will I give power over the nations" (Rev. 2:26).

Before Joseph became a ruler over Egypt, God took him down a long and hard path to prepare him to be an overcomer and a keeper of His word to the very end of life. The great things that Joseph later did were not only related to Egypt but also to Israel and God's Church throughout all the ages. Without his reign, not only might the Egyptians have starved to death, but also the nation of Israel might have been annihilated and the revelation of God's redemption in Genesis would not have been completed.

God's preparation for Joseph may be considered in light of the later revelation, "Awake, O north wind; and come, you south; blow upon my garden, that the spices thereof may flow out" (Song 4:16). Studying Joseph's life carefully, one is impressed that God let the north wind and the south wind alternately blow upon him, until the spices of his character flew out. God prepared his character with sufferings, exercised his body with toil, exposed him to disgrace and humiliation, and frustrated him with injustice and ingratitude, that his mind might be cultivated, his sensibility stabilized, his volition strengthened, his faithful character developed, and his faith in the Lord increased. Joseph's own north and south wind may be considered as follows:

A. South Wind - Enjoying Parental Affection (37:1-17). Joseph was the first son of Rachel, whom Jacob loved dearly. He was handsome and had his mother's beautiful features. The Bible uses even the same wording (*yephath-toar wiphath-Mareh*, handsome form and handsome appearance) to describe her beauty and his handsomeness (See 29:17; 39:6). Following the death of Rachel, Jacob naturally transferred all his love to Joseph. Hence he was the one who in his boyhood enjoyed more parental love than his siblings. As a result he was the only one among his brothers who had outstanding character. Parental love has a lot to do with a child's future disposition and moral characteristics. Unless the mothers of the United States go back to taking good care of their children, there is no way to do away with juvenile delinquency!

When Joseph was seventeen years old, he began to tend the flocks along with his brothers. Owing to his noble character, he not only refused to go along with their evil doings but often reported their wicked deeds to his father. Joseph knew the difference

between love and evil, but not many Christians today do. Love and truth are two interactive concepts, but this is not true of love and evil, which are two entirely different categories. To refrain from exposing evil is not love, but cowardice and criminal. On the contrary, to expose evil and do away with it is part of the genuine Christian character. As long as a person's motive is selfless, exposing evil is a noble deed and should be encouraged. Joseph did the noble thing. As a result, on the one hand he was loved more by his father and was rewarded with "a coat of many colors," or rather "a coat with long sleeves"; on the other he was envied and hated by his brothers.

The basic cause for exciting his brothers' envy was his two dreams. In telling them he gave a hint that he would be exalted above his brothers, and even above the parents. The details of the two dreams hurt his brothers' pride and excited their envy; yet he remained an obedient son to his father and still loved his brothers. When his father sent him to visit them in Shechem, which was more than fifty miles away from his home valley of Hebron, he answered without hesitation: "Here am I" (37:13). Joseph was not spoiled by the south wind!

B. North Wind - Sold into Slavery (37:18-36). It is universally known that those who are going to do great work need special training. Sincerity, obedience, patience faithfulness, diligence, thoughtfulness, purity, and wisdom cannot be obtained in an easy life or convenient environment but only in hardship and obstacles. This was also true with Joseph, who would never have been completely equipped as a ruler had he always remained at home. Providentially, God let his father send him to check his brothers' welfare at Shechem. Having arrived at the desired destination, he learned that his brothers had gone on to Dothan (37:17), which is on the slope of Mount Gilboa. When he reached their midst, they first cast him into a dry pit, and then sold him to the Ishmaelites who dwelt in Media but were passing by Dothan on their way to Egypt as merchants. Although Joseph begged them pitifully for mercy (42:21), they turned a deaf ear and sold him for twenty pieces of silver (37:28). Such a crisis might well have caused many to be mortally sick; yet there is no indication of any accusation or curse falling from his lips, although he might well have wondered how God would fulfill his dreams through these particular circumstances.

C. South Wind - Earning Confidence and Esteem (39:1-6). Having arrived in Egypt, the merchants sold Joseph to a captain of Pharaoh's guards named Potiphar. Instead of complaining and grudging, Joseph went on to do his work and fulfill his duty. Due to the presence of Yahweh with him, he gradually became a "prosperous man" - a man characterized by prosperity. Before long he had won the confidence of his master and was promoted from being a slave to being the steward in his master's house. Many things in his life had changed, but Joseph was learning rapidly. Yet what he had learned in Potiphar's home was not enough. He needed further preparation. Accordingly, God let an unexpected humiliation fall upon him.

