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The Bible Story

Volume 1,

Chapter 1

"In the Beginning"

HAVE YOU ever looked down on the Earth from a high hill or a mountain or an airplane? From such high places the planet we live on looks very huge, even though we can see only a small part of it.

Perhaps it is difficult for you to imagine how something so big could be built. But someone planned and built it, just as someone planned and built the home you live in.

Wouldn't you like to be whisked back into the long ago and see some of the amazing things that happened before the Earth came to be the way it is now? And wouldn't you like to learn about who lived on this planet long before men lived here? And how and why you came to be here?

A Time Machine

Then let's suppose we have a wonderful machine by which we can tune into the Stream of Time. This machine would be able to show on its screen things that happened long before now and things that will happen in years to come!

Suppose that you live in a small town or city in North America and that you would like to know what that town or city was like in the year 1800. You press a button on the time machine and say into its microphone what you want to see.

The screen lights up with a picture you don't recognize. It shows mostly a deep forest. The scene changes, and now you see familiar things. There is the big hill south of your town and the river that flows by it! But there are no buildings, no streets and no cars. Instead, there is heavy forest. But what are those things in the little clearing at the river's edge?

Indian teepees! As the screen picture zooms in for a close-up of Indians moving about, you realize that your town hadn't even started to be built back in 1800.

Just as there was a time when your town and your parents didn't exist, there was also a time when the planet we live on didn't exist. And just as there was a reason for the Earth coming into being, there was a reason for YOU coming into being. Do you know what it was?

If you know the exciting answer to that question, then you have a wonderful bit of wisdom most people don't have. Even most men who are thought of as being very wise can't give you the truth about why man exists.

To learn what really did happen a long time ago, let us ask the time machine to show us how things looked before there was anything in the vast space where our universe is now. It's

difficult for our minds to imagine back over such a long period of time when there was nothing to see. But there was something else there in place of stars and planets.

The time machine screen is inky black. You are gazing into cold, empty, dark space!

At first the screen appears dead, but as it begins to pick up something that is more than of a material nature, a strange, hazy glow comes in sight. (I John 1:5; John 1:4.) It emanates from an invisible being, and gradually spreads out to become so big and bright that it entirely fills what at first appeared to be an expanse of nothingness. Now something that isn't material is brilliantly clear. WHO could it be?
It is GOD.

"In the Beginning -- God"

God had to be there first because He made everything that ever was. (Genesis 1:1.)

Probably one of the first things you wonder about God is where He came from. He didn't come from anywhere. He has always existed right here in space because there never has been any place outside of space. God inhabits eternity (Isaiah 57:15.) He had no beginning (Hebrews 7:3.)

Because we are physical, these things are hard for us to understand. We have to realize that there are matters that God keeps secret from us. Many other things He reveals to us, especially if we are obedient. (Deuteronomy 29:29.) God always was and always will be. (Revelation 1:8.)

What is God like? We know what people are like because we can see them. Your parents and brothers and sisters -- if you have brothers and sisters -- are a family of human beings made of flesh and blood in the image or shape of God. (Gen. 1:26.)

God is a spirit being (John 4:24.) Spirit is something human beings can't usually see or feel or hear. That's why you can't see God by looking into the space of millions of years ago, even though God was all that existed then. However, we can sometimes see some of the things that God produces.

In the beginning there was one in the God Family. That being was God the Father. Each Person that enters the God Family is called God, just as each human person in your family is called by your last name. God the Father is composed of spirit, and He is holy and perfect. God's Spirit, like the light that radiates from Him, goes out from Him everywhere, and is called the Holy Spirit. (Psalm 139:7.)

Now we know that we have gone back in time as far as we can go and still learn something. Next we should ask the time machine to show us something of what happened when God later created the great universe in the vast expanse of space.

We don't know just when the universe was made or how long it took to make it, so we'll simply ask for a view of it after it was created.

Now Look!

The black curtain of depthless space becomes jeweled by millions of specks and patches of light of various hues. Each of those brighter specks of light is a gigantic, flaming sun, some of which are millions of times larger than the one that gives us our light. And though the distant suns or stars appear to be grouped together like clusters of diamonds, they are many billions of miles apart! (Isa. 54:2.) The universe is so big that we can see only part way through it. Our minds can't even begin to realize its tremendous size, but this should give us some idea of how much wiser and more powerful our Creator is than we are. (Job 22:12 and 38:4-6.)

In those clusters of beautiful stars our Earth was created. Men have thought up various theories of how it came to be there. Many foolishly believe and teach that all the stars and planets just "happened" without God having anything to do with their creation. This idea is the subject of much study in most schools throughout the world. (Psa. 53:1.)

WHY the Earth was created should be more important than HOW it came into being. If we were to ask our time machine to show how it looked after it was made, we would see a huge blue-green globe of great beauty hanging against the star-studded backdrop of space. You wouldn't recognize any of our planet's continents or markings, because when it was first formed it was quite different.

To create all objects in the universe, God had to provide material just as carpenters needed material to build the place where you live. (Heb. 11:3.) As you already know, God is composed of Spirit. As light shines from a lamp throughout a room, God's Holy Spirit emanates from Him to all the universe. This mysterious and wonderful power is the very essence of God. By its power the universe was created and by it every physical force and celestial body is controlled.

Angels!

God didn't make the universe just so He could admire His work. He also created millions of spirit beings, or angels, to live in it. Many of them served Him in the third heaven, the place of His throne. (II Cor. 12:2.) We are not told where the third heaven is, but possibly it's somewhere in the northern sky. (Isa. 14:13.) We do know that it is invisible to human eyes, just as spirit beings can't be seen by us (II Cor. 4:18).

A long time ago there was a chief angel in heaven. His Latin name Lucifer" meant "Light Bringer" or "Shining Star of the Dawn". God created Lucifer to be very wise, good and capable. He was perfect in his ways when he was brought into being, and brilliant in knowledge and appearance. Therefore God made Lucifer ruler over the newly created Earth, where millions of angels were sent to dwell. Lucifer was to govern the angels of the Earth by carrying out all of God's orders and laws.

Because God created and owns the universe, He is the supreme ruler over it. Lucifer at first was subject to Him. He did all that God commanded. There were years and years of happiness and contentment among the angels while they and Lucifer obeyed every one of God's laws. This was because God's laws are given to make beings happy. Matters went very well as long as Lucifer obeyed every rule and instruction. (Ezekiel 28:13-15.)

But in time he permitted wrong thoughts to come into his mind. "I am king over millions of angels," he thought. "From them I could form a great army powerful enough to attack God's angels. If I could seize God's throne in heaven and depose God, I could become supreme ruler of the whole universe!" (Isa. 14:12-14.)

The mere thought of conquering and replacing God caused great pride and ambition to grow. With it grew greed and a burning desire to carry out his desires.

At last Lucifer made his plans known to those who were most likely to succumb to his tempting promises to make them rulers, under him, of other worlds, and to give high offices even in heaven to those who would rebel with him. He was elated to learn that a third of all the angels were foolishly willing to risk their happiness by joining his evil cause. (Rev. 12:4 and Job 4:18.) The other two thirds remained loyal to their Creator.

The pride, lust and greed that had grown from an evil idea caused Lucifer's great wisdom to become perverted. Otherwise, he would have known that successful war against his Creator would be impossible. His thinking was so distorted that from then on his reasoning became false. Filled with the belief that he could actually conquer his Creator, Lucifer moved to carry out his rebellious plan. With millions of angels willing to obey him, instead of God, he swept up to heaven with them for the attack.

The war that resulted between vast numbers of spirit beings was an incredible, awful thing. Human beings know nothing of the strange and cataclysmic forces that were used. Even hydrogen or cobalt bombs are puny compared to the powers at God's command. God has always been the most powerful Being to exist. No armies of human beings or spirits are strong enough to dethrone Him.

Lucifer ran into dreadful defeat. The terrible power of the Creator was unleashed with such frightful force that the attackers were blasted out of heaven and back down to Earth. (II Peter 2:4, and Isa. 14:15.)

God wasn't done with the rebellious angels, however. Lucifer's sin of rebellion against the rule of God turned him into a devil. His name was changed to Satan, which means ENEMY in Hebrew. (Rev. 12:9.) Those angels who had followed him were from then on known as demons. Demons are hateful, bitter, unhappy spirit beings whose pure spirit light has gone out forever, and who have only a miserable, hopeless future (Jude 13).

Awful Penalty of Sin

Whenever God's laws are broken, suffering, trouble and destruction are bound to follow. During the great battle when Satan and his demons tried to conquer God, an awesome change came over the Earth. (Gen. 1:2.) What had long been a beautiful planet had been turned into a cosmic wreck because Lucifer rebelled against his maker. The atmosphere was filled with smoke and poison gases so thick that nothing could live in it.

The raging elements pounded the Earth. No physical life could survive through that terrible time. (Ps. 104:29.)

The only living beings left on the planet were the evil, restless demons whose lawbreaking had broken the perfect balance, harmony and beauty of a world God had lovingly created for His creatures.

For a time our world stayed buried in a deep blanket of gases, smoke and water. Oceans covered the whole Earth. There was no longer any dry land. The atmosphere was so clogged with clouds of tiny bits of matter that no light could reach the seas. We don't know how long this condition lasted, but later came the time when God started preparing for a very important event in His great plan. That was the bringing of human beings into existence.

There are several other planets besides Earth swinging around our sun, and probably there are more here and there in the universe. As far as we know, Earth was the only planet God chose and prepared to be the home of human beings patterned after His image.

How God Creates

For five days God worked at making Earth over into a place that would be just right to support human life. (Gen. 1:23.) It took mighty power and awesome forces to alter the whole surface of the planet in less than a week.

On the first day of reforming Earth's surface, God prepared periods of night and day by clearing away much of the smoke, gases and matter that filled the skies. Thus a little light came through to Earth for the first time since Satan and his demons were cast back from heaven. (Gen. 1:3-5.)

On the second day God produced a vast layer of fresh air over the Earth. Through it much of the water vapors seeped upward to form massive, clean clouds high in the sky, and healthy air that could be safely breathed. This combination of healthy gases (Gen. 1:6-8) was necessary to keep man alive. God called this atmosphere heaven. (Gen. 1:8.) He also spoke of two other heavens: one is the space beyond our atmosphere (Gen. 1:14), and the other, called the third heaven, is where His throne is. (Acts 7:49 and II Cor. 12:2.) He doesn't tell us where it is, and astronomers have never seen it because it's invisible.

On the third day, the Creator molded Earth's crust so that some of it was high and some of it was low. The great layer of water surrounding the planet drained into the low areas, causing various shapes of seas. Large areas of land were left above water, forming continents. (Gen. 1:9-10.) On the continents God caused vegetation -- trees, bushes, flowers, grass -- to grow out of the ground. In that same day the lands began to be green with plants of all kinds springing up from the soil. (Gen. 1:11-13.)

On the fourth day the Creator swept the last of the dust and harmful gases from the skies, thus letting the sun, moon and stars shine in their full brilliance on the lands and seas. (Gen. 1:14-19.)

On the fifth day he placed whales and many kinds of water creatures in the sea. On that day He also formed various types of birds to fly through the air. Soon the skies and the waters were swarming with living things.

The Creator had renewed the face of the Earth and had bedecked it with numerous kinds of life in five days. At last He was almost ready to bring man into being. But before creating

man on the sixth day, there were special land creatures to be brought on the scene. Those included elephants, cattle, horses, rodents, worms, insects and every kind of thing that walks, creeps or crawls. (Gen.1:24-25.)

Man Created!

Finally God performed the most important task of physical work. Using the material from which He formed the Earth, He made a human being! (Gen.1:26-28.)

The first human being was fashioned in such a way that he looked very much like God. It was as if God were a sculptor, making a statue of Himself in flesh and blood and bone. Actually, He made this first man out of the dust of the ground and then caused him to breathe air and become alive, so that he became the first living soul (life) of his kind. (Gen. 2:7.)

God named this first human being Adam. He was the first living mortal man on this planet. (I Cor. 15:45.) The Creator had already prepared a beautiful park for Adam to live and work in. This was in Eden, a land on the other side of the world from North America.

God knew that Adam would become lonely if he were the only human being. He took one of Adam's ribs, while he was sleeping, and formed it into a woman. She was given to Adam for a companion. Adam named the woman Eve. (Gen.2:18-22.) Thus ended the first week in the history of the refashioned planet on which human beings have lived for almost six thousand years.

On the seventh day God rested from His six days of tremendous labor. He called that seventh day the Sabbath (Exodus 16:26), thus creating a special day of rest and setting it apart as a twenty-four hour period as His particular day. He made a law that man should observe that same day every week by resting and assembling for worship. God made that day holy time, and commanded all people to always keep it holy. The first six days were for man to work and play, but the last day of the week God kept for Himself. (Ex. 20:8-11.)

God's Sense of Beauty

Let us turn to the time machine again to get a view of part of the beautiful garden of Eden, the park where Adam and Eve lived. The screen shows a deep green, grassy slope leading down to a stream of sparkling, blue water. The slope is decked with graceful shade trees, fruit trees and colorful clusters of plants and flowers. Beyond the fern-banked stream is a towering cliff of red and yellow gate, over which falls a foamy ribbon of glistening water. At one side, in the distance, are rolling hills covered with green groves of leafy trees and flowering bushes. In the distance on the other side is a lush jungle of amazingly beautiful vines trailing thickly between tall, graceful palms. (Gen. 1:31.)

Close-ups on the time machine screen show birds of bright colours flying from tree to tree. Their songs fill the air with soothing music that tells that here is real peace and happiness. Another view shows Adam and Eve beside the stream. They are amusedly watching the antics of fish, turtles and other water creatures playing in the clear, cool water.

Still another view later shows Adam contentedly pruning some lush shrubs. Eve is close by happily choosing and plucking fruit for their next meal. The ability to talk and sing has been instilled in them. They spend much of their time singing together, even while they work. In

their leisure time they enjoy walking in the park. Then there is the greater pleasure of often communing with their Creator.

You will notice that Adam and Eve have perfectly formed bodies. Adam is muscular and handsome. Eve is beautiful and graceful. This is very evident because they are unclothed. No clothes are needed to keep them comfortably warm, and there are no thistles or thorns to scratch them. Being naked is a natural condition that gives them no discomfort of mind or body. (Gen.2:25.)

The screen shows a huge lion moving quietly out from the deep shadows of the thick trees, and creeping slowly up behind Adam and Eve! The two human beings are so occupied with the water creatures that they are unaware of the nearness of the great beast. Then Adam's keen sense of hearing causes him to turn and look. He swings a strong right arm out to seize the lion's heavy mane -- and fondly scratches the head of this beast that has come for a friendly visit!

Before Eve was created, God asked Adam to name all creatures. (Gen.2:19-29.) In that time of perfect peace, all creatures were friendly and harmless. They will be that way again in another time of peace to come to the world in just a few years. (Isa. 11:6-9.)

In looking at these scenes from the distant past, probably you have paid little attention to what the time machine looks like. Observe it closely.

It's the Bible!

Perhaps for the first time you realize that it is shaped much like an open book. Still closer examination will reveal that what you thought was the machine's viewing screen is actually the open pages of the most important of all books -- the Bible!

Chapter 2

"Thou Shalt Surely Die"

LONG AGO God put true facts into the minds of a few men whom He chose. These men wrote out those facts in words God put into their minds. It was like God writing by using human minds.

God does not lie. (Titus 1:2.) He does not make mistakes. Therefore every word written by those men is true. Since then the Bible has been put into many other languages, and the meanings of a few of its words have changed a little in time. But the Bible as it was originally written is entirely true and without mistakes. Many men who thought they had great wisdom have tried to point out mistakes to prove that the Bible is not true, but all of them have failed. If they had been truly wise, they would have recognized that the Bible is the ONLY true book that has ever been written.

If we study the Bible with the idea of gaining wisdom for a better way of life, it can tell us a great deal about what happened long ago, what is happening now in the world and a lot about what is going to happen.

Animal Brain Versus Human Mind

Although the Bible wasn't written until long after the garden of Eden, something happened there that caused all the unhappiness and suffering in the world. God made animals each after its own kind. He made cattle after the cattle kind, dogs after the dog kind. But He made humans after His own kind -- after the God kind. He made man in the form and shape of God. God has hands and feet. But animals have hooves and paws and birds have claws. Animals have brains and animal brains have instinct. A dog has an instinct to bark when someone is coming. The dog doesn't have to think, "Shall I bark?" and then decide whether to bark. The dog just barks automatically by instinct. But a boy or girl or man or woman has to think and decide what to do and whether to do it.

Humans have brains, too, but instead of natural instinct humans have to know and think and decide what to do.

God made man out of matter from the dust of the ground, just as animals were made of matter out of the earth. Just like animals, man was made with only temporary physical existence. This existence comes only from breathing air, and a heart constantly pumping blood through the veins. And even this breath and blood circulation must be refueled by food and water from the ground. Man does not have real self-containing LIFE within himself any more than animals. Some babies die soon after birth. Some live eight or ten years. Some seventy to ninety years, but then all people die. God is different. God is composed of Spirit and has self-containing LIFE eternally, that never dies. God is immortal.

Man has only a temporary existence like animals, but man was made in the image and likeness, or in form and shape like God.

God made the first man, Adam, with a mind that could learn to work with matter or things that grow from the ground. But in order to have a relationship with God and get along with and work with other people, man was made to need the Holy Spirit of God added to his mind.

Through it God would reveal to man's mind the knowledge to get along with other people as well as with God in peace and good companionship.

The Two Trees

So God tested the first man, Adam. He put the first man and woman in the beautiful park God had made, called Eden. In the midst of this beautiful park God had put two very special trees which had very special meaning. One was the tree of LIFE. Although God had not created man out of Spirit with self-containing immortal life, in this test God offered to give Adam and Eve the Holy Spirit and make them immortal just as God is immortal, if they would receive it by eating of the fruit of this tree of LIFE. And they had to reject the fruit of the other special tree, called the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But in this test if they took to themselves the right to determine what is good and what is wrong and harmful, while rejecting the tree of LIFE, they would surely die. You see, they were going to die anyway, unless they received the LIFE-giving Spirit from God. The Holy Spirit is LIFE imparted from God -- God's very own immortal LIFE.

Now this tree of LIFE meant first receiving the Spirit of God which would impart into their minds the spiritual KNOWLEDGE from God of right and wrong in a close relationship with God and with other people. This was SPIRITUAL KNOWLEDGE -- the way of LOVE to God and LOVE to man. God had made man so that he could learn by himself how to work with matter, but without this spiritual knowledge revealed through God's Spirit direct from the mind of God, man could not learn by himself how to get along with other people in peace and cooperation and contentment and happiness. Neither could he have a close loving relationship with God.

So you see the tree God offered Adam and Eve was not only a tree of LIFE, but also a tree of spiritual KNOWLEDGE from God. And the other tree was that of carnal self-produced knowledge which led to DEATH. These trees represented two kinds of knowledge. One, human self-thought-out knowledge resulting in death, and the other, God-given spiritual knowledge leading to eternal LIFE.

Now WHY did God give them this test? The only kind of knowledge a human person can come to know by himself is knowledge that comes into his mind through his eyes, ears, or senses of smell, taste or feel. Unless God specially reveals it by His Spirit you cannot know anything except what you see, or hear, or smell, taste or feel. Try it on yourself.

Now God loved Adam, just as He loves you and all people. God wanted him and all people to be happy, to enjoy living and to live forever. But Satan deceived Eve, and she led Adam to make the wrong choice. So he disobeyed God, rejected the tree of LIFE -- which meant receiving spiritual knowledge from God's Spirit, and he decided to make up his own mind and decide by himself how to live.

Now when Adam had sinned, GOD CLOSED UP THE TREE OF LIFE. That is, God shut off His Holy Spirit from Adam and all his children -- the whole world -- UNTIL Jesus Christ, the "second Adam," should come and pay the penalty of every person's sins so humans could be forgiven and then have the Holy Spirit offered to them. Otherwise, God would have been obliged to allow people to take the tree of LIFE, gain immortal life in discontent, unhappiness, sorrow, and suffering which would last forever!

So God planned how all Adam's children, dying meanwhile, would one day be resurrected back to life AFTER Jesus Christ had paid the death penalty for their sins in their stead, and then, in that Judgment Day, all Adam's children will have the tree of LIFE opened to them. God is a very loving and merciful God.

A Closer Look

Satan and his fallen angels were still roaming the Earth in the form of evil spirits. God allowed Satan to still be the demon ruler of Earth. Satan was enviously angry when human beings were put on Earth to have power over all physical creatures. He looked for some way of turning Adam and Eve against their Creator, so that he could become their master.

His opportunity came one day when Eve walked off by herself in the park. Suddenly she came upon a snake, which was formed quite differently than the snakes that now exist. There was nothing unusual about meeting a snake, because all the animals were friendly with and obedient to Adam and Eve. What surprised Eve was that the snake, now under the power of Satan, spoke to her!

"Did God tell you that you would die if you eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil?" asked the snake.

"He did," Eve answered. "We don't want to die, so we haven't touched the tree."

"But human beings have immortal souls, and therefore they can never die," lied the snake. (Gen. 3:4.) "If you eat of the fruit of that tree, you will receive great wisdom instead of death. You will probably even become as wise as God."

The more Eve thought about what the snake said, the more eager she became to eat some of the fruit of the tree of knowledge. Finally she could resist no longer. She went to the tree and plucked the first bit of fruit she could reach. It was pleasant to taste, so she took some to Adam, who also ate of it even though Eve told him what it was.

By taking the forbidden fruit Adam and Eve took to themselves the right to decide what is good, and what is evil. In so doing, they rejected the God-centered way of God's spiritual Law. They chose the way that transgresses it!

They pioneered in deciding for themselves what is right and what is wrong -- what is righteousness and what is sin! And humanity has been doing what seems right in its own eyes ever since. In so doing, they rejected the fact that God's living, inexorable spiritual Law is the way of good -- the cause of all good -- and its transgression the way of evil -- the cause of all evil. Since they and humanity in general after them have taken to themselves the determination of what is good, they of necessity have followed the way contrary to God's Law. They have followed the way that has produced all the vast mountain of evils that has descended on this sick world!

They Made Themselves Competitors of the Living God

Even though Adam and Eve rejected the voice of God, He did give to mankind His revelation of basic knowledge. We have it in writing! The Holy Bible is that revelation. It contains history, instruction, revelation of basic knowledge and prophecy.

It does not contain all knowledge. It contains that basic knowledge we could not otherwise find out.

After eating the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve for the first time experienced the unpleasant feeling of gnawing guilt. They knew they had disobeyed God. They also had a discomfoting awareness of being naked, and they felt ashamed. They wanted to cover themselves, so they laced fig leaves together to fashion aprons to put around themselves.

Because they had disobeyed God by doing just one of the things He had told them not to do, Adam and Eve committed the very first human sin. That simple wrong act changed the life of every human being who has been born since then.

Just as the super-angel Lucifer ran into trouble when he went against God's rules, human beings also fall into trouble when they break the rules they should live by for their own good. The laws we obey come from those over us in power. The act of causing people to obey rules is called government. God's laws and His government are LOVE. (Romans 13:10.) His rules are that people must first of all love God by obeying Him, worshiping Him, praying to Him, trusting Him and keeping His Sabbath holy.

Next to those most important laws are the laws that people should love other people. Children should respect and obey their parents. (Ephesians 6:1-3.) They must never hate or kill or try to harm others. Instead, they should love everyone, including even their enemies. They must be loyal and honest to others. They must not want to take anything away from others. They should remember that it is better to give than to take. (Ex. 20:12-17.)

Why the World Is Unhappy

After Satan began having rebellious thoughts, he soon came to believe just the opposite of God's laws. His way of life has come to mean doing just the opposite of what was mentioned in the two preceding paragraphs. (John 8:44; I John 3:8.) God allowed Satan to rule over the Earth only until MAN should be created and prove that he was worthy to rule by obeying God. A continuance of Satan's rule would have brought on only increasing unhappiness and suffering.

Because Adam was the first man, God gave him the chance to rule the Earth. (Gen. 1:28.) The condition was that he had to remain obedient to God and have nothing to do with Satan's ways. Satan knew that if Adam failed in obedience, God would take away his chance to rule. Satan's scheme, because he hated Adam, was to trick him into believing that the wrong ways were the right ways. If Adam could be made to fall for that, he would be in trouble.

God had made the man to be the head of his wife and children. (Eph. 5:23, 25.) Just as God rules with love over angels and human beings, so must the man rule with love over his own house. A man who fails to do this will also fail in becoming a ruler in the Kingdom of God that is coming to Earth very soon. Satan knew that God expected Adam to be the head over Eve. That is why he waited to catch her alone. After he had tempted her to pick the fruit she wasn't to touch, Eve tempted Adam. (Gen. 3:6.) Adam wasn't strong enough to keep from disobeying along with Eve. This proved that he couldn't be strong enough to obey God in all things, and therefore wasn't worthy to be ruler of the Earth.

Satan Still the Unseen Ruler

The way it turned out, Satan got to continue as the unseen ruler of the world until one should come who would conquer him by obeying God and never sinning. That man, Jesus Christ, finally did come and qualify to be that ruler. (Luke 4:5-8.) He has not yet returned to the Earth as its chief ruler.

God let Satan stay on Earth, but he wasn't given the power to force anyone to sin. Satan has power only to try to lead or tempt people. As for human beings, God gave them minds capable of thinking for themselves and deciding whether to obey God or Satan. (James 4:7.)

Ashamed that they had believed the things spoken through the snake, Adam and Eve tried to hide in the park. But God knew where they were hiding. (Gen. 3:8.)

"Have you disobeyed me by eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge?" God startled them by asking very near them.

"Eve gave me the fruit," Adam finally answered, trying to shift the guilt to his wife. (Gen. 3:12.)

God was disappointed. He had allowed the man and woman to make their choice of whom to obey. They had chosen the way that would bring only unhappiness. It was too late now for anything except painful regret, and that wouldn't do them any good. All they could look forward to was punishment. (Deut. 30:15-19.)

They were given leather clothing to wear and were banished from the beautiful park that had been lovingly made just for them. God knew that if they were to stay there, they might also eat of the Tree of Life. That would have meant that they would have lived forever in unhappiness and shame. (Gen.3:21-23.)

To prevent their returning to the Garden of Eden, a huge flaming sword in constant motion guarded the only entrance. (Gen. 3:24.)

"Because you have sinned and tempted Adam to sin, you will suffer pain any time you give birth to a child," God told Eve. "So also shall it be with human mothers in the future." (Gen. 3:16.)

Thus the first human beings, because of believing Satan instead of their Creator, lost the right to live on in peace, happiness and good health. How different it could have been if they had obeyed God and then have eaten the fruit of the Tree of Life. They would have lived happily forever!

As another result of their sin, God put a curse on the ground outside the park. For the first time since the Earth was remade, weeds and thistles and thorns sprang out of the soil. (Gen. 3:17.) This was a hardship for Adam, who had to rely on difficult farming for their food.

After a time a son was born to Adam and Eve. This first baby in the world was named Cain. Another son was soon born whose name was Abel. (Gen.4:1-2.) Cain became a farmer, and raised fruit, vegetables and grain. Abel was a shepherd, and took care of sheep, which Adam and Eve found were also good to eat when cooked. (Gen. 4:2.) Cain and Abel learned to

make sacrifices to God on stone altars. This was their way of contacting God and asking forgiveness for things they did that were wrong.

Today we don't make sacrifices because God sent Jesus Christ almost two thousand years ago to die for all of us. Now, if people are truly sorry because of disobeying God, they can show it by repenting and being baptized. (Acts. 2:38) Then God puts the power of His Holy Spirit into their minds so that they can understand and obey the Creator's laws. Thus they can be close to God and know that He hears them when they pray and that He speaks to them when they read the Bible.

It was different with Cain and Abel. One day when they brought their sacrifices to the altar (Gen. 4:34) their attitudes turned out to be quite unlike. Abel picked from his flock the best lamb he could find. It was a little animal he had grown fond of, but he was willing to give it up. Although Cain raised mostly fruit and vegetables, he had a few animals. Among them was a lamb he prized very highly because he knew it would grow into an especially fine sheep -- if he didn't kill it while it was a lamb.

"Why should I give up this special lamb?" Cain thought. "Surely God should be satisfied with some of the best vegetables I have grown."

Cain's heart wasn't right. He felt that God's way wasn't the best way for him, so he did what seemed right in his own mind. That is the very thing most people have been doing ever since. The Bible states that the way that seems right to a man is nearly always wrong, and can bring death. (Prov. 14:12.) God's way is always right, whether or not it seems right in human minds. That is a lesson not yet learned by most highly-educated people. If you can learn it now, you will be a very wise person.

The First Human Murderer!

God could not accept Cain's sacrifice, which wasn't the kind God said it should be. (Gen. 4:5.) When Cain learned that his sacrifice wasn't pleasing to God, he became very envious of his brother, who had done the right thing. The envy turned to anger and then to hatred. Later, when the two brothers were out in a field alone, Cain furiously turned on Abel and struck him with such force that he killed him. (Gen. 4:8.)

The first baby born in the world thus became the first murderer! When Cain realized what he had done, he foolishly tried to hide. Of course God knew where he was, and confronted him.

"Where is your brother?" asked the Eternal. (Gen. 4:9.)

"I don't know," lied Cain, hoping that God wouldn't come across Abel's lifeless body.

"How should I know my brother's whereabouts?" (Read Prov. 28:13.)

Here was more unhappiness for Adam and Eve. Besides losing their second son, they learned that their first one was a murderer and a liar. As punishment for Cain, God put a curse on

him. He had to leave his family and become a lone wanderer in the world. Furthermore, God made Cain a marked man because he had murdered Abel, but he made it plain that Cain should not be murdered by anyone. Instead, he was to live on with the miserable memory of killing his brother. (Gen.4:11-15.)

Adam and Eve had more children. They grew up and had children. Cain had married one of his sisters, and they had children. (Gen.4:16-17.) Another son born to Adam and Eve was named Seth. He, too, took a sister for his wife, and they had children and many grandchildren.

Many people came into the world as the years passed. The more humans increased, the more they fell away from their Creator. It wasn't a very happy throng. Men were naturally mean and greedy. Instead of working for things they needed and wanted, many of them cheated and robbed and killed for them.

Adam lived a long time to see some of the results of his disobedience. He was nine hundred and seventy years old when he died. That's only thirty years short of a thousand. He was able to live so long because of being created with a perfect physical body. But he did die -- just as God said he would if he ate of the Tree of Knowledge. (Gen. 2:17.)

Wars Begin

By the time of Adam's death there were thousands of human beings on the Earth. Even with unlimited space to live in, they banded together in towns instead of spreading out as God intended. (Gen. 4:17.) Huddled together by adjoining dwellings led only to more strife and misery. Men were so much against God's ways that it wasn't possible for them to love one another. Living too closely together made matters much worse. The more they gathered in towns, the greater the need for one group to protect itself against another group. Other bands of men formed to attack towns and seize their wealth. Nothing was safe from the cruel and greedy.

So it was that wars started on the Earth. Men became so evil that killing other men became one of their greatest sports. (Gen. 6:5.)

Chapter 3

Noah Builds the Ark!

GOD LOOKED with sorrow on these human creatures He loved. He was so displeased at their refusal to abide by His rules for happy living that He decided to do an awesome thing.

He would blot them out of existence by a worldwide Flood! (Gen. 6:7).

God knew that if human beings were to continue in their evil ways, they would destroy themselves more painfully. His way would be more merciful. Then He would bring them back to life thousands of years later when Jesus Christ would be ruling Earth. They would then realize how much wiser it would be to obey their Creator.

At that time God saw only one man who was willing to live according to His laws. His name was Noah. (Gen. 6:8.) He warned the people who lived around him that their lives depended on their turning from their evil ways and obeying God. His warnings were ignored.

One day he was startled to hear the Eternal speaking to him. God said: "Because men have disobeyed me and become so evil, I am going to take away their lives. But because you have obeyed me, I am going to spare your life and the lives of your family. All other people will be drowned in a great flood that will cover the whole planet.,'

"But how can my family and I escape such a flood?" Noah asked.

"I will instruct you in building a large ship," God answered. "It will be of such size that it will hold at least one pair of every kind of creature on Earth." (Gen.6:14-16.)

Noah Builds an Ark

Although Noah was four hundred and eighty years old when he and his three sons later started the task of ship-building, old age wasn't a drawback in very early times when human bodies were probably closer to being as perfect as the bodies of Adam and Eve.

When people heard what Noah and his sons were doing, they came for many miles to stare and laugh at what was going on.

"Noah must be crazy!" they jeered. "Who ever heard of building a ship that size? There isn't even any water around here to float it in!"

"He thinks there will be a sudden big flood!" others scoffed. "He's going to have all that work and expense for nothing!"

Years passed. The ship, or ark, grew larger. The closer it came to being finished, the more onlookers ridiculed the patient Noah and his three sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth, who carefully carried on for nearly a hundred years, probably with many other men helping them, to work by the ship plans through which God directed them.

Meanwhile, Noah continued reminding his scoffers that the Flood would come in due time because of their disobedience, but that those who would repent and obey could be spared. No one outside Noah's family believed what he said.

"You've been saying that for a hundred years, and there still isn't the slightest sign of a flood!" people sneered. "You are only a religious crackpot!,"

The Ark Is Finished

Twenty more years passed (Gen. 6:3) while onlookers jeered at the sight of a mammoth ship sitting far from any place where it could float. God had patiently given them one hundred and twenty years to think about their sins and decide to live differently. (II Pet. 2:5.)

People must have admired Noah and his sons, however, for their ability to build such a craft. It was higher than a four-story building, and ten times as long as it was high! It was designed to be a huge, floating zoo. The interior was divided into stables and cages for the many creatures that were to be loaded into it. There were runways, ventilator shafts, feeding troughs and everything that would be needed for the strange, live cargo.

By the time the ship was finished and smeared with waterproof pitch, Noah was almost six hundred years old! His sons were then far older than most people are today when they die of old age. But more work had to be done. There was the task of gathering and storing in the ark the many tons of food that would be needed by the animals. Hay, grain, dried fruit and dried meat were hauled from the surrounding country and stowed aboard along with huge tanks of fresh water.

People continued to laugh at this activity. They wouldn't believe that worldwide disaster was at hand. Instead, they felt that there was a glorious future for man as he spread out to conquer the whole Earth. It was much as it is today, when a few men chosen by God are warning all nations of a great calamity that will sweep the world within the lifetime of most people living today. Instead of heeding these warnings, people are looking forward to an increasingly easier life with more money and less work. And just as foolish hopes were shattered in Noah's time, so will they be shattered again. Even a little child who will heed the warnings is wiser than the so-called educated man who shakes his head at them.

"Where are all the animals you plan to take for a boat ride?" was the question jeeringly put to Noah so often. Then the scoffers would add, "It will take you another hundred and twenty years to round up enough creatures to fill that thing you've built!"

The Animals Seek Shelter!

It wasn't easy for Noah to listen to these taunts decade after decade. But he believed God. He was so sure that his live cargo would somehow soon be on hand that he built a ramp up to a large door in the side of the ark, so that the animals could walk in. This was just another act of faith in the hundred and twenty years of trusting God while the ark was being built and the people warned.

One day those who came to scoff stood and wordlessly stared at what they saw. All kinds of animals and birds were gathering around the ark! (Gen. 7:8-9.) If the amazed onlookers expected Noah and his men to have trouble getting the creatures into the ship, they were

wrong. God had given the creatures an impulse to seek shelter here. They entered the ark in an orderly manner, even though many were ferocious by nature!

Of animals and birds clean enough to be eaten by man, seven pairs went into the ship. Of unclean creatures, only one male and one female entered. Soon they were in the stables and cages that would be their homes for many months. Then Noah and his wife and Noah's three sons and their wives entered the ark. The growing throng of onlookers was still jeering, but some of the people were so amazed at having seen the animals entering the ark that they began to wonder if Noah's predictions from God were true. But most of them simply refused to take Noah's warnings seriously. Then, as now, people couldn't recognize the truth because they didn't want to obey God.

Noah and his sons had built a door to shut up the opening in the side of the ark. God caused it to be closed and sealed. (Gen. 7:16.) If onlookers saw this happen, they must have been quite startled.

Chapter 4

"And the Flood Came"

PERHAPS few noticed on that morning the wind was a little stronger than usual. By noon there were violent gusts that grew into gales. People were forced to shelter. Strong winds weren't very unusual, but when swift-moving masses of unusually dark clouds boiled up over the horizon, residents began to worry.

To add to the growing concern, there were strange rumblings within the ground. The darkness grew worse. The rumblings became so strong that the Earth quivered. Then, just seven days after God had told Noah to go into the ark, Earth's crust broke open here and there, and giant streams of water shot out of the ground. (Gen. 7:11.) At the same time, huge waves roared in from the seas and spread over the coastal areas. Lightning flashed and cracked, followed by deafening roars of thunder. Torrents of water burst from the darkened skies.

This, at last, was just the start of the terrible thing Noah had warned would come upon the world!

It was the most awesome thing that had happened to the planet since Satan's sin had resulted in all of Earth's surface being torn up so that nothing could live on it.

By now most people were becoming crazed with fear. No matter what they did or where they went, water came at them. No one could survive without shelter, but there was no lasting shelter. Rivers flooded the valleys where most people lived. Because of the constant cloudbursts, climbing to higher elevations was almost impossible. Swift torrents of water from the hills and mountains swept brush, trees, rocks, mud and people into the rising waters below. Only the strongest were able to battle their way to higher ground, and then only eventually to lose their lives by drowning or violent injury or murder.

Meanwhile, water had swirled up around the ark and slowly lifted it free of the ground. Many who had jeered at Noah had realized that the inside of the ship was the only safe, dry place left. (Gen. 7:18.) A few who hadn't been able to flee elsewhere had waded up to the ark and screamed to be let in. With rain pounding loudly on the ship, no one inside could hear the frantic shrieks. Hands clawed feebly at the pitch-smearred siding, and then disappeared in the rapidly rising and turbulent water.

God's Mercy

In His great mercy, God had given the people one hundred and twenty years to heed His warnings through Noah. The people had ignored Noah, which was the same as ignoring their Creator. Now it was too late to change or to pray for help. It is often too late to expect God to help us if we postpone asking for help beyond the long periods of mercy God extends to us.

Day after day the water kept rumbling out of the sky and up from the ground. It swelled to the tops of the highest mountains. Any people or animals who were strong enough to fight their way that far must have battled among themselves for the last gasps of air before they were swallowed up.

Within a few weeks the water was so deep that the peaks of the highest mountains were well below the surface of the water. (Gen. 7:20.) By then every person on Earth had been drowned except the eight in the ark.

For forty days and nights water gushed supernaturally from the heavy, gloomy cloud layer. Then the rain stopped. By this time the blanket of water covering the planet was a few miles deep above the land and normal sea surfaces. But Noah and his family and cargo floated safely as high as some of our passenger planes now fly above the clouds!

For a hundred and fifty days the water stayed at it's deepest. (Gen. 7:24.) During this time, the people in the ark weren't idle. Whatever the tasks, they must have been hard to perform in the weeks in which the ark pitched and rolled through massive waves pushed up by the wind. God caused this strong wind to blow so that it would evaporate the water as fast as possible.

The Waters Lower

One day the tops of the highest mountains began to appear above the water. The ark drifted up against one of the mountains. (Gen. 8:5.) The water level kept lowering, leaving the ark stranded high on the side of the mountain.

Noah waited more than two months while the water kept going down. After that he sent out birds to see if the distant land below was still flooded. At last one of the birds returned with a green leaf in its beak, after which it flew away and failed to return. This proved to Noah that the water had drained off to where plant life had started redeveloping, and that the valleys were ready to live in again. (Gen. 8:11.)

The men opened the top of the ark, then the only eight people left on Earth excitedly came out on the top deck to view land for the first time in more than a year. (Verse 13.)

After being cooped up for so many months, the sight of dry ground was a wonderful welcome sight to Noah and his family, but it was strange to look down on a silent world where there was nobody to scoff at them.

A New Life Begins

"Come out of the ark," God told Noah. "Bring the creatures with you. I want all living beings to spread out over the Earth and produce families." (Verse 17.)

The large door in the side of the ark was broken open, and a wide ramp type of gangplank was built from the door to the ground. Then all the creatures were freed from their stables and cages to return to a new life amid the new greenery of the Earth.

But Noah didn't set all of the animals and birds free. He was so thankful to his Creator for sparing him and his family that he built an altar on the mountain, and sacrificed some of the clean creatures as an offering to God. (Verse 20.)

God was pleased with Noah. He blessed him and his sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth. They were told to rebuild homes and raise children, so that many people would again live in the world from which the disobedient had been purged.

"I shall never again bring a flood over the whole planet", God told Noah and his sons. (Gen. 9:11.) "As a promise to you that it will not happen again, look at this sign that will sometimes be seen in the sky." (Verses 12-17.)

Thereupon the Eternal caused a beautiful arc of many colors to appear from horizon to horizon. Whenever people see this colorful arc, called a rainbow, they are seeing the sign of the promise God made to man more than four thousand, three hundred years ago!

Chapter 5

The Tower of Babel

FROM then on, all the people who came into the world descended from Noah's three sons and their wives. (Gen. 9:19.) After some years had gone by, there developed many inhabitants in the plains area south of where the ark had landed. Some of them moved farther down into the valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates, the two main rivers of what later became known as the land of Assyria.

As the years passed and people increased in numbers, many of them moved southeast over the lower plains to what is now known as the Persian Gulf. There the soil was rich, and wonderful crops sprang out of it. The ground was best in the region where the Tigris and Euphrates flowed closest together in a land called Shinar. (Gen. 11:2.) More and more families chose that area in which to live.

There were very few rocks or trees there. Probably no great city would have been built there if it hadn't been discovered that much of the soil was just right for making excellent bricks. These were made by pressing moist clay into block shapes and baking them in the sun or around fires. Furthermore, there were places where a thick, pitchy liquid oozed from the ground. This liquid, called bitumen, was the very thing needed to hold the bricks together. (Gen. 11:3.)

Human Beings Huddle Together

Men began putting up homes, barns, warehouses and all kinds of buildings. Before long towns were sprawling over the plain of Shinar. People were massing together again just as they had done before the Flood.

This did not please God. He knew that when human beings huddled together in crowded buildings, they failed to get the best out of the good things He had created for men to find in the fields, the forests, the mountains, the streams and even in the seas and deserts. Besides, men were more likely to break God's rules of happy living when they existed in masses. God had told Noah and his family that people should spread out over the Earth.

Noah lived for three hundred and fifty years after the Flood. (Gen. 9:28.) During that time he publicly proclaimed God's wishes whenever he had the opportunity. Through him, many people understood something about God's plans and laws. Unhappily, most people were living further and further from the ways they should have been living, and had little interest in bettering themselves by obedience to their Creator.

Nimrod Becomes a Hero

At this time in human history there was a man who came down from one of Noah's sons, Ham. The man's name was Nimrod. Most of Earth's inhabitants today wouldn't have any idea who this man was, although in one way or another he has had a powerful effect on the life of most every one who has lived in the past four thousand years.

Nimrod was a very large, strong, fierce man with dark skin. Because of his power and skill as a successful hunter of wild beasts that attacked people, he became a hero and a leader among

his tribesmen. (Gen. 10:8-9.) Like most others of his time, he knew of his Creator's laws, but he hated those laws. Just as many people today have been led to believe, Nimrod believed that if he lived by God's rules he wouldn't enjoy life. He lived by his own laws, and tried to prove to others that they would be happier if they would live the same way.

Nimrod became chief over the people who grouped together in the main sprawling town in the land of Shinar. Probably there were many families who didn't like the way he ordered them about, but whenever wild animals attacked, Nimrod and his warriors fought to protect the townspeople. Nimrod later built a wall around the growing town. Deeds like these helped make him a strong leader, and caused more families to move in and settle under his rule.

Before many more years had passed, the town had grown into a city. It was the first large one to be built on the Earth after the Flood. It was such a wonder that people came from afar to gaze on the vast mass of buildings and high walls. That country later came to be known as Babylonia, and the name of the city was Babel or Babylon. (Gen. 10:10.)

Nimrod Begins Idol Worship

Nimrod was not only ruler of Babylon, but he became the most feared man in the land. His power and wealth grew as Babylon grew. He made the laws, and those laws decreed that Babylonians should not look to the God of Noah as their ruler, but should be ruled by human governments. One of Nimrod's schemes to hold people together under his rule was to build a tower so gigantic that it would excite everyone's awe and wonder. It was to be the highest temple ever built, and a monument to the sun god in the center of a world-ruling government. (Gen. 11:4.)

Men slaved for a long time just to erect the base of the tower. Then little by little the temple took shape toward the sky. Nimrod's plan for a brick monster to loom up over the plain was working out well.

Then God stepped in. He saw that Babel was only the beginning of far-fetched things men would try to do, and that they had to be stopped. (Gen. 11:6.) Imagine what it would have been like if men such as Nimrod had been able to develop weapons such as we have today!

Many Languages Begin

Since the Flood there had been only one language. Men hadn't moved apart in different tribes long enough to start speaking in different ways as do the people of today in various sections of the Earth. (Gen. 11:1.) Then something happened to the men working on the tower. They began to accuse each other of not talking plainly. Some talked one way, while others talked other ways. The less they understood one another, the more they argued. Arguments grew into fights. Work came to a halt. (Gen. 11:7-8.) Not every workman necessarily spoke a different language, but God caused them to speak in so many different ways that the lack of communication made it impossible to continue working on the temple. The tower was thereafter called "Babel" because "Babel" meant "confusion" in Noah's language.

Not understanding their neighbors, many of the families living in or near the city of Babylon moved away to seek a living in distant parts of the land. This was what God intended for them to do. (Gen. 10:25 and Deut. 32:7-8.) His way of scattering them by confusing their

language was a great blow to Nimrod's scheme for quick growth of his kingdom and greater control over man's religious habits.

But during the next few years, while people were scattering out over the land, those who stayed at Babylon were increasing in numbers. Besides, many who had never been there stopped there in their travels. In time, there were so many in or near the city of Babylon that Nimrod again put men to work on the tower. Nevertheless, it wasn't God's will that the tower should be finished. It never was.

Noah Dies of Old Age

At the time Nimrod's kingdom had spread, Noah was still living! He was about seven hundred years old when God scattered men from Babylon. Still he was not feeble, and because he remained faithful to God, God gave him many more years of abundant life. He became a successful farmer who was nine hundred and fifty years old when he died!

That is a long time to live, especially when we consider how short a time we live today. Yet those who are wise enough to turn from the wrong kind of living and seek God's ways will enjoy even longer lives. They will get to live forever as spirit beings (I Cor. 15:44-45, 53), and many of them will start that long life by ruling the Earth soon with Jesus Christ for a thousand years! (Rev. 2:26-27 and 5:9-10.)

Later, they will dwell in a beautiful, jeweled city God will send down from Heaven to Earth. (Rev. 21:2.) This is one of the many wonderful things God has prepared for those who love Him.

Chapter 6

Abram Journeys to Canaan

TWO YEARS after the Flood, when Noah's son Shem was a hundred years old, Shem had a son called Arphaxad. (Gen. 11:10.) When Arphaxad was thirty-five years old, he had a son named Salah. (Gen. 11:12.) Several generations went by in this manner. When about three hundred years had passed, a man by the name of Abram was born. (Gen. 11:26.)

Abram was brought up in a city in Mesopotamia (Acts 7:2) called Ur, not very far from the spot where Nimrod began to build Babel. (Gen. 11:28.) Like Noah, Abram learned to obey God's laws, while again the people of that world were worshiping idols and living further from God's ways. Abram was one of the few who didn't take part in pagan ways. When he was about seventy-five years old God told him to move with his family to another country.

Abram Obeys God

God promised him that if he would obey all His instructions, Abram would become the father of the most famous nation on the earth, and that in time this nation would enjoy some very special blessings. Abram didn't know what the land he would go to would be like, and he didn't know what the blessings to his people would be, but he trusted God and obeyed.

Besides his wife, Sarai, Abram took along a nephew named Lot, Lot's wife, shepherds to take care of flocks of sheep and herdsmen to handle herds of cattle. It was no small task for Abram to move his family and their possessions to a distant land. (Gen. 12:4.)

After many weeks of travel, they arrived in the land of Canaan, where God had said Abram should go. (Gen. 12:5.) Canaan was a very fertile land where there was good soil and plenty of growing things. But the people of the land were evil. Therefore God caused a famine to come on that area. This famine occurred just after Abram reached Canaan. (Gen. 12:10.) Lack of rain caused the fruit trees, vegetable plants and grass to dry up. There was little food for the animals Abram and Lot had brought to Canaan. And without cattle or sheep, there wouldn't be enough food for Abram and those with him.

Abram Goes to Egypt

Reports came to the travelers that down in the land of Egypt there was no lack of rain, so Abram and his family went down into Egypt to save their flocks.

In the land of Egypt a great civilization had grown up since the flood. The Egyptian kings, or pharaohs, had become wealthy and powerful in spite of their worshiping of idols. They enjoyed all the good things that came from the ground. Whatever they lacked they took from others.

Because Sarai was a beautiful woman, and that the king of Egypt might want her for one of his many wives, Abram asked Sarai to pose as his sister instead of his wife. (Gen. 12:12-13.) Sarai was actually only Abram's half-sister, because her father was Abram's father, but her mother wasn't Abram's mother. Abram wanted to convey this half truth because he feared that if it were known that he was Sarai's husband, the Egyptians might kill him so that Sarai would be free to be married.

The thing that Abram feared soon happened. Although about sixty-five years of age, Sarai still appeared as a young and beautiful woman. She was of lighter skin than Egyptian women. Before long it was reported that this unusual woman might find special favor with Pharaoh, who commanded that she be brought to his palace. Believing that she was unmarried, he had her lodged in a place where his future brides were prepared for marriage.

Pharaoh was so pleased at the prospect of Sarai becoming his wife, that he gave Abram costly gifts that included livestock, servants and a fine residence. But God didn't want Sarai to become Pharaoh's wife. To prevent it, He sent plagues on Pharaoh's house. This misery and discomfort to the king and his family was rightly guessed to be because of Sarai when it was learned that she was Abram's wife. Pharaoh was angry at Abram because of not telling him all the truth at first, but God was pleased that Abram finally disclosed to Pharaoh that Sarai was Abram's wife. Pharaoh sent Sarai back to her husband, and gave orders to his men to see that Abram and his family and property were safely escorted out of Egypt. (Gen.12:14-20.)