D. North Wind -- Facing Temptation and Injustice (39:7-20). Many young people might count the north wind as a tragedy, but to God it shows His grace, as

revealed in Jeremiah's Lamentation: "It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth" (Lam. 3:27). An easy life without struggle can make a youngster rotten, but a yoke borne in youth is but a stepping-stone for the individual to reach a higher station. This was the same for Joseph. One day while in Potiphar's house fulfilling his duties, his master's wife, who had been casting her eyes upon Joseph for some time, suddenly caught him by his garment with the intention of forcing him to lie with her. Joseph, because of his consciousness of God's presence, rejected her advances, left his garment in her hand, and fled.

This temptation might have been irresistible and inescapable for other young men; Joseph however quickly overcame it. The secret of his victory lay in putting distance between the temptation and himself. Although one may overcome some temptations by facing them, yet many of them, especially those temptations connected with sexual lust, can be overcome only by fleeing (See 2 Tim 2:22). According to Scripture, Joseph's victory might have rested on three pillars, yet essentially there was only one foundation - faithfulness. He wanted to be faithful to God who had always been with him, to the master who had so much confidence in him, and to himself that his purity might be kept from defilement. He cared only for the integrity of his faithfulness and paid no attention to the price that he might pay. For God's sake he would rather go to jail than yield himself to the wicked woman's desire; for his master's sake he did not want to disgrace his owner's wife by defending himself. So he kept silent without one word of controversy. What a beautiful character he had! Although evil is usually short-lived, however, for the time being it did prevail over Joseph. When Potiphar got home, he accepted his wife's accusation and put Joseph in jail.

E. South Wind - Promotion and Friendship (39:21-40:22). Physical environment may change a person's character but not his spiritual conviction. The conviction of God's presence had been an encouragement and power to Joseph throughout all his past trials, and it was once again a blessing to him in jail. It helped him to forget the slander of his master's wife, to ignore the injustice of his master, and to concentrate his mind on his immediate responsibilities. Before long his faithfulness in duty and wisdom in work were recognized by his superior, the keeper of the jail, who promoted Joseph to be his assistant.

Talent and friendliness are a pair, and neither one can be put to good use without the other. Talent without friendliness makes it hard to reach others' hearts, and friendliness without talent can render only lip service. Joseph had both and was thus able to create a friendly environment in the jail. Pharaoh's butler and baker, who were also in jail, were troubled one night by dreams. Joseph noticed their troubles and asked if he could be of any help. They told him that each of them had dreamed a significant dream, but no one could figure out what they meant. Joseph comforted them by saying: "Does not interpretation belong to God?" This indicates that in Joseph's mind God was surely everything! Finally, Joseph interpreted the butler's and the baker's dreams, and after three days both interpretations were completely fulfilled: the butler was restored to his

butlership, and the baker was hanged. Indeed, it was Joseph's south wind blowing, but on a rainy day!

F. North Wind - Enduring Ingratitude and Tardiness (40:23). Waiting is wearisome; waiting longer than expected is almost unbearable. Joseph's imprisonment for two long dreary years was surely for him a severe north wind. Each day of those two years was a very long day. This short verse: "Yet did not the chief butler remember Joseph, but forgot him," well expresses the butler's selfishness. It indicates the ungrateful character of the butler in general and denotes the terrible experience of Joseph in particular. Such a situation could lead a person to hate the world for its selfishness, but it was not so in Joseph's mind. He possessed the great virtue of keeping silent and the great ability of watching and waiting for God's operation. God prolonged his jail life in order to cause him to have more faith in His faithfulness and more patience in His time. God's "tardiness" is assuredly His extra grace to His beloved ones!

G. South Wind - Reigning as a King (41:1-45:24; 47:13-31). No chastening is enjoyable at the time received; it is always painful and unpleasant. Nevertheless, it brings forth the fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it (See Heb. 12:11). God's time is incredibly accurate; He is never a minute ahead or a second behind, but always on time. When the end of those two long years came, God on the one hand caused Pharaoh to have a strange dream; on the other He caused the chief butler to remember Joseph's goodness to him. He then recommended Joseph to Pharaoh for the interpretation of Pharaoh's dream. Although the dream was twofold, the subject matter was one: the seven years of plenty contrasted with the seven years of famine. As soon as Joseph had finished his interpretation and had given his suggestion how to prevent the coming disaster, Pharaoh appointed him to carry out the plan. Pharaoh had recognized that in Joseph there was something not naturally but supernaturally endowed, even "the Spirit of God." Promptly, Pharaoh took off his signet ring and placed it upon Joseph's hand, clothed him with fine linen, put a gold necklace about his neck, had him ride in the second chariot of honor, and ordered the heralds to call out ahead of him: "*Abhrek* - bow the knee" (41:43). Thus Joseph was made a ruler over all the land of Egypt (41:38-43), and his dreams given by God were finally fulfilled. He reigned over the Egyptians with wisdom and sympathy and over his own brothers with discipline and love. Fittingly, he was honored above his brothers (49:26).

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¹J.B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* (London: Macmillan and Company, 1902), p. 119.

²C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Biblical commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1949), Vol. I, p. 252.