Back to Canaan!

Abram and Lot and their wives and servants then moved their livestock back to Canaan. Abram went to a spot where he had built an altar to God when he first came to Canaan. There he asked for forgiveness and strengthening. (Gen.13:1-4.)

By this time the famine in Canaan was over. The flocks and herds belonging to Abram and Lot had become much greater in number. They could feed well on the new, lush grass. But because the animals were so numerous, Abram's men and Lot's men began quarreling over the places where there was the most grass and water. Abram didn't want to have any trouble with Lot, so he suggested that they choose separate regions in which to dwell.

God had promised this land to Abram. It was Abram's right to have first choice where he wanted his animals to graze, but he unselfishly told Lot to take the first choice. Lot looked down on the rich soil in the Jordan River valley, and said he wanted that. That left the upper lands to Abram, but Abram was satisfied because Lot was satisfied. (Gen.13:5-12.)

After Abram and Lot separated, there was a day when Abram was on a high mountain. There God spoke to him again, telling him that all the land he could see in all directions would forever be his and his descendants' whose number would be equal that of the number of specks of dust on the earth. (Gen. 13:16.) This was a wonderful promise to Abram, who was nearly eighty years old and without children.

Meanwhile, Lot and his family pitched their tents near the city of Sodom in the rich Jordan valley. Lot thought he had made a wise choice in going there. He didn't realize what trouble he would have with the people who lived there. They were exceptionally vile. As a godly man, Lot should never have come near them.

War Breaks Out in Canaan

Shortly after he moved close to Sodom, war broke out between the kings of the five cities of the Jordan valley and four kings of the land where Nimrod began his kingdom. The four distant kings won the battle. The people of the two main valley cities, Sodom and Gomorrah, were pursued to the mountains, where some of them escaped. Most of them were captured to

become slaves of the victors. Among the prisoners were Lot, his family and his servants. Lot's possessions were taken from him. Evidently it had been unwise to choose to live in the valley.

When word reached Abram about what had happened, Abram set out in pursuit of the victorious kings with only his three hundred and eighteen men. (Gen. 14:14.) It took courage to face an army with many more men than Abram had. Abram looked to God for help, and God helped him by giving him a chance to quietly encircle the camp of the four invading kings by night. Their men were taken by surprise. In the darkness they couldn't tell how much of a force was attacking them. Fearing that it could be a huge one, they fled to the mountains near Damascus to the north, leaving behind all the prisoners and loot seized in the Jordan valley. (Gen.14:13-16.)

The king of Sodom came with his remaining men to honor Abram for what he had done to the enemy, though he wasn't aware that Abram had done it because of Lot and his family. This meeting took place at a spot near the city of Salem, which later was called Jerusalem.

Melchizedek, king of Salem, also came out to meet Abram. Melchizedek's servants brought out bread and wine to Abram and his weary men. (Gen.14:13-16.)

There's nothing unusual about a king providing nourishment to tired soldiers, but this was an unusual king. The Bible refers to him as "King of Righteousness." (Heb. 7:1-3.) Melchizedek blessed Abram for rescuing the people who had been taken captive. Abram gave Melchizedek a tenth of all the goods that had been left behind by the attackers who had fled, even though Abram kept none of it for himself. (Gen.14:20-24.) This was according to God's tithing law, which states that anyone who fails to give a tenth of his earnings to God's priests, or ministers, is robbing God. (Mal. 3:8-11.) All possessions are God's. Giving back a tenth is one of the right ways to honor Him.

The king of Sodom offered to reward Abram for all he had done, but Abram refused to accept anything. He preferred God's blessings to the wealth an earthly king could provide.

The Lord Makes a Promise to Abram

Some years later, when Abram was living peacefully in his tents in the hills above the Jordan valley, the Lord spoke to him in a vision. He told him again that because of his obedience he would become the father of a great nation. Inasmuch as Abram and his wife were becoming too elderly to have children, Abram was puzzled by God's promise. He reminded God that he was childless and had no heir. (Gen.15:1-3.)

God replied that Abram's heir would be a son of his, and that if he could count the stars on a dark night, he would know the great numbers of people who would descend from that one son!

Abram believed God and God blessed him for his belief. (Gen. 15:6 and Rom. 4:20-22.) Nevertheless, God intended to show Abram a sign that the promise would be kept. The Creator told him to slaughter some clean animals and birds and lay them out as for an offering.

Abram obeyed.

A little later a deep sleep fell on Abram. He dreamed that he was in intense darkness, and that God's voice came to him out of that darkness, telling him things that would happen many years after Abram would die. (Gen.15:8-12.)

"The people who live after you shall continue to be as strangers in the land", the Voice said. "Later they shall become slaves to a foreign nation for four generations, but in about four hundred years they shall return to this land with great possessions." (Gen.15:13-16.)

Abram awoke to see a very hot flame passing over and between the carcasses he had laid out. When he saw this amazing sight, his faith in God became even stronger. (Gen. 15:17.)

God has always promised good things to those who obey Him. His promise to Abram is one that has had a great effect on the whole world for thousands of years. We who are Abram's descendants today are being affected by it now. We are enjoying greater wealth and material blessings than most of the other nations.

Abram's First Son

Sarai, Abram's wife, was about seventy-five years old at that time. She believed she was too old to bear a child, and couldn't understand how it was possible for her and Abram to become the parents of a child from whom would descend millions of people. Sarai had an Egyptian maid, Hagar, who was a much younger woman. Sarai told Abram that he should take Hagar as a second wife, with the hope that Hagar would have a child for Abram and Sarai. In those times a man often married more than one wife. Abram did as Sarai suggested, and in time Hagar had a son named Ishmael. (Gen.16.)

Thirteen years passed. Abram came to be ninety-nine years of age. One day a figure appeared before him and said:

"I am God Almighty! Live according to my laws!" (Gen. 17:1.) Trembling, Abram bowed with his face to the ground while God told him that because he was learning to obey His laws, He would keep the promises He had made years before. He informed Abram that his name would be changed to Abraham, which meant "father of many people". (Gen.17:3-6.) Sarai's name, God said, would be changed to Sarah, which meant "princess".

God then promised Abraham that Sarah would surely have a son, although she was already eighty-nine years old. The son was to be named Isaac. (Gen.17:15-16, 19.)

Abraham Learns that Sodom Is to Be Destroyed

Not long after that, three strange men came to Abraham's tent. Two of these men were angels, and one was God appearing in the form of a man. (Gen.18:1-2.) In those days, because travel was more difficult and tiring, hospitality was greater. Abraham invited the three to rest and eat. A meal was prepared for them, including bread, butter, milk and meat. (Gen.18:3-8.) After they had eaten, Abraham was informed that within the year Sarah would have a son. This was wonderful news to Abraham and Sarah. Sarah, especially, could hardly believe it. (Gen. 18:9- 15.)

Two of the men went on to Sodom. God stayed and told the astonished Abraham that His two angels were going to Sodom to find out just how evil the people were there.

"If they find that most of the residents are vile and perverted, I shall destroy the whole city!" God declared. (Gen.18:16-22.)

"If you find fifty good people there, wouldn't you spare the city so that those fifty will not die?" Abraham asked.

"If I find fifty good people in Sodom I will not destroy it", God replied.

Abraham then asked if Sodom would be spared if only forty-five good people could be found there. The answer was that if that many good people could be found there, the city would be spared. Abraham kept on asking about the matter, each time lessening the number of people. Finally he was told that if only ten good people could be found in Sodom, it would be spared. (Gen.18:23-33.)

Lot, the nephew whom Abraham had rescued from the kings who had attacked Sodom, had unwisely returned there to live. That evening, the two angels, appearing as men, arrived at Sodom and met Lot, seated by one of the city's gates. (Gen. 19:1.) Lot saw that they were strangers, and graciously asked them to his home for food and rest. He didn't know they were God's messengers. At first they declined, but when they saw that Lot was different from the other people, they agreed to go.

Lot had a special meal prepared for his guests. Later, as they were about to go to bed, a noisy crowd surrounded Lot's house. These people knew that there were two strangers in the house. They yelled to Lot to put the two out into the street, where they intended to treat the strangers shamefully. (Gen.19:4-5.)

Lot went outside and pleaded with the crowd to go away. He was so concerned about his guests that he even offered to turn over his two daughters to them if they would leave. The shrieking, evil mob wouldn't listen to Lot. Some of the men rushed at him, pinning him against the door. The two angels inside reached out, pulled Lot in, and slammed the door shut. (Gen.19:6-10.) The angry crowd rushed against the house to break into it. Then a strange thing happened. The attackers began to stagger and grope aimlessly about. Their angry yells turned to moans. God's messengers had struck them with sudden blindness! (Gen. 19:11.)

When the rest of the mob saw that something awesome was happening, it drew back from the house. But something still worse was about to happen. All the men in the city had joined the crowd. (Gen. 19:4.) Inasmuch as all had the same base desires, that meant that there weren't as many as ten good men in Sodom. There was no reason for God to spare it.

"If you have relatives in Sodom you want saved, tell them to leave the city at once!" the angels told Lot. "Sodom and its people are about to be burned up!"

Lot hurried out to find the young men who had married his other daughters. When he told them what was about to happen, they refused to believe him. (Gen. 19:14.) He was so disappointed that he decided to stay at his house until they decided to join him. The angels warned him that he must leave at once, but Lot lingered. Even after they seized him, his wife

and two unmarried daughters and forced them outside the city, Lot still hoped the rest of his family would show up. (Gen.19:15-16.)

"Hurry to the mountains!" the angels insisted. "Don't stop or even look behind you at what is about to happen!"

"It's too far to the mountains", Lot argued. "There's a town over there in the valley we can reach sooner. Let's go there!" (Gen.19:17-22.)

The angels' patience was almost at an end with Lot, who was still hopeful that his married daughters and their husbands would somehow follow him. The party hurried on. The sun was just coming up as they reached the town of Zoar, several miles from Sodom.

Back in Sodom and in Gomorrah, the other main city on the plain, there was a sudden ground tremor. In the nearby area of the flammable bitumen pits, the earth cracked open to loudly spew out oil, salt and sulphur high into the sky. In an instant these mingled and exploded with a deafening roar, blowing glowing chunks of matter even higher. Seconds later the chunks rained back, hundreds of them plummeting on Sodom and Gomorrah like so many blazing meteorites. There was no way for the people in or nearby the cities to escape.

Even much of the plain near the two cities withered under the terrible heat. Nothing was left alive in that region. The greenest bushes and grass ignited and burned. Other asphalt deposits were set on fire, causing a chain reaction that made devastation there complete. (Gen.9:24-25.) God thus dealt with the people there because they were harming themselves by living in their evil ways instead of by His laws.

At the beginning of the fire storm, just as Lot and part of his family were about to enter Zoar, Lot's wife was so curious to see what was happening that she turned and looked back on the scene of destruction. Lot and his daughters hurried to Zoar, but Lot's wife never arrived with them. She had been turned into a piece of rock salt the shape and size of a human being! (Gen. 19:26 and Luke 17:29-32.)

Thus Lot lost his wife because he chose to live in an area of sinful people. God was merciful to him in sparing him and his two daughters.

Abraham Views the Frightful Scene

Safe in his peaceful home in the mountains, Abraham got up early to look down in the direction of Sodom. He was startled to see clouds of smoke rising above the blackened plain and its cities. (Gen.19:27-29.) It was clear to him that God had failed to find as many as ten good men in Sodom.

At first Abraham must have thought that his prayers for Lot had been in vain. Later he learned, to his great joy, that God had answered his prayers. The town of Zoar, even though it was on the plain area with Sodom and Gomorrah, had been spared so that Lot would have refuge.

Realizing that by staying in Zoar he would still be dwelling among people who had no respect for God, Lot and his daughters fled to the mountains. (Gen. 19:30.) He would have

been richer and much more trouble-free if he had chosen not to live among the wicked people of Canaan.

Chapter 7

Abraham Gives Up His Son

AFTER the destruction of the cities on the plain of Jordan, Abraham moved southwestward to a land called Gerar. As God promised, a son was born to Abraham and Sarah. An angel had already told them to name the baby Isaac. Abraham was a hundred years old when Isaac was born. Sarah was ninety. (Gen.21:1-3.)

In those days it was a custom to hold a feast in honor of a child between two and three years old. When Isaac was that age, Abraham held such a feast because his son had grown out of babyhood and into a little boy. Having become a greatly respected man in that region, Abraham invited important men to the feast, probably even the king of Gerar.

When Hagar and her son Ishmael saw what special attention Isaac was receiving from so many people, they became envious. Ishmael was Abraham's first son, and Hagar was bitter because Ishmael hadn't been so honored when he was that age. (Gen.21:8-9.) During the dinner, Hagar and Ishmael made some unkind remarks about little Isaac. His mother became very angry when she overheard them.

Ishmael Leaves

Even though Sarah had suggested that Abraham have a child through her maid Hagar, Sarah had disliked having Hagar and Ishmael living in the same tents with Abraham and her. She went at once to Abraham to ask him to send Hagar and Ishmael away. This was a problem to Abraham, who knew that there could be little happiness in a household where there were two jealous mothers.

"Do as Sarah wishes and send them away," God told Abraham. "But don't feel sorrowful about it, because I shall take care of them. Isaac, not Ishmael, will be your heir, but from Ishmael I will make a whole nation!" (Gen.21:10-13.)

This promise greatly relieved Abraham. He obeyed God. Early the next morning he prepared provisions for the immediate departure of Hagar and Ishmael, whom he hoped could reach a place where they could rest out of the hot afternoon sun. Probably he also hoped that they would not go too many miles distant to live.

While it was yet cool in the morning, Hagar and Ishmael took food and water and started out afoot from Abraham's tent. Hagar, who was an Egyptian, set out with her son across the desert to the south, probably intending to go back to her native land. (Gen. 21:14.) She believed that if they could reach the main caravan trail to Egypt, they might meet a caravan that would take them along to the southwest.

It didn't happen that way. Hagar failed to find the caravan trail. By the middle of the hot day they had drunk all their water. The shade-less desert became so warm that by the middle of the afternoon Ishmael fell to the burning sand, and was unable to get back on his feet. Because he was a growing teen-ager, he required more refreshment than did his mother, who realized that if she didn't find water soon, her son would surely die of thirst within hours!

Hagar became frantic. There seemed no possibility of finding water in that great expanse of hot sand and rocks. By the middle of the afternoon, when the heat was at its worst, Ishmael was only partly conscious. Hagar struggled to roll him into the weak shade of a wizened desert shrub. There she left him and walked far enough away to be unable to hear his groans. That and her bitter sobs were the only two sounds in the painful heat of the wilderness.

Ishmael Rescued

After a while there came a startlingly different sound. It was the voice of an angel speaking to Hagar! "Don't worry about your son, Hagar", the angel said. "Go help him. God will cause a great nation to come from Ishmael!" (Gen.21:17-18.) Hagar looked up. She didn't see the speaker, but she saw something she hadn't noticed before. It was a spring of clear, cool water bubbling out of the sand only a few feet away! Hagar lunged for the spring, filled her empty leather bottle, and thankfully hurried to pour some of the water between Ishmael's parched lips. God had promised Abraham that He would look out for Ishmael and his mother. He began by saving their lives in the desert.

After Ishmael recovered, he and Hagar were still unable to find the caravan trail. They traveled to the southeast to a desert area where Ishmael became so skillful at archery that he was able to shoot plenty of birds and animals for food for the two. They kept on living in the desert for so many years that he became almost like a wild man. (Gen. 16:12.) Hagar managed to bring him an Egyptian woman for a wife. (Gen. 21:21.) Ishmael and his wife had children, and those children grew up and had children. In time, a whole nation sprang from Ishmael, just as God had foretold. Today we know those people as Arabs.

Abraham Put Through His Greatest Test

Down through the years Abraham had shown by his obedience that he was truly God's servant. God planned to put him to one more test that would be the hardest of all. At that time he was living at a place called Beer-sheba, north of where Hagar and Ishmael had gone into the desert. There Isaac grew up. Abraham was thankful that God had given him this fine, young man. He was shocked one day when he heard God say: "Take Isaac to the land of Moriah and offer him for a burnt offering!" (Gen. 22:2.)

Abraham could hardly believe what he had heard, but he obediently began to plan carrying out the instructions because he knew they were from the Creator God. He had his servants prepare to start on the journey early next morning. He was almost overcome with sadness when he saw them chopping the wood on which he was to offer the son for whom he had waited so many years. The provisions for the trip were loaded on a burro. Then Abraham, Isaac, two servants and the loaded burro set out for Mount Moriah, a high hill to the east.

Abraham had told the others that he was going to make a sacrifice to God, but he didn't say what that sacrifice would be. For more than two days they walked toward where the sacrifice was to take place. (Gen. 22:4.) Meanwhile, many thoughts went through Abraham's troubled mind. God had promised him that through Isaac there would become nations whose people would number as many as the stars in the sky. But if Isaac weren't to live, how could this be? Would God bring Isaac back to life? And why should God ask him to sacrifice his son? This was a terrible ceremony begun by Nimrod and practiced by certain idol worshipers in those days. Could it be that God wanted His followers to do the same?

The more Abraham thought about these things, the more depressed he became. Nevertheless, he refrained from trying to argue with God or give excuses for not sacrificing his son. He knew that God was far wiser and more merciful than any human being. He simply obeyed, no matter how he felt about what he was asked to do.

After Abraham had sighted the mountain on which the sacrifice was to be made, and the group had reached a point close to its base, Abraham told his two servants to stay with the burro while he and Isaac went up alone to worship. (Gen. 22:5.)

Abraham Obeys God Without Question

Carrying a knife, a torch, some rope and the wood for the fire, father and son set off for the top of the hill. Not knowing what part he would have in the sacrifice, Isaac began to wonder what was to be offered.

"We have the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" he asked his father. (Verse 7.)

"God will provide the lamb, my son," Abraham replied. (Verse 8.)

When they reached the top of the hill, Abraham chose a brushy spot where the servants below couldn't see what would take place.

"Bring stones for the altar," Abraham said, and together they built up a flat pile of rocks large enough for a person to lie on. Abraham then arranged the wood on the stone altar.

At this point the Bible doesn't state in detail what happened next. It simply tells that Abraham bound Isaac and put him on the altar. (Verse 9.) Very likely Abraham told Isaac at the last moment that he, Isaac, was to be the sacrifice.

With his son lying helpless on the altar, Abraham picked up the sharp knife with which to slay his son. Isaac stared in sudden, shocking alarm at the white knuckles of his father's hand as it lifted the knife. Then he tore his gaze from the point of the knife to the sad face of a father who felt that within seconds the son he loved so much would be dead. Abraham would have chosen to take his own life, but that wasn't what God had told him to do. Abraham knew that one cannot do better than obey the Creator, no matter how difficult it may be.

Isaac Rescued

Abraham tensed his arm for the blow. At that instant a strong, clear voice called out his name. He crouched motionless and listened.

"Do not harm Isaac", the voice spoke. "Because you have been willing to give up your son, I know that you fear me!" (Gen.22:10-12.)

Abraham knew that God was speaking to him through an angel. He tearfully fell to his knees, overcome with joy and thankfulness because God hadn't required him to take his son's life. When at last he looked up, he saw a ram thrashing about in nearby brush. The ram's horns were locked so tightly in a bush that it was trapped. Abraham realized that here was an animal for the sacrifice in place of Isaac. (Verse 13.)

Isaac, too, was very thankful as his father slashed the ropes that bound him. They then prepared the ram and offered it to God.

Perhaps one might think that it was cruel of God to cause Abraham to almost slay Isaac. God is never cruel. He is always loving and merciful. Sometimes He gives some very hard tests to those who choose to obey Him. This is to prove obedience or wisdom, just as sometimes school teachers or parents give tests to find out how much is being learned.

In Abraham's case it proved that Abraham loved his Creator more than any other thing or person, including his son. The proof was good for Abraham and a good example for millions who would later read of this event. It also pointed to a time two thousand years later when God Himself would be willing to give His only son, Jesus, to be killed because of all the evil things done by man.

But there's more to the story.

Abraham's Descendants Promised Prosperity

Before Abraham and Isaac started back down the hill, the angel spoke again to Abraham.

"Because you have been willing to give up your son for me," promised God, speaking through an angel, "I will indeed bless you. Your descendants will be AS MANY AS THE STARS OF THE HEAVENS and as the sands of the seashore. They shall be able to conquer their enemies. All the nations of the world shall seek to be as prosperous as those who descend from you. All this will happen because you have obeyed me!"

Those who have come down from Abraham are today numbered in the hundreds of millions, but most of them have no knowledge of who they are and the real reason why they are so prosperous.

After Abraham and Isaac had returned to where the two servants were waiting, they set out to go back to Beersheba.

Later, Abraham moved to Hebron in the southern part of the land of Canaan. There Sarah died at the age of one hundred and twenty-seven years. This mother of many millions of people now living around the world was buried in a cave in a field belonging to Abraham.

Chapter 8

Esau Sells Jacob His Birthright

ABOUT three years after his wife Sarah had died, Abraham began to think about Isaac getting married. By then Isaac was forty years old. Abraham was concerned lest his son pick a wife from among the Canaanites, who were idol worshipers.

Abraham instructed his chief servant to take men, camels and provisions on a trip to Mesopotamia, Abraham's native land, and bring back a wife for Isaac from among his own people. (Gen.24:3-4.) It was the custom then, as it still is in some countries, for parents to choose whom their sons and daughters would marry.

Abraham felt certain that there were many people still in Mesopotamia who worshiped God. He had a brother, Nahor, who still lived there and had a large family. (Gen.22:20-24.) He knew that it would be more pleasing to God for Isaac to marry within his own family than take an idol-worshipping wife.

Abraham's Servant Finds Rebekah

After days of journeying to the northeast, Abraham's servant and his caravan arrived one evening at a well just outside the city of Nahor. (Gen. 24:10.) In those days the women were generally the ones who went to the wells to draw water. Abraham's servant prayed that among them would be one that would turn out to be a good wife for his master's son. He also prayed that God would point out such a woman by causing her to volunteer to draw up water for him and the camels. That would seem to be asking a lot of God. What woman would be willing to draw water for ten thirsty camels?

But even before the servant's prayer was finished, a beautiful young woman approached the well. As she drew up water, Abraham's servant came up to her and asked her for water to drink. At once the woman held out her water jar. (Gen.24:11-15.)

"Drink, my lord," she said. "This could almost be an answer to my prayer," thought the servant. "She is willing to give me a drink, but surely she won't want to go to more trouble than that."

Abraham's servant was surprised, therefore, when he heard the young woman say, "I will be glad to draw water for your camels, too! I'll give them as much as they can drink!"

This was a direct answer to the prayer made only minutes before. Abraham's servant was sure that this was the woman for Isaac. To pay her for her trouble, he gave her a gold ring and gold bracelets of great value. (Gen. 24:22.) When he asked her name, he received another surprise.

"I am Rebekah", she told him. "I am the daughter of Bethuel, Nahor's son."

Nahor was Abraham's brother, so this young woman was a second cousin to Isaac! It was good news to the servant to learn that he had found a woman who was of Abraham's people, and one who knew about God. Abraham's servant immediately thanked God for helping him.

Laban Invites Him In

Rebekah ran to her home to excitedly tell her family what had happened, and show the ring and bracelets. When her brother, Laban, saw the costly jewelry and heard Rebekah's story, he hurried to the well to invite Abraham's servant in. (Gen. 24:29-31.) The servant was thankful for the invitation, but before accepting it, he made sure that the men with him unloaded, fed and made straw beds for the camels. He and his men were then brought water with which to wash their feet. This was a custom that was very helpful in arid lands where travelers' feet became dusty and weary.

Food was then set before them, but the servant wouldn't eat until he had told his hosts why he had come. (Verse 33.) He related to Rebekah's family what had happened to Abraham since he had left Haran many years before. He told how Abraham had obeyed God in the lands where other people would have nothing to do with God, and how Abraham had become wealthy and the happy father of an obedient son, Isaac.

When the servant told them about his prayer for a good wife for Isaac, and how Rebekah had fitted in with what he had asked for, Rebekah's family were convinced that God had led him to Rebekah.

"We believe that it's God's will that Rebekah become Isaac's wife," they told the servant. (Verse 50.)

The servant was so pleased to hear this that he again thanked God. Then he had gold and silver and beautiful clothing brought to Rebekah, and costly gifts for her family. (Verse 53.) Then, at last, all enjoyed a happy feast. If the reader believes that it was unfair to Rebekah because she had little or nothing to say about all these plans, it must be remembered that in those times wives were picked in a different manner. In this case, Rebekah was undoubtedly pleased and excited, even though she hadn't met Isaac. What matters more is that God had a hand in the matter, which would insure the happiness of the people involved.

Next morning, Rebekah's family asked if she could stay a few more days at home. Abraham's servant reminded them that because God had so quickly led him to Rebekah, no part of the matter should be postponed. Rebekah stated that she was quite willing to leave at once, so the caravan set out on the way back. On the return trip it was enlarged by the addition of camels carrying Rebekah, her nurse and her maids. Rebekah's family was sad to see her go, but its members were happy that she would obviously have a good man for a husband. (Verses 55-61.)

Isaac Meets His Bride

Days afterward, as Isaac was out walking in a field, he saw a caravan approaching. He went to meet it, hopeful that it was the one his father had sent to Nahor. When Rebekah saw a man hurrying toward them, she asked who he was. On being told that he was the man she had been brought to marry, she was pleased. She quickly and modestly attired herself in a long veil before stepping down off her camel to meet her future husband. (Verse 65.)

Isaac and Rebekah were married shortly after their meeting. Because they had God's blessing, they were very happy. (Verse 67.) Through them, the Creator moved a step nearer starting the nation that would do important work in the world through succeeding generations.

By that time Abraham was one hundred and forty years old, and quite content to leave matters to Isaac, who managed his father's business well. Thirty-five years later, at the age of one hundred and seventy-five years, Abraham died. (Gen. 25:7-8.)

The Bible refers to eight children Abraham had. All were sons. If there were others, the Bible doesn't mention them. (Gen.25:1-4.) Most of those sons were born to Abraham's second wife. The first two sons, Ishmael and Isaac, buried their father in the same cave where Abraham's first wife, Sarah, was buried. (Gen.25:9-10.) Thus ended the life of one of the most obedient of men. Because of that obedience to his Creator, Abraham became wealthy and lived a long time.

There was one thing God promised him that he didn't receive then, however, even though God always keeps His promises. It is everlasting life in God's Kingdom, which will come to Earth only a few years from now. Then Abraham will become, along with others who obey God, one of Earth's mightiest rulers. (Heb. 11:8-14.) At that coming time, strange as it may seem, many of you who read these words will get to meet Abraham and talk with him.

Although Isaac and Rebekah were happy in their marriage, the years passed without their having any children. They became so disappointed that at last Isaac asked God to send them a child. (Gen. 25:21.) God answered the prayer. After twenty years of marriage, Isaac and Rebekah realized that at last they would soon become parents.

At the same time, Rebekah suffered unusual pains that were so severe that she prayed for relief. God told her, probably in a dream or a vision, that she would give birth to the beginnings of two nations. One nation would turn out to be stronger than the other, she was told, and that the first one born would serve the other. God gave her strength to continue in her condition until she became the mother of twin boys.

The first one born was called Esau. The second was named Jacob. (Gen.25:22-26.)

As the boys grew, it was plain to their parents that they were very different in manners and characteristics. Esau loved to hunt and roam about, as did his uncle, Ishmael. Jacob wanted to follow his father's kind of life by raising animals and crops. But Isaac liked the delicious meat that Esau brought home, so Esau became his favorite son. Rebekah's favorite was Jacob because he chose to do the things that kept him close to home. (Verses 27 and 28.)

Esau Sells His Birthright

One day Esau went on a long hunting trip. He went so far that by the time he returned he was staggering with weariness. As he arrived home, he saw that Jacob had prepared a savory lentil soup. Esau was so weak and the soup smelled so good that he begged Jacob to give him some at once lest he faint from lack of nourishment.

It was a custom then that the first son born in a family would receive more gifts and rights than any brothers born later. Because Esau was the first born, he naturally had what was

called the birthright. This meant that if the father died, the birthright owner would inherit a larger share of the father's property than would any other children in the family. In this case, it also meant that the descendants of the oldest son would receive the greatest share of the promises God made to Abraham and those who came after him.

The birthright was of great value. Jacob realized that, and he selfishly desired it. He knew that here was an opportunity to get it.

"I will give you all you want to eat if you will turn over your birthright to me", Jacob smiled shrewdly.

Esau was so hungry that he feared he would faint any minute from lack of strength. In that condition, his birthright didn't seem very valuable to him. Food was mostly what counted at the moment. The delicious aroma of the steaming lentils bubbling in garlic and butter was enough to sway Esau into deciding what to do.

"I promise you my birthright for those lentils!" Esau eagerly exclaimed. (Verses 29-33.)

Jacob shoved the bowl of soup toward Esau, who cooled it a little by dipping chunks of bread into it. After Esau had bolted it down and his strength started to return, he strode away with his game, not seemingly caring about the great price he had paid for something to eat. (Verse 34.)

Isaac and Rebekah didn't know about this matter at the time. Otherwise, Isaac especially would have been greatly displeased because of Esau being his favorite son.

Years later, Esau brought grief to his parents by marrying two wives. In those days it wasn't unusual to have more than one wife. The worst part of the matter was that both of Esau's wives were Canaanites. The Canaanites worshiped idols, and had little knowledge of God. (Gen. 26:34- 35.)

Jacob Steals the Blessing

One day when Isaac was well past a hundred years of age, and had become blind, he sent for Esau to come and listen to what he had to say.

"At my age, death could come to me at any time" he explained to Esau. "I want to ask God to bless you before that happens. Take your bow and go out after a deer. Then cook the meat as I like it. After I have eaten, I shall ask God to give you the blessing that should be on the son who has the birthright."

If Esau had been honest, he would have told his father that he had promised his birthright to Jacob. Instead, he said nothing about it, and set out to hunt for venison. (Gen.27:1-4.)

Rebekah had heard Isaac talking to Esau. She wanted Jacob, her favorite son, to receive the blessing Isaac would ask from God. She believed that Jacob was better fitted to be Isaac's heir. A plan came into her mind. She hurried to Jacob to tell him about it.

"Do as I say, and you will receive the blessing your father is about to ask for Esau", she told Jacob. "Go out to the flocks and get two young goats. I'll cook them just the way your father

likes them cooked. After you take some of it to him and he eats it, he'll give you the blessing before Esau returns!" (Gen.27:5-10.)

Jacob believed he should have the birthright advantages because Esau had promised them to him years before, but he couldn't understand why his mother thought it could be accomplished so easily. There was too much difference between him and his brother. For one thing, Esau was a very hairy man. In fact, hair all over him was so thick that his skin felt almost like that of an animal.

"I can't pass for Esau", Jacob argued. "When my father puts his hands on me and feels my smooth skin, he'll know I'm not Esau. Then I'll probably receive a curse instead of a blessing."

"Don't worry about that," his mother said. "I'll take care of matters. Hurry and get those kids. If there's a curse, let it be on me instead of you."

Jacob didn't know what Rebekah intended to do, but he reasoned that if she were willing to take the blame for anything wrong, he should be willing to do as she asked. He brought her the two kids. Rebekah hastily made from them a meat dish cooked and seasoned just the way Isaac liked it.

Next, she had Jacob put on one of Esau's coats. Over his hands, forearms and his neck she carefully wound strips of the hides from the young goats that had just been slaughtered.

"Now take this meat and bread to your father," she said to Jacob. (Verses 11-17.)

Jacob must have felt that this was a wild scheme for getting what he and his mother wanted. Nevertheless, he went to Isaac's tent and tried to sound like Esau by calling "Here I am, father!"

"Who is it?" asked Isaac.

"This is Esau", Jacob answered. "Sit up and eat this meat I've brought for you. Then give me the blessing you promised."

"How can it be that you've brought back a deer so quickly?" Isaac asked.

"God led me where to find one", Jacob lied. (Verses 18-20.)

Isaac was puzzled. This wasn't Esau's manner of talking. He asked Jacob to come near so that he could put his hands on him. Jacob stepped close to the bed and almost held his breath as his father reached out and moved his aged hands over the hairy strips of goat hide on his son.

"Your voice is like Jacob's, but your skin feels like Esau's", Isaac said. "Are you really Esau?"

Again Jacob lied by saying that he was his brother. "Give me the food, and I shall eat it and then bless you", Isaac promised.

Jacob suddenly felt great relief, though at the same time he felt guilty because of lying and tricking his father with the goat hide. Quickly he put the steaming meat before Isaac, and brought bread and wine. (Verse 25.)

When Isaac had finished eating, he asked Jacob to come close and kiss him. When Jacob did so, Isaac smelled the grasses and aromatic herbs of the fields on his coat. It deceived Jacob into believing that Esau was beside him. This was because Esau spent so much time hunting. It didn't occur to him that another could be wearing Esau's coat. (Verses 26-27.) Isaac then asked a blessing on his son.

"God, give to this young man, who smells of a field you have blessed, many well-watered fields," Isaac prayed. "Give him plenty of grain and fruit of the vines. Cause people to serve him and nations to bow down to him. Give him power to rule over his brothers. May a curse be upon any who will try to put a curse on him, and may a blessing be upon any who would bless him." (Verses 28-29.)

Esau Comes in from the Field

Having received the blessing, Jacob left at once. He went just in time to avoid Esau, who had meanwhile shot a deer and cooked part of it for his father.

"I have returned with the venison you asked for!" Esau called out as he came near Isaac's tent. "Sit up, father, and eat it!" (Gen.27:30-31.) Blind Isaac was just leaning back on his pillow, content in thinking that he had just performed an important duty. The sound of Esau's voice brought him back up suddenly. In that moment he knew something wasn't as it should be. He found himself trembling as he spoke.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"I'm Esau, your firstborn son," Esau replied. (Verse 32.)

"Then where is the one who brought food to me and left just now?" Isaac inquired. "He said he was Esau. I asked God's blessing on him. And God will bless him!" (Verse 33.)

Esau was so puzzled and surprised that he almost dropped the food he was holding.

"Then ask a blessing on me, too, father!" Esau excitedly begged.

"But your blessing has obviously been stolen by your brother Jacob", Isaac explained, recalling how much the voice had sounded like Jacob's.

"I should have known it was Jacob who did this thing!" Esau exclaimed bitterly. "He has cheated me twice. First he took my birthright. Now he has stolen my blessing. Can't you ask God for anything for me?" (Verse 36.)

"I have asked for special things for Jacob", Isaac replied. "I can't ask for the very same things for you."

"But surely there is something you can ask for me, your firstborn son!" Esau cried out in a shaking voice. Even though he was a strong man physically, he broke down and wept aloud. (Verse 38.)

Isaac felt great pity for his favorite son. He meditated prayerfully for a few moments.

"Here is what shall be for you, Esau my son," Isaac finally said. "God shall give you and those who live after you a land far away from the best things this Earth has to offer. You will have to hunt and fight for what you will get. You and your people will serve your brother and his people, but there will come a time when you will be free of them." (Verses 39-40.)

Esau wasn't thankful for anything his father asked for him. Instead, he was very angry because Jacob had received the greater blessing.

Esau Plots to Murder Jacob

"My father will soon die", Esau thought. "Then I will do away with Jacob because of what he has done to me." (Verse 41.)

In his anger, Esau must have told someone what he planned to do. His mother heard about it, and was afraid for Jacob. She warned him of what might happen, and begged him to go stay with her brother back in the city in Mesopotamia where she had been born. (Verses 42-43.)

Rebekah became so worried about his safety that she thought up a plan to get Jacob to leave. She knew that he would probably do anything his father told him to do, so she went to Isaac.

"If Jacob lives here much longer, he is likely to marry a Canaanite woman", Rebekah told Isaac. "I think you should send him to Haran to choose a wife from our own people before he is trapped by some woman from among the idol worshipers around us."

Isaac had been greatly disappointed before because his favorite son, Esau, had taken pagan wives from among nearby nations. He didn't want Jacob to do the same thing. Probably Jacob didn't intend to, but Rebekah had fostered concern in Isaac's mind. After a time he had a talk with Jacob.

"If you're considering marriage, don't choose a wife from any except your own people", Isaac told Jacob. "Perhaps you will find a wife in Haran, where your mother was born. If you make the trip, God will surely bless you. May He cause you to have many children and much good land when you return."

Jacob welcomed this good reason to escape from his brother. He started off for Haran by himself with few provisions. He wanted to travel light and fairly fast, and off the direct route east in case Esau decided to pursue him. Taking side trails, however, made parts of his trip more difficult.

Chapter 9

Jacob Meets Rachel

JACOB'S efforts to escape his angry brother, Esau, were in vain. Esau didn't pursue him after all. Instead, he tried to please his parents, after leaving his first two wives, by marrying a third who wasn't a Canaanite. Unfortunately, she was from Ishmael's family. That still wasn't very pleasing to Isaac and Rebekah. (Gen. 28:6-9.)

Jacob Stops at Bethel

After Jacob had left for Haran, one of his first stops was on a lonely, rock-covered mountain slope. There he slept on the ground with his head resting against one of the stones. He was very weary because of the long walk during the day, but instead of sleeping deeply, he had a strange dream. He dreamed of a huge stairway leading from the Earth to very high into the sky. Many angels moved up and down the stairway, at the top of which stood a powerful looking being.

"I am the God of Abraham and Isaac", came a voice from the Figure at the top of the stairway. "I will go with you on your trip, and I will protect you. The land on which you lie will become yours, and those who come after you will own it. They will spread out over the Earth, and through them all nations will receive a blessing. I will bring you safely back to this land again. I will keep all the promises I am making to you now." (Gen.28:13-15.)

When Jacob awakened from the dream, he was filled with a strange fear. He realized that God had spoken to him for the first time. The unusual experience left him weak and trembling. (Verses 16 and 17.) He felt that this was such an important event in his life that he should mark the spot where the dream occurred. He anointed the stone against which he had rested, and set it up like a pillar as a special landmark. He was so thankful for God's promises to protect and provide for him that he promised to give God a tenth of all that came to him. (Gen.28:18-22.)

Jacob knew that the first tenth of what anyone earns should be returned to God. After all, God owns all things. Whatever man has comes to him as gifts from his creator. Even the air he breathes is a wonderful gift, because it keeps him alive. In asking man to give back only a tenth of what he earns, God is being very generous. Besides, He promises that He will provide well for those who are faithful in giving back a tithe, or tenth. (Mal. 3:8-11.)

Jacob Falls in Love

With the pleasant knowledge that from there on God would protect him, Jacob proceeded eastward. After days of trudging over stony mountain trails and hot desert sands, wading through creeks and crossing the great Euphrates River, he came to the land of Mesopotamia. One day when he was approaching a city, he noticed some shepherds and their flocks of sheep gathered about a well that was protected by a large, flat rock. Jacob went up to the men and asked them where they were from.

"We're from Haran" they answered, pointing to the city in the distance. (Gen. 29:1-4.)

Jacob was happy to learn that his long, wearying trip was about at an end. Then, on inquiring about his mother's brother, Laban, he was surprised to learn that Laban lived nearby, and that his daughter, Rachel, was at the moment approaching the well with some of Laban's sheep. (Verses 4-6.)

Jacob was anxious to meet one of his own family alone. It was such a special event that he didn't want strangers around. He politely inquired of the shepherds why their flocks weren't out in the pastures grazing. When told that all the animals had to be watered at one time, Jacob started helping the men move the stone cover from the well. By this time Rachel had arrived. Jacob couldn't help noticing how beautiful she was. After he had drawn up water for her sheep, he stepped up to her and kissed her. (Verses 9-11.)

"I am Jacob, your cousin", he informed the startled young woman. "My mother is Rebekah, your aunt."

Rachel was so surprised and pleased that she took her sheep and hurried to tell her father about Jacob. This gave Jacob a chance to shed some tears of thankfulness and joy because of God leading him to his people.

When Rachel's father heard about Jacob, he hurried out to meet him and welcome him to Laban's home.

Jacob visited with his uncle's family for a month. During that time he did his part in the work that had to be done around Laban's home and in the fields. The more he saw of Rachel, the more he cared for her. She had an older sister, Leah, who was closer to Jacob's age, but Jacob was interested only in Rachel.

Laban could see that Jacob could be a profitable addition to the family. He couldn't expect Jacob to keep on working, however, for only food and lodging. (Verses 12-14.)

"If you wish to keep on working here, I would like to pay you fair wages", Laban told Jacob. "Tell me what you think would be fair pay."

"I shall work for the next seven years for you if you will then give me Rachel for my wife", was Jacob's surprising answer. (Verse 18.)

Laban was of course pleased. Seven whole years of service from a good worker was like an offer of much money. Laban agreed, but only after purposely hesitating. He didn't want it obvious that he was elated at this bargain.

Jacob Marries Someone Else!

Seven years can be a long time. For Jacob, who was happy in seeing Rachel every day, the months went by quickly. When at last it was time for the marriage, Laban gave a feast that lasted a week. It was a time of great celebration by many people in that area.

At the time of the ceremony, Jacob's bride wore a long, heavy veil that hid her almost from view. Jacob was very happy. He felt that it was well worth seven years of labor to finally have Rachel for his wife. Later, when the veil was removed so that he could look on the woman he had married, his happiness suddenly left him.

His bride wasn't Rachel. She was Leah! (Gen.29:20-25.)

Filled with anger, Jacob went at once to Laban.

"Why have you cheated me this way?" he demanded. "You know I didn't ask to marry Leah! I asked for Rachel!"

"I'm sorry, my nephew", Laban explained, "but in this land it's a custom that the older daughter must marry first. I can't change the custom. I had to give you Leah."

If Laban had been fair, he would have told Jacob about the custom. What he really wanted was to get Leah married, and he chose a dishonest way to do it.

Jacob was disappointed and bitter. This trick by his uncle reminded him of the way he had tricked his brother and his father in order to obtain the birthright and a special blessing. Perhaps he then realized that it was just that he should be the victim of a dishonest act. Later, he was surprised at what Laban had to say.

"If you feel that only Rachel should be your wife, I will give her to you if you will do two things", Laban told Jacob.

"But Leah is my wife" Jacob said. "What two things could change that?"

"If you will be a good husband to Leah for the rest of the marriage feast this week, then I shall see that you will be married to Rachel at the end of the week", Laban replied.

"I am willing to be a good husband to whomever is my wife", Jacob said. "That is the answer to one thing you ask. What is the other thing?"

"You must work for me seven years more for Rachel," Laban replied.

Jacob was stunned by Laban's words. For a while he said nothing, leaving Laban to wonder if he had asked too much of Jacob.

"I agree to those terms" Jacob finally replied. "Rachel is worth more to me than fourteen years of work." (Verses 27-28.)

Perhaps the remainder of the seven days of feasting seemed almost as long to Jacob as were the first seven years of service to his uncle. At the end of the week, he and Rachel were married. Thus he had two wives, which was a common thing in those times. Rachel was the one he loved, however.

Jacob carried out his promise to work seven more years for Laban whose scheme to marry off both his daughters later brought grief to this deceitful man.

Six More Years of Work

By the time his fourteen years of labor for Laban were finished, Jacob had little more than a large family and tents to live in. As it happened, only one son of his eleven boys was born

through Rachel. Meanwhile, because of Jacob's careful planning and willingness to work hard, Laban became wealthy in sheep and cattle. Jacob couldn't see a very profitable future for himself in keeping this up. He told Laban that he wished to take his family and go back to Canaan to visit his elderly father. This worried Laban, who didn't want to lose such a valuable man.

"If you will continue working for me" Laban told Jacob, "I shall pay you any wage you ask."

"I don't want wages," Jacob said. "I'll look after your animals for a while longer if you will give me those with spots or ring marks on their hides."

Jacob was surprised that Laban agreed at once on this arrangement. (Gen. 30:25-32.) Next day he found out why. Laban had his workmen and sons quickly remove and take away most of the animals Jacob had asked for. (Verses 35-36.) Jacob had counted on taking sizeable flocks and herds with him back to Canaan. Now he would have to wait for more of those kinds of animals to be born.

God had promised Jacob that He would look out for him. God had kept that promise. During the next six years that Jacob continued to take care of Laban's animals, God miraculously increased the animals with spots or rings. So many of the cattle, sheep and goats became Jacob's, having come mostly from the small number Laban had allowed him to have, that Jacob became a wealthy stockman in those last few years with Laban. By careful trading and buying, he also acquired many camels, burros, tents and other expensive equipment.

At the same time, Laban's animals weren't increasing as he wanted them to. It had long been plain to Jacob's uncle that he had become prosperous because a man who relied on God was managing his business. But now that Jacob was prospering, Laban wasn't pleased. He feared that Jacob would leave him at any time.

Jacob Leaves Laban Secretly

As Laban became less friendly, Jacob's desire to leave grew. One day God made it plain to Jacob that he should go back to Canaan. (Gen. 31:13.) Fearing that Laban might forcibly try to prevent his leaving, Jacob waited until a time when his father-in-law had gone several miles away to oversee the shearing of his sheep. Then Jacob had his workmen take down his tents and pack them and his belongings on his camels and burros. Jacob was careful not to take anything that belonged to Laban. With all his family, flocks and herds, it was a big moving job. Cattle, sheep and goats had to be herded. The caravan couldn't move very fast. (Verses 17-18.)

Leah and Rachel were glad of the chance to leave. They felt that their father hadn't been fair to them or to Jacob.

Laban didn't find out what had happened until the caravan had been gone for three days. (Verse 22.) Of course he was very angry. His anger was even greater when he found that some small idols he prized highly, and which Rachel had stolen, were missing. He was certain that Jacob had taken them.

"Saddle my fastest camels for a trip to the west!" Laban roared at his foreman. "I will overtake Jacob if we have to go all the way to Canaan!"

After seven days of hard travel, during which the camels were forced to move at top speed, Laban and his men came within sight of Jacob's caravan encamped for the night beside the main east-west trail. (Verse 23.)

"We'll stay back here tonight out of their sight", Laban told his men. "Early tomorrow morning we'll overtake them. Then Jacob will regret leaving me as he did!"

By next morning, however, Laban wasn't very intent on revenge. That night God spoke to him in a dream (verse 24) warning him that if he harmed Jacob, God would deal with him harshly. Laban was so disturbed by the dream that he dared not carry out his intent to cause Jacob any trouble. By the time his caravan overtook Jacob's, his anger had subsided.

"Why did you sneak away as you did?" he demanded of Jacob. "If you had told me, I would have prepared a great feast. I didn't even get to tell my daughters and grandchildren good-bye." (Verses 25-29.)

"I left while you were away so that there wouldn't be any arguments," Jacob answered.

"I would more than argue with you," Laban said, "if God hadn't warned me in a dream last night not to oppose you."

"You're wise to obey that warning", Jacob said.

"Probably so", Laban agreed. "I respect your belief, but you obviously don't respect mine. Otherwise you wouldn't have taken my little idols. I demand them back!"

"If you think I have them, search my belongings", Jacob replied. "If you find them with the property of any person in this caravan, let that person die!" Jacob didn't know that Rachel had the images, or he wouldn't have made such a promise. While Laban and his men searched for the images, Rachel rested in her tent on a camel saddle in which she had hidden the idols. Soon the search brought Laban to Rachel's tent.

"Get up from that saddle so that I may search there", he gruffly muttered to his daughter.

Rachel stopped further inspection of her things by telling Laban that she didn't feel well and didn't want to be disturbed. Laban irritably left to go tell Jacob that the images couldn't be found. Jacob was angry because of the search. He asked Laban why Laban had been unfair to him through twenty years of devoted service, and why he now treated him as an enemy.

Laban knew that Jacob deserved better treatment. Because he wanted the reputation of a fair man, Laban suggested that they make an agreement that there wouldn't be any more unfriendliness toward each other. As a monument to this agreement, they had their men erect a large pile of stones where they were. Then they dined together as a further sign of friendship.

Next morning Laban said good-bye to his daughters and their children, and set back toward Haran. (Gen. 31:35.) Jacob's caravan moved on westward.

Jacob Tested by God

The closer Jacob moved to Canaan, the more concerned he became about meeting his brother, Esau. For a long time Esau had lived in the rough, wild country of Seir, through which Jacob's caravan would almost travel on the way to Canaan. Jacob feared that there would be trouble if Esau heard that he was coming that way. Jacob was certain that Esau hadn't forgotten how he had been tricked many years previously. Esau had threatened to kill Jacob, and it could be that he was still awaiting Jacob's return.

In an attempt to find out how Esau felt about him, Jacob sent messengers ahead to try to contact his brother. They were instructed to tell him that Jacob was about to pass through the land with much wealth from Haran, and that Jacob hoped they could meet as friends.

Not long afterward the messengers returned to report that they had met Esau, and that he was not far behind them with four hundred men! (Gen. 32:3-6.)

The report shocked Jacob. He knew that all the people in his caravan couldn't stand against four hundred men led by a man who had promised to kill him. He gave orders for the caravan to divide into two groups and to separate. He reasoned that if one group suffered an attack by Esau's men, the other group might escape. (Verses 7 and 8.)

Jacob then did the thing that would be more helpful to him than anything else he could do. He asked for God's protection. He admitted to God that he wasn't worthy of it, at the same time reminding God, though that wasn't necessary, that God had promised him protection.

God wants us to look to Him for help, but if there is anything we can do to help or protect ourselves, He expects us to do it instead of being lazy. Jacob didn't stand idly by and wait for his Creator to do what man could do. Probably God inspired him to act as he did. Out of his animals he picked five hundred and fifty of the choicest cattle, goats, sheep, burros and camels. Then he divided each kind of stock into groups, and each group was sent out at a different time to approach Esau as one of several gifts.

"Tell my brother that I hope he will accept my presents", Jacob instructed the men who departed with the stock in the direction from which Esau had been reported to be approaching. (Verses 13- 2)

Thus Jacob hoped to make Esau feel friendly toward him. After the animals intended for Esau had gone on, Jacob moved the two sections of his caravan on ahead a short distance to camp for the night. (Verses 22 and 23) He remained behind to be alone and pray.

That night a strange thing happened. Suddenly somebody seized him and held him down as though trying to prevent his completing his trip to Canaan. Before long Jacob and his attacker were engaged in a furious wrestling match! Soon Jacob realized that his opponent wasn't an ordinary man. Instead, he was an angel sent from God. (Verses 24-25.) Years later the prophet Hosea was inspired to write that the angel with whom Jacob wrestled was actually God. (Hosea 12:3-5.)

That was a trying night for Jacob. When he realized that he was dealing with more than a human being, he struggled to be able to get the blessing of this Superior Entity. (Verse 26.) Before dawn, Jacob was blessed and praised for determination greater than that of his brother Esau. Jacob was determined to strive with all his might to not lose God's blessings and

eternal promises. He proved by his physical wrestling that he had the strength of character to overcome his spiritual problems. The wrestling match was a test of character!

Before Jacob's wrestling partner left, he informed Jacob that his name should be changed from Jacob to Israel, which meant one who overcomes, or proves to be a champion. (Verse 28.) God wouldn't give His blessing and a birthright to a man who had taken them from a weaker brother unfairly. Therefore He appeared as a man to give Jacob the chance to prove himself with one who appeared as his equal.

When dawn came, Jacob found that he was very sore in one hip, showing that God's blessings don't come without hardship and suffering. (Verse 31.)

Later, when he joined his caravan, he was troubled to see a growing cloud of dust in the distance. There was no doubt that it was Esau and his four hundred men swiftly riding toward Jacob's caravan.

Chapter 10

Joseph's Adventures in Egypt

TRUSTING that there would be little trouble, Jacob nevertheless arranged for Rachel and her son Joseph to stay behind the other people in his caravan. That was because Rachel was the wife he especially loved and Joseph was his favorite son. Then he moved up past his family and servants on his way to meet Esau. (Gen.33:1-2.)

Esau and his four hundred men came to a halt a short distance from the front of Jacob's caravan. Jacob, ahead of the others, was so close that he could see his brother staring at him. He bowed seven times toward his brother, as was the custom then when one party wished to show respect for another party. After each bow, he moved a few paces closer to Esau.

After the seventh bow, he straightened up to look squarely at his brother for the first time in twenty years. (Verse 3.)

Jacob Meets Esau Face to Face

For a few moments there was a strained silence. Then Esau, who had dismounted from his camel, rushed forward to seize Jacob -- and hug him! The two brothers were so happy to see each other that they wept.

Thus God answered Jacob's prayer.

When Jacob's family saw that the two brothers had met as close friends, the wives, children and servants came near and bowed. Jacob explained that they were his two wives, his twelve children and his servants. Esau was pleased at sight of the courteous people. Then, looking behind him, he saw an approaching crowd of sheep, goats, cattle, camels and donkeys.

"What's this?" Esau asked. "I passed it on the way to meet you."

"You passed it too swiftly," Jacob smiled. "These are gifts I sent out ahead for you!"

"But I have no need for stock," Esau said. "I have plenty. Keep them for yourself."

"I am so thankful that God has spared you and caused you to be friendly with me that I want to give you these things" Jacob said.

Esau could see that Jacob would be disappointed if the stock were refused, so he gladly accepted. (Gen.33:8-11.) Then he suggested that their caravans go together back to Seir, where Esau lived. Jacob knew that with their children and greater numbers of animals, they would tiresomely hold back his brother and their men, who would naturally move much faster. The two agreed that Esau's group should go on ahead, and that Jacob's caravan would follow at a slower pace until turning off to the north into Canaan, where Jacob later bought land for his many animals. (Verse 17.)

After Jacob and Rachel had arrived in their new land, there was a twelfth son, Benjamin. Unhappily, Rachel died at the time. (Gen. 35:16-20.) Before this sorrowful event, Jacob's

daughter Dinah attended a pagan festival of the Canaanites and got into trouble. Some of Dinah's brothers were so enraged that they acted in a brutal manner that was distressing to their father. (Gen.34:25-31.)

Joseph's Adventures

As time passed, Jacob's favorite son, Joseph, grew into a young man. At age seventeen he was helping take care of his father's livestock. His brothers did the same kind of work, but they disliked Joseph because their father favored him. (Gen. 37:3.) To make matters worse, Joseph told his brothers that he had dreamed about becoming an important person. (Gen.37:5-11.)

Later, when the ten older sons had moved their animals about sixty miles away, and had been gone for several days, Jacob began to worry. He feared that they might have been attacked by men who had reason to dislike them. He sent Joseph to find them and return with any news.

It was a difficult task for young Joseph, but after many inquiries and much travel, he came upon his brothers herding their animals. When they saw him coming, they decided that the opportunity had come to handle him as they had long wanted to without interference from their father.

Excited at having found his brothers, Joseph hurried happily toward them, shouting their names. He halted when he came close enough to notice deep scowls on most of their faces.

"Well!" one of the brothers sneered. "If it isn't Joseph the dreamer!"

Suddenly Joseph felt his arms pinned painfully behind him by those who had stepped up to seize him.

"Rip his coat off!" someone yelled.

The coat Joseph was wearing was a bright, many-colored one his father had given him. Because it was special, it was one of the reasons why his brothers were envious. After they jerked off the wanted coat, they dropped Joseph into a nearby deep but narrow pit. The lad landed on loose, dry gravel at the bottom of what had been a well, and so was unhurt. He got to his feet and tried to scramble out, but the loose rock fell in when he touched it. He could see that it was useless to try to climb out.

Joseph at first thought that his brothers were playing a trick on him. He repeatedly called up to them to help him. The only response was an occasional laugh as they started eating their noon meal.

One of the brothers, Reuben, wasn't cruel enough to laugh at his young brother's plight. He had gone to watch the flocks while the others ate together, and planned to return and rescue Joseph after the others returned to their animals. (Gen. 37:22.) He didn't see the caravan of Midianites approaching that area. They were traveling southwest to Egypt to sell spices. When the other brothers saw the Midianites, and that they were going to pass by very closely, an idea came to one-of Jacob's sons.

"These Midianites buy and sell almost everything, including slaves," Joseph's brother Judah observed. "Why not sell Joseph to them? They could resell him at a profit in Egypt as a slave!"

There was instant agreement among the brothers. They waved down the approaching caravan, and told the caravan captain that they had a young man they wanted to sell as a servant. The captain was urged to dismount and look at Joseph. After he saw the lad, there was much arguing and bargaining. Finally it was agreed that Joseph would be sold for a small sum. It was a ridiculous price for a human being, but the Midianites felt they had out-bargained Joseph's brothers, who were relieved to get rid of their young brother for any amount.

With ropes the Midianites pulled their purchase out of the hole. Not knowing exactly what was happening at the time, Joseph struggled to get free and shouted to his brothers for help. They only watched idly as he was dragged away, and divided up the twenty pieces of silver the Midianites had paid them.

Reuben Returns to the Well

A little later Reuben came back to the well pit. On finding that Joseph wasn't there, he rushed back to his brothers, who had gone back to their flocks, and excitedly informed them that Joseph was missing.

"He must have escaped!" some of them said, and all pretended to be concerned.

Reuben was so disturbed that he ripped some of his clothing apart. His brothers dared not tell him what happened lest he tell their father, to whom they knew they would have to make some kind of explanation. Later, they took Joseph's coat and smeared it in the blood of a goat they killed. A few days later, when they returned home, they acted very sad.

"Is this Joseph's coat?" asked one of the sons, holding out the blood-stained garment.

"It is!" exclaimed Jacob, staring fearfully at it. "I had it made for him. Where did you find it?"

"We found it out in the desert", was the reply.

"I didn't know about that!" Reuben spoke up.

"We kept it from you because we didn't want you to worry," was the explanation to Reuben.

"My son must have been killed by some wild beast!" Jacob moaned.

He was so sad at the thought of losing his favorite son that he was close to illness for many days. His sons tried to comfort him during that time. Jacob would have been better off to have known the truth but his sons were fearful of his anger.

Joseph Reaches Egypt

While Jacob was feeling depressed about what he thought was his son's death, Joseph was taken down into Egypt by the Midianite traders. There, in a slave market, he was put up for sale to anyone who would pay the best price. He was bought by Potiphar, the captain of the

guard for the king of Egypt. His rank was that of a powerful and important man. (Gen. 37:36.)

Potiphar put Joseph to work in his household doing all kinds of tasks. It wasn't long before he noticed that this new servant was more capable and trustworthy than others. That was because Joseph followed God's laws. Honest, energetic and anxious to do his best, he was soon put in charge of all the servants in Potiphar's household. God's blessing had been on Laban's household because Jacob served God. Now there was a blessing on Potiphar's household because of Joseph's obedience to his Creator.

Joseph wasn't aware of it, but he was beginning to be used in God's plan that would affect the whole world for thousands of years.

Matters went well until Potiphar's wife began to like Joseph as much as she did her husband. Joseph knew that shouldn't be, and told her so. (Gen.39:7-8.) This so displeased her that she snatched off Joseph's jacket as he was leaving the house. She called for other servants. When they hurried in, she held up Joseph's jacket, and told them that Joseph had been very insulting to her, but had fled when she had cried out. Her husband later was told the same untrue story. He angrily ordered soldiers to find Joseph and put him in the king's prison. (Verses 12-20.)

Time passed, during which the man in charge of the prison noticed that Joseph was unusually obedient to the rules, and that he was an intelligent person who helped keep order there. (Verses 21-23.) God caused Joseph to find such favor with those in charge that before long he was next in authority under the head jail keeper. However, he had to go on living in the dungeon, even though he enjoyed a fairly high office.

Chapter 11

Joseph Becomes Ruler of Egypt

AT THAT time a plot was discovered to poison Pharaoh, king of Egypt. As a result, two high ranking men of the king's court were put in prison. One was the chief butler, in charge of wine production and serving. The other was the chief baker, or chef. He had charge of preparing and serving food for the king's table. There was no proof that either of these men was guilty.

Potiphar, who by that time had probably begun to doubt that Joseph was guilty of his wife's accusation, came to Joseph and asked him to look after the two new prisoners. (Gen.40:1-4.)

One day Joseph noticed that both appeared especially worried. When he asked them why, they told him that they had had disturbing dreams the night before. Joseph observed that the dreams could have important meanings, and that the two men should tell them to him.

"I dreamed of a vine with three branches that blossomed and produced ripe grapes," the butler told Joseph. "I pressed the juice from the grapes into a cup, and gave it to the king."

The strange dream was impossible for Joseph to understand through only his own thinking. Later, by himself, he asked God for wisdom, and God revealed that the dream had a meaning, and what it was.

"Your dream means that within three days you will be freed from prison and will be given back your office as head butler to the king," Joseph told the butler. (Verses 12-13.)

On hearing this, the chief baker became anxious also to tell Joseph his dream, hoping that it would also have a pleasant meaning. So he told Joseph that he dreamed that he was carrying three baskets of food to Pharaoh on his head, and that suddenly birds swooped down and snatched up all the food from the baskets.

When Joseph realized the awful meaning of this dream, he knew who had schemed to poison the king. He didn't relish telling the chief baker what his fate would be, but he knew God would expect him to reveal the truth he had been given the wisdom to know.

"Within three days Pharaoh will have you hanged, and birds will pick the flesh from your bones," he said to the startled chief baker. (Verses 16-19.)

Three days later was Pharaoh's birthday. It was a day of feasting and great celebration, and on which certain prisoners would be brought from the king's jail and pardoned. On that day the chief butler was given a pardon and restored to his former office, just as Joseph had foretold. At the same time the chief baker was publicly hanged out where vultures came to eat his flesh, just as Joseph had said would happen.

"When the opportunity comes, please tell your king that I am an innocent Hebrew prisoner who has been held here unfairly for a long time," Joseph told the chief butler just before that happy man left to be pardoned. "Perhaps he will free me, too." (Verse 14.)

In his elation at being freed, the chief butler forgot about speaking to the king for Joseph. (Verse 23.)

Joseph Leaves Prison

Two years passed. One night Pharaoh dreamed two dreams which troubled him. He believed they held some meaning he should know, and therefore sent for men who were supposed to have magic powers to understand unusual dreams. Pharaoh related them to these men, but none was able to say what they meant.

It happened that the chief butler was serving the king when this took place. Suddenly he remembered Joseph. Realizing that he would find special favor with the king if he could direct one to Pharaoh who could interpret the dreams, he told the king about Joseph's ability. (Gen.41:1-13.)

A little later guards came to escort Joseph to the king. This was the opportunity for which Joseph had prayed so long. (Verse 14.)

"I have been told that you have the power to tell the meanings of dreams," the Egyptian ruler said to Joseph.

"I don't have that power, but the God of Israel does," Joseph answered. "He will give you an answer through me."

Probably that answer made Pharaoh think that an overly-religious foreigner had been brought to him, but he was anxious to try any method of getting what he wanted.

"I dreamed that I stood by the Nile River and saw seven fat cows come out of the water," said Pharaoh to Joseph. "As these cows fed on the thick grass at the river's edge, seven thin cows came out of the water and ate up the seven fat cows. Even so, the thin cows remained just as thin as before eating the fat cows.

"I dreamed again, and saw seven plump heads of grain growing out of one stalk. Seven thin heads of grain, appearing withered by a hot wind, came out of the stalk and ate the seven plump heads. Are there important meanings to these dreams?"

"There are," Joseph replied. "Both dreams have the same meaning. God wants to make doubly sure that a warning will be heeded. The seven fat cows and seven plump heads of grain mean that the next seven years will bring a record number of stock animals and grain harvests to Egypt. There will be far more food than people can eat. The thin cows and withered heads of grain mean that right after the seven years of plenty there will come seven years of famine. Your herds will die because little will grow out of the ground. There will be so much misery that people will fail to remember the seven good years."

Pharaoh and those around him stared in silence at the young foreign prisoner who had told what would happen to their nation in the next fourteen years. His earnest manner caused them to believe him, though they didn't want to believe what he had said about a famine. "If you can foretell the future," Pharaoh finally said, "I trust you also have the wisdom to advise what my people should do to prepare for the famine."

"They should use the seven good years to store up food," Joseph answered. "It would be wise to first choose a man capable of taking care of such gigantic preparations. Then, when the lean years come, there will be enough food, if it is distributed properly, to see Egypt through them." (Gen.41:33-36.)

"I believe this young Hebrew is being guided by his God," Pharaoh told his advisors. "If he speaks the truth, it would be foolish not to take his advice."

There was a chorus of agreement. Those who had heard Joseph looked on him with awe and respect.

Joseph Appointed Ruler

"If I should choose a man to take care of storing food, what wiser man could I pick than this Joseph?" Pharaoh asked.

Again there was a chorus of agreeing voices. Even if the advisors hadn't agreed, the king probably would have decided on Joseph. The man who was the ruler at the time was more intent on doing what was best for his people than some who ruled before and after him.

Next time Joseph was summoned to Pharaoh, he received a great surprise for one who had spent so much time in prison.

"Because your God has given you great ability, from now on you will be the ruler over my house and all Egypt," Pharaoh told Joseph. "Though I will be over you, your word will be the law in all my realm." (Gen.41:39-41.)

That was how God answered the prayers of Joseph, one who was living by His laws. Not only was he freed from prison, but he was made second in rank to the powerful king of Egypt. He was given the authority to sign important national documents, a special gold neck chain to show his high position, fine clothing, a costly carriage second only to Pharaoh's, beautifully furnished rooms to live in and servants to take care of his needs.

From the time Joseph was sold as a slave at the age of seventeen, he had advanced, in thirteen years, at the age of thirty, to be the real ruler of Egypt, the foremost nation on Earth at that time!

To further show his royal esteem for Joseph, Pharaoh arranged for him to meet Asenath, the daughter of a high official in Egypt. Joseph quickly grew fond of Asenath, and soon married her. (Gen. 41:45.)

For a long time after that, while Joseph traveled around Egypt, he saw wonderful crops and many fat herds. It was clear that God was carrying out His intention to bless the nation for a time with a great abundance from the ground.

Most of Egypt was usually dry, sandy desert. Without water from the great Nile River, that land never would have produced very much. But during those seven years of plenty, there was so much rain that areas far from the Nile gave unusual crops.

Joseph Orders Granaries Built

Before the grain began to pile up, Joseph gave orders for granaries to be built in various regions of Egypt. Later, he started a system by which a fifth of the crops was stored in the granaries. So much grain was stored in seven years that all record was lost of how much was taken in. (Verse 48.)

Meanwhile, Joseph became the father of two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. His life was so full that he almost forgot the years he had spent in prison.(Verse 50.)

Seven good years passed. The next year there was a change in the weather. Showers almost ceased. Streams dwindled. Hot winds blew more often. Green fields turned yellow. Within a few months it was plain that the crops were going to fail. The second half of Joseph's prophecy was beginning to happen. The time of famine had arrived.

Before long farmers in some regions began to run out of food for their animals and grain for bread. It was then that Joseph ordered the storehouses opened. As demands for grain grew, it was plain that if the crops hadn't been stored, thousands of Egyptians would have starved in the first year or two of the famine period. (Verse 54.) The famine wasn't only in Egypt. Lack of rain affected many nations. Before long other peoples were begging the Egyptians to sell them grain and meat. Joseph gave orders that provisions should be sold to all outsiders who were in dire need. (Verses 55-57.)

Jacob Sends His Sons for Food

Back in Canaan, Joseph's father, Jacob, was one of many worried by conditions. There was hardly any grass for his animals. Continued dry weather would mean they would die. There would soon be neither grain nor meat to eat.

Jacob had heard that Egypt had grain to sell, so he sent ten of his sons there to buy some. Because he had lost young Joseph years before by sending him on a trip, Jacob kept Benjamin, his youngest son, with him. (Gen.42:1-4.)

Taking camels and donkeys to carry back the loads they hoped to buy, the ten sons went down into Egypt to find that they would have to bring their request for grain to the governor, who was next in power to Pharaoh. When they came before the governor, they had no idea that he was the brother they had sold for a slave many years before.

Joseph knew them as soon as they came before him. When they bowed, he remembered having dreamed as a lad that his brothers were bowing to him. At last that prophetic dream had come true. (Verse 6.)

Joseph wanted to welcome them and tell them who he was. Instead, he decided to be harsh with them for their own good.

"You say you have come from Canaan to buy food. Why should I believe that?" he asked harshly. "I think you are spies! Probably you think that Egypt is weakening because of the famine, and you are here to check on our military strength!"

"We aren't spies, sir!" they quickly replied. "We are the sons of an elderly man who needs food. Our father had twelve sons. The youngest is with him. One is dead." (Verses 9-13.)

Joseph wanted to ask about Benjamin, but he had to remain stern.

"It might be wise to keep nine of you in prison and send one of you to bring back the brother and father you claim you have," he continued. "Then I might be convinced you aren't spies."

The ten brothers stood uncomfortably before Joseph while he kept frowning at them.

"On second thought," added Joseph, "I believe it would be better to put you all in prison to give you a chance to think matters over and decide to tell the truth."

"But we're telling the truth!" they called to Joseph as guards led them away. (Verse 17.)

Three Days Later

After three days Joseph had his brothers brought before him. They still insisted that they had come only to buy needed grain.

"You will get your grain," Joseph surprised them by saying. "However, one of you will stay here in prison until the young brother you speak of is brought to me!"

The brothers' faces fell. Each feared he would be the one to be jailed.

"This trouble has come on us because of what we did to Joseph," they murmured fearfully among themselves.

"I told you it was wrong to treat him the way you did!" Reuben spoke up. "Now we may pay for it."

All this talk between Joseph, who spoke in Egyptian, and his brothers, who spoke only in Hebrew, had been through an interpreter. (Verse 23.) Joseph still remembered his native tongue, and when he heard his brothers talking excitedly among themselves, he understood every word. He felt so sorry for them that he turned his head away and wept, even though they had treated him brutally in the past.

"The guards will take one of you back to prison," he said, controlling himself.

He looked slowly over the tense faces before him. His eyes settled on Simeon, the brother who had suggested killing him when he, Joseph, was only seventeen years old.

"Take that man to the dungeon!" Joseph snapped, pointing to Simeon. Guards swiftly bound the protesting Simeon and dragged him away. It was becoming plainer to the brothers that God was having a hand in their affairs.

"Leave now," Joseph told the remaining nine. "You will be told where to pick up your grain and how much to pay."

The Brothers Hurriedly Leave Egypt

Later, after the brothers had bought the grain and loaded it on their animals, they were relieved to depart. At dusk they stopped where the animals could be fed and sheltered for the

night. When one of the brothers opened his grain sack to feed his animal, he discovered a bag of coins that contained the exact amount he had paid for the sack of grain.

"It must be the money I paid for my part of the grain!" he exclaimed. "How did that get there?" "This is not good," one of the brothers said. "It could be a scheme to arrest you for not paying for the grain."

"They could arrest all of us if they could prove that one of us is a thief," said another. "God is dealing with us because of the wrong things we have done." (Verses 25-28.)

During the rest of the trip the brothers feared that Egyptian soldiers would overtake them, but they safely reached home in Canaan.

Jacob was happy at their return with the grain, but he was most unhappy to learn that Simeon was being held prisoner and that the governor of Egypt had demanded to see Benjamin.

Chapter 12

"I am Joseph"

WHEN Jacob's sons began taking the grain out of their sacks, each was shocked to find a bag of money there. It was the same amount each had paid the Egyptians. When Jacob learned about this, he was worried lest his sons be considered thieves and taken back to Egypt.

"I have already lost Joseph and Simeon," Jacob said. "Now you say I should send Benjamin to Egypt. I won't do that because I don't trust you to return him to me."

"Let me take Benjamin so that we may prove ourselves and rescue Simeon from prison," Reuben suggested. "If I don't return, you may have the lives of my two sons."

"Don't make foolish promises," said Jacob. "I don't intend to part with Benjamin. If anything should happen to him, I would die of sorrow."

The Famine Grows Worse

As months passed, famine conditions worsened. Like most others, Jacob didn't know that there would be seven years without enough rain to make crops possible. Every day he prayed for rain, and each day he looked for a weather change. God had a plan He intended to carry out in spite of prayers from His followers.

The food supply brought from Egypt became so low that Jacob had to tell his sons to go back to Egypt for more. (Gen.43:1-2.)

"There is no use returning for more grain unless we take along Benjamin," Judah respectfully told his father. "We were told by the governor that he wouldn't see us again unless we would bring our youngest brother to him." (Verse 3) "If you want grain, Benjamin will have to go along. If anything happens to him, I'll be responsible." (Verses 8-9)

"Then take him," Jacob finally agreed. "Take also some gifts for the Egyptian governor. My servants will prepare packages of honey, spices, ointments, perfumes and choice dates and nuts. Also take back the money that was returned to you in your sacks. Offer all these things to the governor. I pray that God will be with you, and that all of you will return safely with Simeon."

Once again Jacob's sons went to Egypt, and once again they stood before the governor, who was their brother. When Joseph saw that they had returned with Benjamin, he was very pleased. However, he had to keep from showing his feelings.

"Take these men to my house and have a very special meal prepared for them," he told his chief servant. (Verse 16.)

The servant escorted the ten sons to Joseph's quarters. They weren't sure why they had been brought to such a fine place. They began to wonder if they were there to receive some sort of punishment. Therefore they told Joseph's chief servant about their first trip to Egypt for grain, and how their money had mysteriously been returned to them. They explained to him that they wanted to give the money back, and that they had more money for buying more grain. (Verses 20-22)

"Don't worry about these things," the chief servant told them. "Make yourselves comfortable until my master comes."

Simeon Released from Prison

While the brothers waited, they were given the chance to bathe, and their animals were fed. Then, to their surprise, their brother Simeon, who had been a prisoner for about a year, was brought in to them. (Verse 23.)

At noon Joseph arrived at his home with some high-ranking Egyptians. The brothers bowed low to the governor, and humbly presented the gifts they had brought from Canaan. Joseph thanked them and asked about their father.

"Is this the brother you told me about?" Joseph asked, looking at Benjamin.

"It is," was the reply. "This is Benjamin. He should help prove that we didn't come to Egypt last year as spies."

Joseph was so glad to get a good look at Benjamin that he almost wept. He had to excuse himself and go to another room, where he broke into tears. He returned shortly. No one could know how he felt in standing before eleven brothers who weren't aware that he was their brother. (Verses 29-31.)

Food was brought in for all present. With so many good things to eat and drink before them, the brothers quickly forgot their fears and worries. Benjamin enjoyed the meal more than anyone. For one thing, he was served far more of everything. Besides, he received special dishes not served to the others, inasmuch as Joseph quietly had instructed his servants to give him special treatment. (Verse 34.)

Of course Benjamin didn't try to consume all that was set before him, but it increased his awe for the governor. He would have been more awed if he could have known that the governor was his brother!

Brothers Prepare to Return to Canann

Early next morning Jacob's sons set out for home with as much grain as their animals could carry. They were happy with the way matters had turned out. They couldn't know that something unpleasant was about to occur.

Toward noon they noticed a cloud of dust off to the southwest. As the cloud grew larger, they could make out that a band of men on horses was swiftly coming toward them. They were surprised when the leader of the band turned out to be the chief servant of Egypt's governor.

"Why have you treated your host, the governor, so badly?" the chief servant asked the brothers.

"What do you mean?" they asked. "

The governor's special silver cup is missing," was the answer. "That's the one he was using yesterday when you ate with him. He thinks one of you stole it!'

"We aren't thieves," the brothers exclaimed. "We brought back the money that was returned to us on our first trip to Egypt. Why should we steal now? Search us. If you find the cup in our belongings, we will become your servants. If one of us is hiding the cup, he shall die!" (Gen.44:4-9.)

They felt that it would be impossible for the cup to be found with them. None would have dared take such a valuable article from the powerful governor of Egypt.

"Let it be as you have said," agreed the chief servant, motioning his men to search the brothers' belongings.

To the unpleasant surprise of Jacob's sons, money for the grain was again found in the sacks. And the silver cup was found in Benjamin's sack! (Verse 12.)

In miserable silence the brothers packed their belongings back on their animals. Surrounded by their pursuers, they rode back to face the governor. When Joseph appeared, they fell down before him.

"What have you been trying to do?" Joseph sternly asked. "Obviously you don't know that I sometimes have the power to recognize evil intentions."

"What can we say?" asked Judah, the brother who told his father that he would surely look out for Benjamin. "There's no way of proving we aren't guilty, and we aren't. We've done some wicked things in our time, and if God wants to punish us by becoming your slaves, so be it." (Verse 16.)

"It needn't be that way," Joseph said. "I ask that only Benjamin become my servant. The rest of you may return to your father."

Perhaps some of the brothers thought that this was a fair way of settling matters. Judah didn't. He wanted to get the governor to set Benjamin free. He pointed out that his father had almost died of sorrow when he had lost a young son by the name of Joseph, and that his father was certain to die of sorrow if his youngest son, Benjamin, failed to return home.

Joseph was so moved by Judah's plea that he could no longer keep his feelings under control. Joseph had treated most of his brothers harshly because he wanted them to be painfully aware of their evil deeds. He had returned their grain money twice to keep them in a sober state of mind. He had servants put the silver cup in Benjamin's sack so that Benjamin would have to stay with him for at least a while. (Gen.44:1-2.)

Joseph Reveals Who He Is

Joseph was unable to continue acting the part of a stern ruler. He dismissed the Egyptian officials from his home so that he could be alone with his brothers (Gen. 45:1.)

"I am Joseph, your brother," he tearfully told them.

Instead of saying anything, his brothers only moved backward, staring in surprise and unbelief.

"Come near me," Joseph said. "Look at me closely, and you should recognize the young brother you sold to Arabian slave traders years ago." (Verse 4.)

His brothers continued staring in silence. Perhaps some of them remembered Joseph telling them of his dream of their bowing down to him.

"Don't be unhappy because of my reminding you of things you have done," Joseph said. "God caused these events. He opened the way for me to be taken to Egypt and gave me ability to see a part of the future. It was for the good of many people, including you and your father, that God directed me to prepare for a famine. Five years without harvest are yet to come, so I want you to return to our father and tell him what has happened and what is going to happen. Tell him that as governor of Egypt under Pharaoh, I want him and his family and his animals and all of you and your possessions to come down to Egypt to live while the famine lasts. If you don't, you will probably lose all that you have."

Joseph then embraced Benjamin and his other brothers. This caused them to lose their fear of this man they had regarded only as a stern governor of Egypt. They began to talk as only brothers talk among themselves. It turned out to be a happy time, especially because Joseph wanted to forgive them for wrong things most of them had done to him.

When Pharaoh heard about Joseph's brothers, he was anxious to be of some help because of his high regard for Joseph. He supplied carriages and animals to take back to Canaan for the more comfortable trip to Egypt by the women and children that would come from Canaan. He felt that those who weren't up to the discomfort of travel by swaying camels and jolting donkeys would be helped. To this Joseph added new clothing. To Benjamin he was particularly liberal by including money. To his father he sent ten donkeys loaded with food (Verses 22-23.)

Besides these things, Joseph's brothers took the grain they had been sent for.

"Have a safe trip back home," Joseph said. "Go straight to Canaan and return as soon as you can with our father." With this advice, the governor of Egypt sent his brothers away.

Chapter 13

Seven Years of Famine

SEVERAL years later Joseph's brothers arrived safely at their home in Canaan. When Jacob their father saw that eleven of them had returned safely, he was very happy.

"I thank God that you are back!" he exclaimed as he hurried to embrace them. "Now if only I could see your brother Joseph again!"

Joseph Is Alive

"You will!" one of the sons shouted excitedly. "Joseph is alive! We found him in Egypt!"

This remark startled Jacob, but it also saddened him more because he thought that the speaker was unwisely trying to cheer him up. When the other sons loudly echoed the news, and that Joseph had become the governor of Egypt under Pharaoh, Jacob had to believe them. He was so moved that he fainted with relief and joy.

Later, when he was shown the gifts and bags of grain from Egypt, and the carriages for his trip there, he was overjoyed at the prospect of going to see Joseph.

Jacob Journeys to Egypt

Before long Jacob, his sons, their families, servants and animals were moving southwestward. The carriages Pharaoh had sent made travel less difficult for small children and the elderly. Being one hundred and thirty years old, Jacob appreciated journeying in such awesome comfort.

At the same time he began to be concerned at remembering that God had forbidden his grandfather, Abraham, to go into Egypt. His worries about this ended when God told him in a vision that He meant Jacob to go there, and promised him a return to Canaan. (Gen.6:1-4.)

As soon as Joseph heard that his father's caravan had reached Egypt, he drove out in his chariot with some of his cavalymen to meet the visitors. The reunion of a fond father and long-lost son was a joyous one. Joseph felt that his life was so full that he didn't mind if it ended then. Happily, he was to live for several more eventful years.

Joseph Tells Pharaoh

"Pharaoh will want you to appear before him," Joseph told his father and brothers after informing the king that his family had arrived. "When he asks you what you do for a living, truthfully tell him that you tend cattle and sheep, even though most Egyptians regard animals as sacred, and don't like shepherds and drovers because they seldom think of animals as sacred."

Pharaoh at first asked five of Joseph's brothers to come before him. As Joseph had predicted, the king inquired about their occupations. When he learned that they dealt in cattle and sheep, he suggested to Joseph that they settle in the Egyptian area of Goshen. Joseph had hoped that

Pharaoh would do that. The best nearby pastures were in Goshen. Besides, there were fewer Egyptians there who would trouble outsiders who lacked the belief that animals should be worshiped.

Jacob later was brought to Pharaoh, who treated him with honor because of respect for Joseph. The king saw that all of Jacob's family were settled in the rich Nile River delta land, the section of Egypt nearest Canaan. "

Weeks passed, during which Joseph had the opportunity to occasionally visit his father and his brothers and their families. Meanwhile, the famine grew worse. Those who had lived too luxuriously during the seven good years were first to feel the shortage of food. Joseph sent word to all the nation that farm animals would be accepted by Pharaoh as payment for grain.

After the animals had been turned in, there was a period of less complaint. Before long, though, people were again begging for grain. The only way they could pay this time was to turn their land over to Pharaoh, who soon became the nation's wealthiest landlord. Most of the land that didn't belong to him was retained by priests of Egyptian pagan religions.

The food problem increased with each passing day, but Joseph believed that the end of the famine was near. When seven years of it were almost up, he started moving the people back to the farms they had left.

"Pharaoh now owns your land," he told them, "but he will give you seed for starting new crops. In return, you must give him a fifth of your harvest."

The people considered this fair, though not many felt certain that the famine was about to end. After the end of the seventh year, when rain returned and crops began to spring up in abundance, the Egyptians had even higher regard for Joseph.

Jacob lived seventeen years in Egypt. His children's families increased greatly in numbers. Because God had given Jacob the name of Israel, Jacob's descendants were called Israelites, a nation that developed inside Egypt.

Believing that his life was about over, Jacob sent for Joseph and his two young sons, Ephraim and Manasseh.

Jacob Adopts Joseph's Children As His Own

"God told me years ago that I would be the father of a great nation, and that those who live after me will be given the land of Canaan," Jacob told Joseph. "I want to adopt your sons as mine to make sure they remain part of our family instead of mixing with the Egyptians."

Joseph agreed. He brought his sons to where his father, who had become weak and partly blind, rested on his bed. He fondly hugged his grandsons, observing that it was a great blessing from God to live to see them. He sat up to pray for them, placing his left hand on Manasseh's head and his right hand on Ephraim's. Thinking that his father was too blind to see which boy was which, Joseph gently removed Jacob's left hand from Manasseh's head.

"It is the custom that the RIGHT hand be on the first-born," Joseph said. "Manasseh is the older."

"I realize I put my right hand on the head of the younger one," Jacob explained. "The greatest nation of the earth will come from Manasseh, but a commonwealth of nations will come from Ephraim."

Jacob then asked God to cause mighty nations to come from each of the boys. (Gen. 48:19.) Then, knowing that his death was near, he asked to see all his sons.

A Prophecy for Today!

Jacob was inspired by God in what he said, for he told each son a little of what each vast tribe would be like in the far future.

He had the most to say about Joseph, whom God said would spread out into the wealthiest nations in the world. Now, thousands of years later, we learn through the Bible that Joseph was the father of the English-speaking nations. When we read what is foretold to happen to Ephraim, we know that it means Great Britain. And when we read what is to happen to Manasseh, we know it means the United States of America. Only in recent years, just as He said He would do, has God let us understand these things.

Jacob died right after speaking to his sons. Joseph ordered Egyptian physicians to prepare his father's body for burial by an Egyptian method known as embalming. This took many days. Then followed a long period of mourning by the Egyptians.

At last Joseph and his brothers and their families, except their very young children, along with a great number of Egyptian officials, soldiers and servants, started off with Jacob's body for Canaan. It was a trip of three hundred miles, and therefore this must have been one of the greatest funeral processions in history. (Gen.50:7-13.)

This great ceremony for Jacob wasn't just because the Egyptians held Jacob in such high regard. It was mostly because they thought of his son, Joseph, as a national hero because he had saved their nation from starvation.

Jacob lived one hundred and forty-seven years. Some might have thought of him as a very plain, unimportant man. But he had a very necessary part in God's plan to bring into being the great nation of Israel, the nation God chose to help Him in a wonderful plan.

Chapter 14

Moses Flees Egypt

AFTER Jacob's eleven sons returned to their homes in Goshen, some of them began to worry that Joseph might yet deal harshly with them because of the way they had treated him when he was younger. They sent a message to him asking for his forgiveness. Joseph was moved by the message, but even more when they came to ask for his pardon. He assured them that he wanted only to help them, and that God had used them to get him into Egypt to help many people. (Gen.50:15-21.)

Joseph Dies

After governing Egypt for many years, Joseph died at the age of one hundred and ten. Before his death he told his brothers that God would some day take the Israelites back to Canaan. He asked that his body be taken back there. However, he remained in a coffin in Egypt for many years. (Verses 22-26.)

For the next two centuries, the Israelites in Egypt increased to two million, most of whom continued to live in the Nile delta area. (Exodus 1:6-7.) Several pharaohs ruled and died meanwhile. The next one mentioned in the Bible after Joseph's time hardly knew who Joseph was. (Verse 8.) He disliked the Israelites. He planned to prevent them from increasing by turning them to hard labor.

The Israelites Are Enslaved

By being promised good wages, the Israelites were drawn from their farms and pastures to construction jobs. Soon they realized that they were being maneuvered into forced labor. The Egyptians supposed that in these miserable circumstances the Israelites would decrease. Surprisingly, they increased even more.

"Work them harder!" Pharaoh ordered his taskmasters. "Work them till they drop! Use whips and sticks on them!"

Under increasingly harsh treatment, and divided into gangs to keep them under control, the Israelites became hopeless slaves to the Egyptians. They were herded over the land to dig long canal beds, line the banks of the Nile with stone and build fortresses and pyramids. Most of them slaved long hours making huge bricks from clay and straw. (Ex. 1:9-14.)

All this failed to decrease them. The cruel Pharaoh therefore decreed that all Hebrew midwives would be expected to kill baby boys born to the Israelites. Failure to obey was punishable by death. (Verses 15-16.) The midwives had no intention of committing murder. On hearing that they refused, Pharaoh angrily called them to come to him to explain why.

"Israelite women are stronger than Egyptian ones," they said. "They so seldom need our help that we never know about many births."

Pharaoh had intended to punish the midwives for their disobedience toward him, but because the midwives obeyed God, God caused him to change his mind. (Verses 17-21.) Pharaoh then

moved in another direction. He instructed his police and soldiers to watch for and seize newly-born male babies and throw them in the Nile. (Verse 22.)

There probably were babies who escaped this inhuman fate. Unhappily, most were drowned. The Israelites were filled with dismay. They longed to flee from Egypt, but they were too well guarded. They could see only a dismal future of servitude. There was no way of knowing that through one of those babies God was going to bring about a great change.

The Birth of Moses

At that time a boy was born to an Israelite couple living north of Pharaoh's palace near the Nile. They managed to hide the child from the police for three months. Then, because they knew the authorities were suspicious, they put the baby in a pitch-smearred basket and set him afloat in the river, trusting that God would cause someone to find him who would keep him safe. This was risky, they realized, but they reasoned that God had inspired their decision.

As God willed it, Pharaoh's daughter came to the river to bathe, and found the basket and its live cargo. (Ex. 2:5-6.) She was so impressed by the appearance of the infant, which she recognized as an Israelite, that she decided to try to keep it in her protection. At that point a little girl surprisingly appeared and courteously told the Egyptian princess that she knew of an Israelite nurse who could help. (Verse 7.)

Pharaoh's daughter approved, whereupon the girl raced off to the nearby home of her mother, who was also the Israelite boy's mother, to tell her what had happened. She was relieved at the turn of events, having sent her little daughter to try to find out what would happen to her floating baby. She quickly joined the princess, who asked her to take care of the baby for her for an indefinite time.

"While you have this child, don't worry about my father's police bothering you," she was told. "When I'm ready to keep the boy safely, I'll send for him."

Pharaoh's daughter sent servants to learn where the overjoyed woman lived. Her husband was suspicious of their presence, but when he later learned what had happened, he and his wife were thankful for God's intervention.

Several years passed. The beautiful baby grew into a handsome little boy. When at last Pharaoh's daughter's servants came for him, his parents grudgingly but promptly gave him up, admonishing him to carefully remember the laws of God he had been taught.

Moses Adopted by Pharaoh's Daughter

The Egyptian princess adopted the little lad and called him Moses. (Ex. 2:10.) Educated by the best instructors in the nation, he grew up to attain prominence and high rank in outstanding Egyptian pursuits. By the time he was forty years old, he became less interested in Egyptian matters and more concerned about the welfare of his mistreated Israelite kinsmen. Brutality by the Egyptians angered him increasingly.

In one case he intervened to try to save the life of an Israelite who was being beaten to death. As a result, the cruel Egyptian guard died, too. (Verses 11-12.) Moses later learned that the

fight had been seen by at least one Egyptian, and that Pharaoh's police would seek to arrest him for murder. (Verse 15.)

He managed to flee Egypt and escape to a mountainous region of the land of Midian to the east. The first people he had anything to do with were some young shepherdesses he befriended by helping them obtain water for their sheep. To show their appreciation to a person who obviously was a poor, wandering stranger, the young women took him to their father, an important man in that area.

Chapter 15

God Chooses Moses

Reuel father of the shepherdesses Moses had befriended, asked why his daughters were back home so early from their work. He was told that a stranger, an Egyptian, had drawn water for their flocks in return for something to drink.

"I would like to meet this man," Reuel said. "Invite him to eat with us."

It didn't take Reuel long to find that the stranger was intelligent and educated. He offered Moses work as a shepherd. He didn't expect him to accept, but Moses did, feeling that it was safer to stay there than continue traveling on roads where he might be recognized. In Reuel's out-the-way pastures, he would have the opportunity to think and put his thoughts into words. He liked the solitude, and he had long wanted to be a writer. He couldn't even imagine that his writings would become part of the world's most famous book, the Bible.

As time passed, Moses became very fond of Zipporah, one of Reuel's daughters. They were married and had two sons.

Meanwhile, back in Egypt, conditions were becoming worse for the Israelites. The pharaoh had died whose daughter had adopted Moses. The kings who succeeded him were even crueler. Suffering Israelites begged God to free them from the Egyptians. Soon God was to help them.

God Calls Moses

Moses had been in Midian about forty years when one day on a mountain he saw a strange sight. A bush was afire, and though it continued to burn like a torch, no part of it was burned up. As he approached the spectacle, Moses was startled by a strong voice from the bush.

"Don't come any closer, Moses!" he was told. "You are standing on holy ground. Remove your shoes and listen to what I, your God, have to say!" (Ex. 3:5-6.)

Moses was so awed that he hid his face with his jacket. When he heard what God had to say, he cringed and wanted to hide completely.

"I am going to deliver the suffering Israelites from the Egyptians," the voice continued. "I want you to go to Egypt and tell Pharaoh to let your people leave his country!"

"Why do you choose ME to do that?" Moses finally stammered. "Why would Pharaoh listen to a stranger like myself?"

Although God told him, that he should contact the king of Egypt and the leaders of Israel in a move to lead the Israelites to freedom, Moses couldn't believe that a sheep herder would be chosen for such a task. He was on the verge of arguing with God, who patiently repeated His request.

"Don't worry about your people leaving where they are in a state of poverty," God added. "I will cause the Egyptians to contribute liberally to them at their departure." (Exodus 3:21-22.)

God Shows His Power

When Moses asked how he could prove that he had been sent to help his people gain their freedom, God patiently, to Moses' horror, displayed how Moses could appear to perform startlingly gruesome miracles.

Despite this, Moses felt that he shouldn't be sent because he didn't speak Egyptian very well. Furthermore, he was far from an expert with his native language, Hebrew. When God reminded him that his Creator could give him the ability to speak well, Moses still thought that the task was too much for him.

Moses Tries to Run Away from God's Calling

"Please find someone else for such responsible work," he begged God.

God was still patient. He told Moses that He would send Aaron, his brother, to do most of the speaking for him. This was pleasing to Moses, who knew that Aaron was much more articulate. Nevertheless, Moses wanted to bring up a last excuse by reminding God that he, Moses, was wanted in Egypt for murder. God spoiled that final effort by informing him that the Egyptian authorities who had sought him had all died.

Moses returned home with his flocks to surprise his father-in-law with the news that he planned to return to Egypt to visit his relatives. Just before he left with his family, he was warned by a message from God that Pharaoh would at first refuse to free the Israelites. He was told that if Pharaoh continued to refuse, God would bring some terrible things on the Egyptians, including taking the life of the Egyptian king's first-born son. (Ex. 4:23.)

On burros, Moses and his family set out for Egypt northward along the east side of the Red Sea. Before they had gone very far, Zipporah became angry with Moses because of a family matter. Moses sent his wife and sons back home. Quite likely God caused this to happen so that Moses could better apply himself to what he was to do in Egypt.

About the same time, in Egypt, Moses' brother, Aaron, was told by an angel to go down the east side of the Red Sea, and that he would meet the brother who had been missing for forty years. The brothers were thus brought together for a happy reunion. Moses told Aaron what God expected them to do. Together they went to Goshen, where most of the Israelite leaders lived. There Aaron gathered them together to explain what God, through Moses, intended to do. Most of the leaders were excited and pleased. A few started to cause trouble.

Chapter 16

Moses and Aaron Meet Pharaoh

"WHAT proof do you have that God sent you to lead us out of Egypt?" some of the chief Israelites demanded of Moses and Aaron.

"We want to get out of here!" one spoke out loudly. "But we want to choose a leader instead of accepting just anyone who claims he has been sent by God!"

Encouraged by this kind of talk, other skeptics added their opinions. Aaron held up his hands for silence.

God Performs Miracles Through Moses

"God expects some to fail to recognize His servants," Aaron told them. "He has given my brother the ability to do unusual things so that you can see for yourselves God working through him."

Aaron motioned to Moses, who stepped up and held out his shepherd's rod and tossed it to the ground before all. The instant it touched the soil, gasps of alarm came from the onlookers. They fell back, staring. The rod had turned into a long, coiling, hissing snake!

To the astonishment of all except Aaron, Moses walked up to the snake and seized it by its tail. It wiggled furiously, then became rigid as it turned back into the lifeless shepherd's rod. The Israelite chiefs murmured among themselves in a tone that suddenly was different. In the silence that followed, Moses held up his right hand for all to see that it was a normal hand. After thrusting it inside his jacket, he withdrew it to display a white, leprous, decayed hand. There were expressions of horror, especially from those uncomfortably close at hand. Moses then again concealed his hand, and pulled it into sight to show that it had instantly returned to normal.

"No one could do these things without the power of God," some muttered.

"Not necessarily," said one. "Haven't you heard about the powers of Pharaoh's magicians?"

Ignoring the remark, Aaron called men to bring in a large jar of water. He announced that it was from the Nile, and invited onlookers to examine and taste it. A few did.

The Doubters Convinced

When the examination was over, Moses motioned for the helpers to tip the huge jar over. Many gallons of clear water surged across the ground, wetting the sandals of those who were nearby. At the same time Moses waved his shepherd's rod over it. The onlookers were startled to see the sparkling liquid curdling into a red mass.

"Blood!" someone shouted, trying to leap out of the thickening puddle. "It's turned to blood!"

After the expressions of horror had died down, someone began to speak out to thank God for sending men to help lead their people out of their misery. The others bowed their heads and silently joined in the prayer. (Ex. 4:31.)

Moses and Aaron were thankful that these men accepted them. Later, they and some of the leaders went to the Egyptian city of Memphis to appeal before the king.

"If these Israelites are here to ask a favor," Pharaoh told his aides, "they will receive none from me."

"We come in the name of the God of Israel," Aaron declared to Pharaoh when the Israelites were admitted. "Our God has told us to tell you to let our people go to the desert to worship Him."

There was a cold silence in the court, broken at first by faint giggling from Egyptian women who were the king's guests for the day. Pharaoh leaned forward from his elevated chair and frowned curiously down on Aaron.

"I don't know your God," he muttered. "Whoever He is, He isn't going to cause me to let the Israelites leave!" (Ex. 5:2.)

"We must obey our God," Aaron patiently went on. "All He wants is that we be given three days in the desert. If we don't go, we might be punished." (Verse 3.)

"I'm aware that you two are scheming to sneak your people out of Egypt!" Pharaoh snapped, glancing darkly at Moses and Aaron. "Go back and warn them not to let up on their work!"

Guards herded the Israelites out of the room while amused guests laughed. Pushed along with Aaron, Moses was discouraged because he was so helpless.

Pharaoh Oppresses the People

The more the king thought about the Israelite leaders coming to him for a favor, the angrier he became. He sent orders to his labor gang officers to work the Israelites even longer hours. (Ex. 5:6-9.) The Israelites were slaving on many projects, but probably the brick makers were most seriously affected by the new orders, which required them to walk long distances to widely scattered fields to gather the straw that was necessary in making bricks. (Verses 10-13.)

Production became so difficult that the laborers fell behind in their tasks. Egyptian officers, fearing Pharaoh's wrath, began to beat the Israelite foremen, whom they expected to beat the workers into greater production. (Verse 14.) Instead, the Israelite officers sent men to Pharaoh to complain about matters. They managed to be heard, but Pharaoh took the opportunity to express himself.

"You Israelites are lazy!" he stormed. "You beg for time off to worship your God! That's a ridiculous excuse! Get back to work! And remember my new orders!" (Verses 15-19.)

The Israelite officers glumly left the palace. Moses and Aaron were outside, anxious to learn what had happened. The officers regarded them without friendliness, muttering as they strode past that it had been a grave mistake to anger Pharaoh by telling him that God required their presence in the desert.

Moses Prays for Help

Moses was discouraged again, and unhappy that God had expected him and Aaron to ask a favor of Pharaoh. As soon as he was alone, he complained to God for allowing the Israelites to fall into greater misery. (Verses 20-23.)

"You will see that after I deal with the king, he will be ANXIOUS to get rid of Israel," God assured Moses. "Remember that I am your Creator the One Who made promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Tell your people that I haven't forgotten my promises to them. I will cause great things to occur, and will bring them into the land I told them I would give them." (Ex. 6:6-7.)

Heartened by these words, Moses and Aaron went to encourage their people. Unfortunately, the laborers were so miserable that they weren't inclined to listen. (Verse 9.) Not long afterward, while Moses was trying to weather this repeated stress, God again told him to return to Pharaoh to ask for the release of his countrymen. Moses' reaction was to tell God that it would be futile to try to help people who didn't seem to be interested. God firmly reminded him that he and Aaron had the responsibility, and that it had to be done. (Verse 13.)

Pharaoh Again!

"You claim that your God has sent you to demand your countrymen's release," Pharaoh smugly repeated when the two Israelites came to him. "How can you prove that? What powers can your God show?"

Intending to amuse his court guests, the king settled back in his chair to enjoy the discomfort he expected Moses and Aaron to show. Moses glanced around at the grinning faces. Then he tossed his shepherd's rod to Aaron, who threw it on the thickly-carpeted floor in front of the king. There were sudden expressions of alarm. Grins faded. Pharaoh's bearded chin sagged. His narrowed eyes widened as he stared down.

As it had done before, the rod had turned to a large, wriggling serpent! (Ex. 7:8-10.)

Pharaoh straightened up and stared at the creature. He gestured impatiently to an aide, who approached nervously to listen to the king's hasty instructions and quickly leave. Minutes dragged as people gazed uneasily at the coiling, tongue-darting snake. Finally the aide returned to whisper something to Pharaoh.

Egyptian Magicians Appear

"Your display was clever," the king said to Moses and Aaron, "but now you will learn that I have men who are cleverer and can display more power."

From behind curtains several richly-robed men appeared, each carrying what appeared to be a shepherd's rod. They lined up a little way from the king, dramatically brandishing the sticks, then throwing them in unison to the floor. Every stick, to the surprise of Moses and Aaron, turned into a live snake!

"My magicians have just sure passed the power of your God!" Pharaoh boasted, leering triumphantly at the Israelites.

Applause and shouts of praise came from the court audience. Under the king's amused stare, Moses bent down to pick up his snake so that it would turn back into his rod. But the snake wouldn't hold still to be picked up. It slithered away toward the other snakes. It was then that the applause abruptly ceased. Pharaoh's smirk dissolved to an expression of disbelief. Moses' snake was hastily gulping down the magicians' snakes! (Verse 12.)

This was too much for the onlookers, especially the magicians. As Moses snatched up his gorged snake, which turned back into a shepherd's rod, they scrambled out of sight. Even Pharaoh tried to exit nonchalantly.

"We have showed you the proof you wanted!" Aaron called out. "Now will you let our people go?"

"Pharaoh whirled and glowered coldly at the two Israelites, whom he had suddenly come to dislike more than ever. For a moment it appeared that he was about to give in.

"I will," he muttered, "do no such thing!" and strode away. (Verse 13.)

Chapter 17

The Plagues of Egypt

ALTHOUGH Moses and Aaron were again disappointed, they felt that Pharaoh was beginning to take them seriously. Fearing that they would have no success in getting into the king's palace soon, they welcomed God's information that Pharaoh could be reached at his bathing pool, and how they should get there and what they should say.

One morning when Pharaoh was slipping into his tiled pool built in a bank of the Nile, he was startled to hear a familiar voice from the foliage bordering his pool. He looked up with curious dismay to see Moses and Aaron. Guards moved swiftly toward the two Israelites, but the king held up a restraining hand.

"Wait!" he commanded. "I want to know what kind of show this couple has in mind for me this time."

Aaron leaped at the opportunity, relating what God had told Moses.

"We have come to warn you that because you have refused to let our people go," Aaron said, "our God will turn this river into blood! The water creatures in it will die. It will be undrinkable. People will turn ill because of the horrible stench." (Ex. 7:15-18.)

"I would have been disappointed if you fellows had come with less exciting news," Pharaoh quipped, idly splashing water over himself. "The Nile is a mighty stream. It worries me to think of what to do with that much blood."

As the Egyptian guards and servants roared with laughter, Aaron lifted Moses' rod at arm's length. This gesture sobered the Egyptians. They were sobered further at a shout of alarm from Pharaoh's robe bearer.

"The water is turning red!" he yelled.

Standing waist deep in the pool, Pharaoh glanced down to see that the water had lost its clarity and was growing redder by the second. He had a sudden desire to leap out of it, which he did in an undignified manner. The perturbed robe bearer thrust the robe over his master to hide the ugly crimson streaks, but there was no concealing the thick, red puddle in which the king uncomfortably wiggled his toes. (Ex. 7:20.)

"Call my magicians!" the king commanded. "Tell them what has happened!"

There was a wait for them to arrive and prove that they had power equal to what the Israelite God had shown through His followers. From his bathhouse Pharaoh gazed apprehensively across the reddened Nile flowing to the north, spotted with the white bellies of dead fish. The results of the power of the Israelites' God showed plainly, but the king didn't want to allow himself to believe what he saw.

At last the magicians appeared with servants bearing huge casks. These were opened in front of all to reveal many gallons of clear water. This was poured out on the ground while the magicians waved their arms and uttered strange words.

Before it could soak into the soil, it turned blood red! (Ex. 7:22.)

"There is no miracle your God can perform that my magicians can't perform," Pharaoh said to Moses and Aaron. "Of course you had the advantage. My men could hardly turn the river into blood when it already appeared that way!"

Hoping that Moses and Aaron had been impressed by this comparatively weak display, the king walked away as he struggled to maintain his dignity. (Verse 23.)

Seven Days Without Water

The whole nation of Egypt soon was in misery. Water was the life of that arid land. Even the canals, pools and ponds had become blood, which wasn't good even for fertilizer because it was too stenchy to use.

There was a frantic struggle for drinking water for people and livestock. Only in Goshen, where most of the Israelites lived, were there some wells with clear water. Getting it from there or sources outside Egypt was too great a task to serve the whole country. Even many Israelite slaves suffered, though they had the advantage of work stoppages.

Pharaoh and his family were supplied with fresh water at the cost of increased suffering by many servants. What mattered most was the welfare and lives of most of the Egyptians. Realizing that he could lose a nation to rule, Pharaoh decided less than a week later that he would have to contact Moses and Aaron. The discomfort, the shortage of water and the complaining of people were too much for him.

On the eighth day after the Nile had turned to blood, excited servants informed the king that the river and other bodies of water had miraculously returned to normal. There was great rejoicing in Egypt. Pharaoh was relieved that he would be spared asking Moses and Aaron for help, or even to see them. He was quite angry when he learned they had come to see HIM.

Moses and Aaron Return

Hoping the two Israelites had come to tell him they had given up their desire to take their people into the desert, Pharaoh nodded for his guards to admit the visitors.

"Spare me your old story of asking three days off work for your countrymen!" the king almost shouted as Moses and Aaron walked toward him.

"We have come to warn you that if you refuse to let our people go, God will bring millions of frogs into this country!" Aaron answered. "They will swarm into your kitchens, your beds and wherever you stand, sit or lie!" (Ex. 8:1-4.)

"Go tell your God that He can't do more than my magicians can do!" Pharaoh scowled. "I'm not frightened by your tiresome threats!"

The king was worried. He knew his magicians had failed miserably in trying to outperform Israel's God. He would have been much more concerned if he could have foreseen what would happen next morning, when he was awakened very early by the screams of women servants. As he turned over for more sleep, he felt something crawling on his face. He jerked to a sitting position to see in the dim light of early dawn many small frogs hopping and crawling over his bed covers! (Verses 5-6.)

Angered because his servants would allow such desecration of his quarters, he leaped out of bed to plant his warm feet on a slithery carpet of cold frogs swarming on the floor. He slipped and slid to the door just in time to collide with embarrassed servants struggling to sweep piles of frogs away from his bedroom door.

"Forgive us, sire!" they stuttered. "These creatures are coming from the river in great hordes!"

The king shuddered. He remembered Aaron's prediction, uttered only the day before. He stared almost unbelievably down on the masses of frogs, alive and dead, that matted the costly carpet of his sleeping chambers.

Pharaoh's Breakfast

Later, when trays of food were brought to the royal dining table, the king resolved he wouldn't let the irksome state of affairs spoil his appetite, and dived into a bowl of food. Suddenly he stopped eating. Tiny green frogs were mixed in with what he had been contentedly chewing! His dining had suddenly ended.

During the next days, the discomfort of the Egyptians increased with the frogs. Again, in a weak attempt to prove that the God of Israel wasn't the only deity who could perform miracles, Pharaoh called on his magicians to display their pagan god-given powers. When they produced frogs, seemingly out of nothing, Pharaoh suddenly decided he had seen enough of such creatures, and that he would be more pleased in seeing them disappear. He called for Moses and Aaron.

"I am weary of gazing at frogs," he admitted to the two Israelites. "If your God will stop them coming out of the river, your countrymen will be free to go to the desert to worship Him!" (Ex. 8:8.)

Elated and thankful, Moses and Aaron promised the invasion of the reptiles would cease next day. Moses at once went to entreat God to stop the plague. Next day the frogs ceased coming out of the river. Then began the massive task of burning or burying the tons of dried and rotted flesh. Days passed. Moses expected the foremen of the Israelite workers would be instructed to tell the laborers the time had come finally to leave, but this didn't happen. Moses and Aaron went to ask the king why he hadn't done as he had said he would.

"I intended to let the workers off," Pharaoh casually and callously explained. "Then I realized that I needed so many of them to help get rid of the dead frogs."

Chapter 18

The Plagues Continue

GOD later contacted an angry Moses to tell him to tell Aaron to strike the ground with the shepherd's rod. Even the Israelites, who realized God's power was limitless, were awed at what happened. The dust particles of the soil began to move about as though alive, which they had become, having turned into tiny lice-like insects that flew away to afflict the Egyptians and their animals with painful bites and stings!

While many of the Egyptians were still occupied with getting rid of the frogs, they were attacked by this new plague of blood-sucking creatures. The air was so full of them that it was almost impossible to breathe without inhaling them. Human and animal hair became matted with the crawling masses.

Servants tried almost vainly to protect the king and his family, while requests poured in to the palace begging Pharaoh to yield to the requests of Moses and Aaron. By now the Egyptians were becoming aware of what was going on. They were increasingly fearful of the power that was causing so much woe.

"They are only tricks of the Israelites," Pharaoh kept saying hopefully. "My magicians have as much power through greater gods. Our patience will win."

But this time the magicians utterly failed to produce the horrible little insects. The head magician could only grovel before the king and admit he considered the Israelites' God too powerful to admit of any competition. (Ex. 8:19)

Pharaoh's anger was exceeded only by his desire to be free of the insects. He tried to do that by a dip in his Nile pool, where he was dismayed to find Moses and Aaron. He wanted to have the two arrested, but he feared what their God might do.

"We have come to tell you that if you refuse to let our people go right away, tomorrow your country will be overrun by swarms of larger insects!" Aaron told him. "Only Goshen, where most of the Israelites live, will be spared."

"Then I should simply move to Goshen!" Pharaoh sneered through his insect netting, and strode on toward the river.

Next day the Egyptians noticed the insects were dying. They brushed the creatures from their hair and clothing as much as they could. Hoping the trouble was almost over, Pharaoh was scornfully jubilant.

"I knew this pagan evil would end!" he boasted. "Only I had the wisdom of our gods to see how it would turn out!"

There were moments of reverential silence in the royal court as the king disdainfully brushed some dead insects from his beard. The quiet was broken by servants rushing in to loudly announce that clouds of larger insects were settling over the city. (Verse 24.)

Before long the Egyptians were victims of deep-biting flies giving more misery than the lice. Normal activities came to a halt in the struggle to try to avoid this new plague. It brought such misery that Pharaoh's advisors entreated him to take any action to try to spare the people.

Pharaoh Weakens

"Send for Moses and Aaron," Pharaoh finally said resignedly.

When Moses and Aaron showed up, the king was quite fretful because of the course of matters. He became even more so when he noted the two Israelites showed no signs of insect bites.

"Why does your God allow these cruel things to come on my people?" he demanded to know. "If He is an intelligent God, He should know I am willing to let your countrymen make their sacrifices to Him. I've never denied them that favor."

"Our rites require that we get away from your people," Aaron pointed out. "They would be so offended by our ways of worship they would probably shower us with stones."

"Then go!" Pharaoh snapped. "Just don't go too far or stay too long, or you could die in the hot, dry desert! But first ask your God to take away these flies!"

"We'll do that," Moses said. "But remember your promise to let the Israelites go. Don't deceive us as you did before." (Verse 29.)

Moses asked God to remove the flies. That night a strong wind scoured the land. By morning the insects had been swept away, but they had been so voracious they had brought much death, sickness and destruction. Pharaoh realized Egypt couldn't afford another such catastrophe, but he regretted having promised to let the Israelites go.

Pharaoh Breaks His Promise Again

As might be expected, he sent a message to Moses reminding him his promise to let the Israelites go was made during a time of great mental and physical stress, and shouldn't be considered binding. (Verse 32) Moses was very upset by such perfidy, and therefore welcomed God's instructions to him and Aaron to warn the king of an even worse plague to come to Egypt the next day. (Ex. 9:1-3.)

"You keep on relaying threats from your God," Pharaoh loftily observed. "He has yet to bring any woes unendurable to me!"

The fifth plague struck before most of the Egyptians knew what was happening. Within hours the land was strewn with dead cattle, horses, sheep, goats, camels and donkeys. A sudden, fatal sickness to animals wiped out Egyptian livestock. Meanwhile, animals belonging to the Israelites were untouched. (Verse 6)

This was also a serious religious blow to the Egyptians, to whom many kinds of animals were sacred. It was difficult for them to understand why their idols would allow death to come to the animals from which the idols had been copied.

Even through this tremendous loss to his people, Pharaoh remained stubbornly unbending. Perhaps he was less moved by this last plague because personal suffering wasn't as intense as it had been in former ones. Furthermore, he seemed even more intent on keeping the Israelites as a powerful working force to build Egypt up to the world's top nation in construction of public works and wonders. He had visions of a super-glorious country, but if he could have foreseen what his stubbornness would bring, he would have had a much humbler attitude.

Chapter 19

The Worst Weather Ever!

PHARAOH had just started on a tour to view the livestock damage outside the city, when he was advised to turn back because an especially strong wind was driving the sand. At the same time the king saw two unwelcome but familiar figures carrying a large leather bag, standing on the palace steps.

Moses and Aaron Reappear

"What do you have there?" the curious and unfriendly king called out to the Israelites.

Moses and Aaron came closer to reveal the contents of the bag.

"Ashes!" Pharaoh snorted. "How ridiculous!"

"Are they?" Aaron queried. "Would it mean anything to you that they are from the brick-drying kilns where our people have slaved so long?"

Without more words, Moses and Aaron dipped their hands into the bag and flung the tiny particles into the rising wind.

Boils!

Almost at once people living around Memphis, Egypt, broke out with painful boil-like blisters and sores. Minutes later those in more distant areas were overtaken with the same thing. Within hours all Egyptians became victims of the painful skin eruptions. The Israelites were the only ones in Egypt not afflicted. Even Pharaoh's magicians weren't spared, though the king futilely hoped they could help. The Bible account of this plague was the last time the magicians were mentioned. (Ex. 9-11.)

When Pharaoh, who was among the first victims, recalled how the two Israelites had tossed the fine ashes into the wind, he realized that each ash particle touching skin obviously produced a skin eruption, of which he had his share. To worsen matters, much of the livestock rushed into Egypt to help replace some of the losses of animals during the last plague was downed by the skin affliction.

Because this was the kind of plague that pained the king both physically and appearance-wise, Pharaoh didn't delay for long an appeal for help to Moses and Aaron. He sent a messenger -- obviously one who didn't have boils on his feet -- to ask the two Israelites to come to the palace. Pharaoh didn't want to see them, but he needed relief. Besides, he was curious to learn what was going to happen after his next refusal to let the Israelites go. He didn't have to wait long, though the wait was painful.

"I know! I know! You are about to warn me of a new plague!" he growled as Moses and Aaron appeared. "But first get rid of this one!"

"Instead of mocking, you should be giving thanks that you're not dead," Aaron advised him as Moses nodded in agreement. "Our God has spared you only to continue letting you witness

His great power. If you still refuse to let our people go, a terrible hailstorm will come on Egypt tomorrow, making your boils even more agonizing!" (Ex. 9-19.)

"Hailstorms have occurred in Egypt before," the king observed, trying to appear painless as he tormentedly shifted his weight in his chair. "Small ice particles falling, surely will be endurable. Meanwhile, no Israelite has my permission to leave!"

Moses and Aaron weren't the only ones to hastily leave Pharaoh's court. Some of the Egyptians who had heard of the hailstorms to come were fearful of them, and hurried to try to get their property under cover. They warned friends to do likewise, and to seek shelter for themselves.

Hailstorm and Lightning

Later, on God's orders, Moses pointed his shepherd's rod toward a sky already darkening. Strong drafts of wind set the clouds boiling. Lightning flashed and shimmered through them. The roar and rumble of thunder threw the Egyptians into panic. Those in the open began to race for shelter from the expected down-pouring of heavy rain.

But instead of rain came awesome bolts of fire. It cracked against the ground and hissed and sizzled off in all directions, scorching people, animals, shrubs, crops (except those still in the seed stage) and buildings. This was followed by huge hailstones smashing down on everything and snuffing out the lives of the unprotected. Only in the Goshen area of Egypt was there no lightning and hail.

In the smoking, rattling shelter of his palace Pharaoh shakily turned from a window to confront pale-faced Egyptian officials and servants. The accusing stares, the roaring bombardment, the vivid flashes of fire, the hideous rumble of thunder and the cries of people and animals in pain finally prevailed over the king's stubborn desire to hold the Israelites.

"Somebody must go after Moses and Aaron!" he shouted above the din, though he knew that anyone he sent probably couldn't survive the storm.

Almost miraculously the two Israelites shortly appeared, obviously protected by God from the frightful forces on their way to the palace. Pharaoh eagerly strode forward to meet them.

Pharaoh Weakens

"I and my people have been wrong!" the king exclaimed, generously sharing the blame. "Beg your God to stop this horrible storm! Your people will be free to leave Egypt at once!"

This was a far different Pharaoh from the one who had defied God a few hours before. Moses and Aaron could hardly believe that he had changed that much, but they were encouraged. Moses assured the king that the storm would cease after God had been asked to stop it, which Moses knew should be done without the presence of an Egyptian audience.

Pharaoh and his people were greatly relieved when the roar of fire and hail came to a halt. But as usual, as soon as matters improved, the king's stubbornness and hostility began to revive. Even while the dead were being carried away for burial, Pharaoh was deciding to do nothing to help the Israelites leave -- which was according to God's plan.

Hours and days passed. Because of no word from the king, Moses and Aaron went to him to give him another warning from God.

"You have broken your word again," he was reminded as he sourly regarded the two Israelites. "Unless you give the word for our people to leave right away, another misery will come to your land tomorrow."

As soon as Moses and Aaron had gone, Pharaoh's advisers crowded in to complain that the nation couldn't survive another plague. They were surprised to hear Pharaoh say that if they felt so strongly about the matter, they should see that Moses and Aaron would be brought back. Moses and Aaron were also surprised to be escorted back. Pharaoh then asked them how many of their people were expected to leave. He hoped only the women and children would have to go, so that he could keep the men working.

"All of us and our animals are to go," Moses answered.

"Then go!" Pharaoh exploded, angered by the reply. "But you'll regret leaving! You'll soon wish you had stayed in Egypt!"

Pharaoh was so enraged he had the two hustled out of his presence. Once they were in private, Moses pointed his shepherd's rod to the sky and asked God to bring another plague to Egypt. Immediately a wind sprang up. It increased in intensity as the night progressed.

Chapter 20

Two More Plagues on Egypt

NEXT morning the troubled king of Egypt arose early to observe a strangely murky sky. When he parted the curtains to get a better look, he knew that another woe had started. Huge black and red locusts were streaming by. Many of them were attaching themselves to the outside of the window and crawling inside!

Locust Plague Descends

Pharaoh backed away from the window, staring wildly as the huge insects pounced on the flower plants in a long planter box in the open side of the room. Within seconds they gnawed the plants down to the soil, then hopped, fluttered and buzzed desperately about searching for something else to devour. Suddenly the palace was in a furor. Servants and guards swatted and pounded frantically at the invaders, which by their awesomely increasing numbers were impossible to overcome. They crawled over each other in a horrid, squirming blanket several inches deep in places. They didn't bite people or animals, but it was a ghastly feeling to be crawled on and almost smothered by the sea of squirming, buzzing insects, which were well on their way to destroy the grass, trees, shrubs and plants of the country except in Goshen. (Ex. 10:15.)

Meanwhile, advisers rushed to Pharaoh to beg him to try to put a quick end to the terrible destruction of vital growing things. They claimed he had gone too far in opposing the Israelite God, and there would soon be no worthwhile country for him to rule. Pharaoh knew they were right. Besides, he was becoming nauseated from mashing so many locusts.

"Send for the two Israelites!" he muttered sickly.

When Moses and Aaron arrived, Pharaoh again expressed his regret for acting as he had, and humbly asked them to entreat God for deliverance from this unnerving situation. (Verses 16 and 17) The two Israelites silently regarded the unhappy ruler and left, leaving him and his advisers and servants swatting at locusts in uncertain despair.

Shortly after Moses had asked God to stop the plague, a strong west wind came up over Egypt. It grew so intense people began to fear it would be almost as damaging as the insects. However, it did no more than blow the locusts eastward into the Red Sea, where they were drowned. (Verse 19)

After the locusts had disappeared and the wind had died down, Pharaoh went to his outer court gardens to view the damage. The shrubless sight of what had been his horticultural pride caused him such anger he decided he would hold the Israelites after all. He sent a courier to Moses with the defiant statement that the Israelites had to continue with their work. When Moses received the message, he knew the Egyptians were in for more misery.

Plague of Darkness

That same day the distressed Egyptians were puzzled to note a strange gloom filling the sky. It increased alarmingly until the darkness of night prevailed in the middle of the day. That

was frightening enough, but the darkness turned to utter blackness of such a strange quality that only the strongest torches could partly penetrate it. (Verse 22) Almost all usual activity came to a stop. People stayed in their homes and beds as much as possible to avoid accidents in the intense blackness. As time for dawn approached, there were hopes that light would come, but the depressing dark continued. There was daylight in Egypt only in the land of Goshen. (Verse 23)

Three days of these maddening conditions were three days too many, especially to Pharaoh, who had to keep surrounded by air-polluting clusters of torches to maintain his sanity. He managed to contact Moses and Aaron, whom he anxiously assured the Israelites could leave if daylight were restored. However, he forbade them to take any of their flocks of sheep and goats or herds of cattle. (Verse 24) Moses pointed out that all the animals would have to be taken because such had to be used in sacrifices to God. This angered Pharaoh. He and the Egyptians were badly in need of meat. Besides, he believed that the Israelites couldn't survive without animals to eat, and would be forced to return to slavery in Egypt.

"Unless you leave the livestock, you won't get to leave!" Pharaoh stormed. "I am weary of your demands! Get out of my palace! If I see you two here again, I'll have you killed!"

"You won't see us again!" Moses agreed. "This is the last time we'll be around to listen to you ask us to call off a plague!"

As the two Israelites departed, Pharaoh was elated to see daylight beginning to show in the sky. The ninth plague was ending! It was a wonderful relief to have light from the sun again, but at the same time the king was miserably uneasy at the thought of any new plague that would come. He had just cut himself off from the opportunity of asking Moses and Aaron for any help from God.

Chapter 21

The Exodus Begins

THE ruler of Egypt would have been much more troubled if he could have known about the woes to come shortly. God instructed His people through Moses to ask their Egyptian neighbors to pay for the many services the friendly Israelites had provided them over the years. Most Egyptians were generous in this matter. They freely gave of their jewels, gold and silver. Their liberality reflected the esteem with which they regarded Moses, who was remembered for his former days as a high-ranking Egyptian officer and later respected for his sensible dealings in behalf of his people.

Israel Observes the Passover

Gathering some wealth was only a small part of preparations to leave. Pharaoh yet had to be in favor of it. Moses relayed God's remarks about what to do. On the tenth day of that first month, named Abib (Ex. 12:3), every family was to pick a healthy lamb to be roasted so that it could be eaten on the fourteenth day. When it was killed, its blood was to be smeared on the doors of the Israelites' residences to protect the firstborn males from the death angel God would send to take the lives of all Egyptian firstborn males. This was to be the tenth plague.

"Henceforth the fourteenth day of this month will be known as the Passover," God told Moses. "It will show My mercy toward the people I have chosen to carry out a plan I have for people on Earth. It will prove to the Egyptians that I am the all-powerful God."

God explained further that Passover would become a memorial to be observed forever. On the fifteenth day they were to observe an annual Sabbath. Also, no leavening was to be in their homes for a week.

"The last day of that week shall be another holy day for you," God continued. "On that twenty-first day you shall do no work except prepare food." (Verses 15-20)

God went on to explain that leavening symbolized sin, and abstaining from it was like being free of idol-worshipping Egypt. (Ex. 13:3-10.) He made it plain that anyone, Israelite or not, who used leavening during the time of unleavened bread, would not be allowed to go with the chosen people to freedom in a land prepared for them.

On learning these things, the Israelites prepared for the holy days to come. Thousands of families prepared the lambs. If they didn't have lambs, they were allowed to use young goats. Their homes were marked with blood for the Passover. As the fourteenth day of the month began, they were dressed for sudden travel, as instructed, and then hastily ate their dinners of meat and vegetables.

What the Passover Represents

God's Son, often spoken of as the Lamb of God, was also slain as a sacrifice on the Passover many hundreds of years later. And as God had made the weekly Sabbath a holy day, He did the same now for the annual Sabbaths. These holy times were and are signs between God and the people chosen to carry out His plans.

For centuries there have been disobedient kings, priests, ministers, politicians, dictators and other leaders who have sought to change or blot out the days made special by their Creator. Many have succeeded in misleading people by convincing them that it isn't necessary to obey God in these matters.

Most people today don't know what the Passover is. Some think it is some kind of Jewish custom that developed into an Easter service. What these people don't know is that the Jews, as a separate nation, didn't come on the scene in the Bible until long after the Passover started. The first scriptural reference to the Jews speaks of them being at war with their brother nation Israel. (II Kings 16:6.)

The word Easter was never written in the original text of the Bible, but is incorrectly found in some old English translations. Translators felt or were told long ago that Passover should be connected with pagan worship of the ancient Germanic goddess of spring, Oester.

Jesus' Example

Obedient Christians follow Christ's example by observing the date of the first Passover on that same date Christ was killed. They eat broken, unleavened bread, which stands for the sinless body of Christ, broken by whipping. Wine is used as a symbol of His blood, spilled so our sins would be blotted out.

God gives understanding to those who seek to please Him. Gradually He opens their minds to grasp special knowledge and wisdom. They learn how important and rewarding it is to observe God's sacred times and customs. His plan for a wonderful future will then be more plainly revealed to them.

One would think that that plan would be taught in most churches that claim they are Christian, but it isn't. The fact that it isn't fits into God's way of working. Of the more than 6 billion people in this world, only a few thousand know how God is using them to help prepare much of humanity for glorious things to come.

God Again Punishes Egypt

During the night of the Passover, the Israelites stayed in their homes behind blood-marked doors. (Ex. 12:23.) The night passed with nothing unusual happening to them. But there was great misery among the Egyptians. All their first-born dropped dead. (Verse 29)

There was soon loud mourning in the land. This awakened other people, who got out of their beds to find their firstborn males dead. The custom was to wail when there was a death. The wailing spread everywhere, making Egypt the most mournful nation in the world.

As for Pharaoh, he was stunned when he found his oldest son lifeless in bed. If he could have considered Moses and Aaron responsible, he would have demanded their lives, but he fearfully realized this was God's doing. At last he was ready to act sincerely.

Israel Ordered Out of Egypt

"Send my swiftest messenger to Moses and Aaron with my command for all Israelites to leave Egypt at once with their animals!" Pharaoh barked at an aide, who wheeled and hurried out.

"Wait!" Pharaoh called after the man. "Tell the messenger to tell Moses and Aaron to pray to their God to have mercy on me!" (Verses 31-32.)

A mounted messenger rode swiftly up to Moses' home, who was waiting to see what would develop. Moses' face brightened as the messenger spoke to him.

"This is it!" Moses called to a gathering of elders. "Get word to our people to assemble as we have planned! We should be on our way out of Egypt as soon as possible!"

The departure wasn't made with hasty disorder. Moses, Aaron and many leading Israelites, at God's direction, had worked out details of the start of the Exodus. Because of being dressed for travel, they were almost ready to leave.

This tenth and last plague was too much for the Egyptians, many of whom had previously asked Pharaoh to let the Israelites go. Even the firstborn of their animals fell dead. This further troubled an animal worshiping nation. Many Egyptians urged the Israelites to leave hurriedly before another woe developed. This the Israelites were already starting to do. They loaded their animals with what they could hold, and the people carried what they could. This included the treasures the Egyptians had furnished as well as unleavened bread dough.

They moved promptly toward the Goshen city of Ramses. The Israelites left on the night of the fifteenth of Abib. There were about six hundred thousand men plus their families and the people of other nationalities who wished to join them.

It had been a great day for the weary Israelites. They were at last on their way to being free. It was four hundred and thirty years since God had made His covenant with Abraham, their ancestor, that his descendants would inherit a land of their own. They had much to thank God for on that eventful night of the fifteenth day of Abib, the first annual Sabbath that was long to be remembered. God told them that they should tell their descendants about it down through their generations, so that the Israelites wouldn't forget how He had miraculously freed them. (Ex. 13:3-10.) Centuries later, the people of God's Church around the world still observe that evening.

The Israelites divided themselves into their twelve tribes, formed rough ranks, and started on their way. With them were taken the bones of Jacob and his twelve sons, according to Jacob's wish many years previously.

Toward the Red Sea

Instead of taking the most direct route northeastward to Canaan, the travelers went on eastward. God directed them toward a longer route because He didn't want His people troubled by unfriendly Philistines who lived close to the shorter route. (Verse 17)

That morning a miraculous thing occurred. A small, vertical cloud moved from the eastern sky to grow larger and descend toward the Israelites. It could plainly be seen by all at both ends of their ranks, which were several miles apart from front to rear. The people were awed to learn that this cloud was to be their guide! When it moved, they were to move. When it halted, they were to do the same. (Verses 21-22)

Never before or since has there been the sight of over 6 million people led by a cloud that seemed to stand on one end. It didn't move faster than the small children, flocks, herds and loaded animals could travel. By the end of the day the vast column had moved past the area of green vegetation and into a more arid region. There, near sundown, the cloud ceased moving. This was the signal to halt and encamp. Thus ended the first part of a journey that was going to last much longer and be more eventful than the people imagined.

Chapter 22

At the Red Sea

As NIGHT came, another miracle took place. The cloud glowed! The darker the sky became, the brighter the cloud turned, until it was like a giant flame overhead. To add to the astonishment of the Israelites, a lesser glow extended back from the flame to spread a soft radiance for the campers!

Next Morning's Events

At dawn the extended light gradually turned into a cooling vapor just heavy enough to shield the marchers from the sunlight that later in the day would otherwise produce misery and even injury. Their next camp was on the border of Egypt in Etham.

A little while after the column left Etham, people were surprised to see the cloud swerve directly southward. Knowing this wasn't the direction of Canaan, some of the leading men contacted Moses to concernedly remind him that they were going the wrong way. Moses patiently explained that God was leading the way, and that any who failed to follow the cloud were risking being lost.

"But following that cloud south will put us on the west shore of the Red Sea!" the concerned ones argued. "We'll be cut off from ever getting to Canaan!"

Moses knew that it looked that way, but he trusted God. Man has always, apart from some exceptions, struggled against God's directions. He has generally chosen to go in the ways that appear best to him. Many sincere leaders throughout history have taken others in wrong directions by relying on their limited, unreliable, human reasoning. The beginning of wisdom and knowledge is fear of God. (Ps.111:10; Prov. 1:7, 9:10.) Fear and respect can be shown by obedience and reliance.

The Israelites who complained didn't agree with Moses, but they didn't want to turn back by themselves. The column moved on past the town of Migdol and was then lead to the southwest. A few miles ahead loomed a range of barren, arid mountains. Off to the left was the Red Sea, fifteen miles across. It appeared the column was marching into an impassable spot in Egypt.

Pharaoh Again!

Back in his palace at Memphis, the disturbed Pharaoh's mind was on the Israelites. Already he was beginning to regret letting them go. He had heard of how his people had given liberally of their wealth to the Israelites. This irritated him as much as did Israel's taking all their livestock with them. He considered pursuing them to retrieve these losses, but he was fearful that his chariots would become stuck in the sands of the Etham desert, just east of Egypt, where he imagined they were at the time.

His reverie was interrupted by the entrance of one of the spies he had sent previously to see what the Israelites would do.

"They didn't go into the Etham desert," the spy disclosed to the surprised king. "Their trail led east for a few miles and then turned south along the west shore of the Red Sea!"

"If this isn't true, you'll die!" Pharaoh snapped, jumping excitedly to his feet.

A short while later hundreds of war chariots and cavalymen thundered out of Memphis, headed by Pharaoh and his top officers. The excited king wanted desperately to take advantage of direction change by the Israelites to overtake them as soon as possible.

At the Red Sea

Meanwhile, the Israelites arrived at a point near the Red Sea where ominous mountain peaks jutted up like a giant, unfriendly wall. In spite of this, the cloud continued to move as though beckoning them to come into the narrow spaces between the mountains. Again some of the elders came to warn Moses not to go on.

"This is madness!" they declared. "Even if we manage to get through the mountains, the wider the Red Sea will be between us and Canaan!" With Aaron's help Moses calmly assured the protesters that as long as the people obediently looked to God, matters would turn out in their favor. While heads shook in doubt, a mounted Israelite swiftly rode up, gesturing excitedly to the north.

"The Egyptians are coming!" he yelled.

"How do you know?" Aaron asked.

"I saw a huge dust cloud off to the north as I was rounding up some of my stray animals far behind the column!" the man panted as agitated men swarmed around. "I rode as fast as I could to tell you!"

"Do others know about this?" Moses inquired.

"Of course!" was the answer. "I shouted the alarm all the way down the column! People were naturally upset!"

The babble of voices around grew greater. Moses and Aaron were the only ones to remain calm. They had learned from God hours before that Pharaoh and his army would pursue.

"On your way back to the rear, spread the word to the people that God has told me He will take care of us," Moses told the man. (Ex. 14:13-14.)

The dismayed crowd dispersed. Just as the sun slid behind the peaks, the cloud halted. As the troubled people prepared to camp, a messenger from Moses rode back along the column to tell the people to move forward as far as possible without crowding.

Several miles to the north the Egyptians were excited to see the rear of the Israelite column. Pharaoh was jubilant. He was anxious to close in on his intended victims, but darkness was rapidly coming on.

"We'll have to stay here for the night," an officer told the king. "No need to worry about the Israelites getting away from us. They're trapped between the mountains and the sea!"

Pharaoh couldn't have been more pleased. The frantic, jostling, wearing dash by chariots for over fifty miles was worth it to know the Israelites couldn't escape. He eagerly looked forward to next morning, when he could seize their property and avenge his son's death by slaughtering the Israelites, most of whom at that moment were in a state of terror while trying to settle down to rest for the night. A great part of them believed Moses was to blame for their being endangered. These made the early part of the night miserable by wailing and loudly voicing their emotions.

"We never wanted to leave Egypt!" they yelled. "We would be better off there than murdered here!" (Ex. 14:10-12.)

Moses Stills the People

Those who didn't have this attitude prayed as the bitter shouting increased. Among them was Moses. After asking God for help, he climbed to an elevation from where many could hear him.

"This display of fear, complaint and confusion is displeasing to God!" he called out. "The only voices He wants to hear now are those asking for His protection! Don't be afraid! Be patient and see how your Creator will rescue you! Those of you who have looked back to see the Egyptians approaching have seen them for the last time!" (Verse 13.)

Chapter 23

Crossing the Red Sea

THOSE who heard Moses speak wondered exactly what he meant by saying the Egyptians wouldn't appear again. Then they were surprised to see the cloud move low to a point between the Egyptians and Israelites. (Ex. 14:19-20.)

The Long Night Begins

Most of the Israelites felt safer when they saw what was happening, but the Egyptians were perturbed. While the Israelites saw light from the cloud, Pharaoh and his men found themselves in a heavy fog. Even if they had chosen to attack, it would have been impossible. Not being able to see the campfires of the Israelites was very irritating to Pharaoh.

"More dramatic tactics of Moses and his God!" the king snarled. "This is intended to discourage us so that we'll go back to Memphis. But we won't!"

Not much later, in his last conscious moments, Pharaoh was to wish that he had returned to Memphis. While he tossed and turned, anxious to see daylight end, something awesome was happening only a few miles away. Moses was stretching his shepherd's rod out toward the sea. A dry, warming, east wind immediately sprang up. It grew in intensity as the night wore on. It was a peculiar kind of wind that moved in such a way that it bored into the waters with a force that divided the narrow sea in two, exposing a wide path of mud, sand and rocks!

Everyone Ready!

Before dawn Moses sent men along the column of Israelites to tell the people to pack up and be ready to follow the cloud when it moved. To the consternation of most, the cloud moved overhead to the east and floated out over the sea! Complaints filled the air. Those who obediently walked to the beach were amazed to see, by the light of the cloud, an unbelievable water-walled corridor leading eastward across the sea!

Though puzzled by this phenomenon and troubled by the howling winds, they forged on in their strong desire to get away from the Egyptians. For close to fifteen miles they doggedly plodded on between the two walls of water along a path that had been rendered dry by the arid wind.

Crossing the Red Sea

Making this descent into a sea bed wasn't simple. It wasn't easy to herd shying livestock past walls of water surging up and down and appearing to momentarily give way and come thundering down from its pile-up of up to three hundred feet. People and animals here increased their pace to make the crossing as short as possible over the rough, exposed ground strewn with all kinds of sea life. These objects would have been much more interesting to people who weren't fleeing for their lives.

Back at the Egyptian camp, men were puzzled by the sound of the strong wind. As day dawned, the fog lifted. Free to move, the chariots and cavalry rushed to the area where the

Israelites had camped. Pharaoh was furious when he saw no signs of his quarry except burned-out campfires and innumerable tracks. It was evident that the Israelites had gone toward the sea, but there weren't any of them in sight along the shore.

Not until then did the Egyptians notice the startling path into the sea. They stared in disbelief. Then someone spotted the rear of the Israelites' column retreating several miles distant in the mammoth water ditch. Pharaoh's desire to have his army overtake Israel was so intense that it exceeded his wonder and caution.

Egyptians Plunge Ahead

"After them!" he bellowed. "If they can do it, so can you, only faster!"

His men were fearful of nearing the walls of water, now kept erect by a mysterious force other than the wind, but none dared hesitate. Pounding hoofs and rattling wheels set up a din again as the army charged down the beach and into the yawning space in the water. (Ex. 14:23.)

Though the exposed sea bed was dry enough on the surface for safe walking, there was soft below-surface mud. This, along with dips and ridges, forced the chariots and horses to quickly slow down. Even so, they gained steadily on the Israelites. It appeared that in only a matter of minutes the Egyptians would be able to attack.

Several miles to the east the front of the Israelites' column emerged from the trough in the sea and moved southward along the east shore. It was a great relief to reach higher ground, although the people were aware that the Egyptians were approaching. Those in the rear of the column were almost frantic with fear when the Egyptians were almost on them. Miraculously the cloud moved back over the would-be attackers, there to dump tons of water on them in a cloudburst. Almost immediately the exposed sea bed turned to mud. Chariots, horses and men smashed together in a helpless mass. Pharaoh's shouted orders to move on were lost in the noisy melee. What had been a powerful fighting force quickly became an impotent, directionless clutter of men and animals. (Verses 24-25.)

There were frenzied shouts from frightened Egyptian officers ordering their men to retreat on foot regardless of Pharaoh's mad shrieks to continue after the Israelites.

Chapter 24

Safe at Last!

WHILE the Egyptians struggled in the mud, the rear of the Israelite column emerged from the trough in the sea. A mounted messenger took word to Moses that the last of the people had crossed over. Moses thereupon obeyed God's order to hold his hands out toward the sea.

The Army of Egypt Perishes

At that moment the long walls of water collapsed and rushed together with the monstrous force of two gigantic jaws. They snapped together on the Egyptians, destroying all of them at once. (Verse 28) Thus was the sudden end of the army of the man who had schemed to wipe out a people God had chosen for a special task in His plan for the future. Pharaoh's role in those events meant that he and his men had also been a part of that plan, but in a much different and limited way.

Moving to the south along the east shore of the sea, the Israelites were startled to see the water abruptly recede from the shore. At the same time there was a thunderous roar. A giant curtain of foam spewed skyward all along the area where they had crossed the gulf. They were too far away to notice the men, horses and chariots in that gushing water. They didn't know how their pursuers had died until later when they found carcasses strewn along the shore.

When they realized, in part, what had happened, they were thankful that God had performed mighty miracles for their protection. Then they regretted doubting God's power and complaining so bitterly to Moses.

For their benefit, they were glad to see more than corpses come out of the sea. Chariots were washed up equipped with arms, leather and metal, all of which would prove to be of great resource on a trip that was to last much longer than they expected.

Moses Assembles the People

Before going farther, the Israelites gathered together, at Moses' direction, to thank God for bringing them out of Egypt. A special hymn of gratitude and praise was sung and played. This was undoubtedly the greatest and most volumed expression of thanks ever to be given to God from a crowd. (Ex. 15:1-19.) Even appropriate dancing, led by Miriam, a sister of Moses and Aaron, was used as a part of the worship. (Verses 20-21.)

Moving into the Desert

Water was plentiful where the people had assembled. They watered their animals well and filled all empty containers because they were headed toward arid territory on the west edge of the Sinai peninsula. On the first night on the east side of the Red Sea they camped on uncomfortably warm sand and rock where there was no sign of water.

Next day the water supply dwindled rapidly during the march through even more arid territory. When they camped for the second night, it appeared that getting through a third day without finding water would be at the risk of illness and the loss of many animals.

The next afternoon was even more miserable than the one before. Just when many were becoming too thirsty and discouraged to force themselves or their animals on, a grove of palm trees was sighted in the distance. It turned out to be, to the encouragement of those foremost in the column, an old oasis called Marah. As the people moved closer, they were overjoyed to see a pool of water in the midst of the trees. Some of them rushed forward to fall down at the pool and wildly scoop water into their mouths.

The avid gulping stopped as abruptly as it had started. The water was too bitter to keep on swallowing!

The crowd around the well grew swiftly. Everyone had to test the water for himself and spit it out. This disappointment brought loud complaints, and the complainers accused Moses of being to blame. (Verse 24.) Moses was so dismayed that he pleaded with God to intervene in the matter.

The Water Becomes Sweet

"There is an unusual tree you will find growing by the pool," God told Moses. "Cut it down and toss it into the water."

On seeing their leader hack down a tree and throw it into the pool, many in the growing crowd must have wondered at such peculiar behavior. But from that moment on, those who tasted the water could be seen obviously to be enjoying it.

"This water is as good as that of the Nile!" someone exclaimed. "Why are so many people saying it's bitter?"

This remark led to a rush of people to the pool. In spite of the heavy demand for water for hours, the springs under the pool continued the supply. This additional miracle strengthened Moses' faith in God. One would suppose it would have done the same for all the Israelites, but there were those who felt that matters were going too roughly for them.

"Tell the people that as long as they obey Me I will be their healer and keep them in good health," God instructed Moses. (Verse 26.)

Since that time only a small part of the world's people have observed God's laws, although millions claim to be Christians. The relatively small number of obedient ones have enjoyed the protection and healing God back then promised His followers. In the near future, when vast throngs will be keeping God's laws, good health and prosperity will spread over the Earth. God always keeps His promises.

On to Sinai

Refreshed with water and rest, the Israelites and their animals continued south. At Elim, about twenty miles from Marah, they found twelve water wells, one for each of the tribes.

That and a grove of seventy (the number of Israelite elders) palm trees made the place pleasant for camping.

A few miles south of Elim they were guided a little more to the east to go deeper into the desert. At this stage of the journey many of the people started much complaining again. Moses and Aaron were blamed for a lack of food. More than a few contended it would be better to be dead back in Egypt. (Ex. 16:3.) As before, Moses had to look to God for a miracle to calm the grumblers.

God Acts for Moses

"I have heard the complaints of the people," God told Moses. "Remind them that I am aware of their needs. I shall supply them with bread in the morning and flesh in the evening. The bread they must gather for themselves every day except on My holy Sabbath. To take care of that day, they must gather twice as much on the sixth day." (Ex. 16:4-5.)

God gave Moses instructions for helping keep the people under control. This information was passed on to Aaron, who reminded the Israelites how merciful, generous and patient God had been to them even after their impatience and grumbling.

As Aaron spoke, eyes were drawn to the guiding cloud, which had come to a halt. In the month it had been above and ahead of the column, it had become as commonplace to the people as was the sun, which should at any time cause awe. They watched in wonder as the cloud pulsated and glowed in vivid colors. When it became so brilliant that it began to hurt their eyes, they became apprehensive.

A booming sound like the voice of a mighty giant burst out of the brilliance. It lasted just long enough for the listeners to know that they had heard a syllable of sound from the throat of their Creator or one of His angels. The cloud ceased glowing and moved on, leaving the fear-filled millions sobered and regretful because of their disrespectful attitudes.

Chapter 25

War With Amalek

THAT evening the Israelites were surprised to see the sky darkened by vast flocks of birds. This appeared to be an unusual migration of fowl to a more satisfactory climate.

Suddenly the birds swooped ground-ward, alighting right among the people! Because the birds were weary from what had obviously been a long flight, they were very easy to catch. Within minutes uncounted thousands of these plump quail, excellent for eating, were being prepared for dinner.

Next day there was another miracle. During the night dew had settled on the plants around the camps. Instead of being covered with moisture next morning, the plants were decked with small, flaky white particles. This was puzzling until Moses made the surprising announcement that it was the bread God had promised.

"Early every morning three quarts of this food should be gathered for every person," Moses disclosed. "If it isn't taken in early, it will melt on the plants under the hot sun. And don't try to keep it overnight, or it will spoil."

The people swarmed out around their camps to easily gather the food, which they later named "manna". To their enjoyment, they found it tasted like fresh bread and honey. Those who were late in gathering it found little. Most of it had melted. In spite of Moses' warning about keeping it overnight, some did just that, only to find that it became disgustingly odorous and worm-infected. (Verse 20.)

The Sabbath Commanded

One day not long after the manna first showed up, Moses told the people to gather twice as much the next morning. Two days later no manna appeared. That day was the weekly Sabbath. Furthermore, the extra manna gathered for the seventh day miraculously remained fresh and pure as it was when collected. (Verses 24-26)

Observing the Sabbath day properly was important to God and man. Nevertheless, some spent much of the morning hours of the Sabbath searching for manna that wasn't there. This was so displeasing to God that He instructed Moses to tell the people to stay close to their tents on the Sabbath and refrain from working. After that, for a time, there was more obedience in this matter.

The cloud continued to lead southeast and into a mountain range. A hot, upgrade march faced the people just at a time when their water supply was dangerously low. The next time the Israelites camped, a noisy crowd of them surrounded Moses' tent to loudly accuse their leader of purposely taking them into the desert to meet death. (Ex. 17:1-3.)

Water from a Rock!

Again Moses asked God to calm the complainers, who were only causing others to be troubled. God told Moses, who feared some of the angrier people would try to stone him to death, that he should take some of the elders and go on ahead to a certain large rock, which he was to strike with the shepherd's rod he had used in Egypt. Moses did as he was told. Out gushed streams of clear water which coursed down toward the Israelites' camps! (Ex. 17:5-6.)

The sight of water flowing past their tents and on down toward the rear of the column brought joyful surprise to the excited people. At first the stream was murky from picking up dirt from the ground, but with each passing minute of the flow it became clearer and more drinkable. When the people learned from the elders who had accompanied Moses that the water was gushing from a boulder of granite where there had previously been no sign of it, they marveled at the miracle. Those who had threatened Moses regretted doing so. They wouldn't have acted so childishly if they had relied on God. (Verse 7)

Because of the wonderful supply of water, the Israelites hoped they could stay a few days in that area, which was close to where Moses had shepherded flocks a few years previously. Days passed. The cloud continued to remain motionless, which was a sign to stay.

An Enemy Arrives

However, the Israelites would have been troubled greatly and might have wanted to move on if they could have known that from some nearby foothills, many pairs of crafty eyes were watching from time to time to determine their numbers and their possessions.

The attack on the Israelites came at night. Moses wasn't very surprised. He was aware that the region was roamed by bands of hostile desert bandits who used darkness and surprise to further trouble their victims. He also knew these men were Amalekites, descendants of Esau, twin brother of their forefather Jacob. Their attackers were therefore their distant cousins.

Joshua Comes on the Scene

After the Amalekites attacked and fled, one of Moses' officers, a young man named Joshua, was given the responsibility of mustering an army of defense from among the Israelites. The Amalekites were expected to attack in greater force next day. Joshua had little time to assemble the men. (Ex. 17:9.)

The Israelites' first battle with an enemy was an unusual one. Hordes of fierce, wily desert swordsmen charged in among thousands of untrained men armed mainly with ordinary knives, clubs and weapons taken from drowned Egyptians. Moses was up on a high ridge where he could view the fray. With him was Aaron and a brother-in-law, Hur. It appeared that the Israelites were facing certain defeat. Moses called to God for help, holding his shepherd's rod above him as he had done to signal divine power at the time of the plagues.

It was difficult to determine, in the first few minutes of fighting, which side was gaining the upper hand. Then it began to be obvious the Amalekites were falling into retreat. When Moses was certain of it, he lowered his arms, which were becoming weary. Almost immediately the situation changed. With renewed energy the Amalekites charged back, causing the Israelites to retreat.

Realizing his relaxed attitude affected the fighting, Moses again held the rod up. The startling result was that the tide of battle swung back in favor of his men. However, he was becoming too tired in his arms to maintain that prayerful position. Again he lowered the rod and again the Amalekites pushed the Israelites back!

Chapter 26

On to Sinai

FROM that moment the Amalekites put such fury into their fighting that the Israelites lost more ground than they had gained. (Ex. 17:11.)

"I can see what's happening," Moses dismayedly muttered, "but I'm too tired to stand up here and hold out this rod any longer!"

Aaron and Hur quickly rolled a bench-height rock up behind Moses, who sank to a sitting posture. Each of them seized a sagging arm and jerked them upward. Thus helped, Moses continued his supplication while still grasping the shepherd's rod in an upright position. The three men carried on like this until sundown. (Ex. 17:12.)

By that time matters had changed back greatly in favor of the Israelites. The enemy was completely routed with little loss or injuries to the hastily-mustered army. God reminded Moses to record the day's events in the book he was writing about the Israelites, and to instruct Joshua to also write of the happenings. Moses later had an altar built to honor God for His protection.

On into the Mountains

After hovering for several weeks in the same place, the guiding cloud one morning began to move. The Israelites packed up, got their animals together and were ready to move when the cloud floated to the southeast. The mountains were even higher in that direction. There were those who complained at heading into such rugged terrain. To Moses it was like returning home because he had spent many peaceful years in that region tending flocks of sheep.

After two or three days of travel, the cloud came to a halt right over the highest peak. That was rocky Mount Sinai, a mountain of more than seven thousand feet.

Even the complainers had to admit that the numerous water springs, level areas for pitching tents and nearby patches of grass for grazing left little to be unhappy about. Moses advised the people that it would be wise to set up their camps for a long stay, inasmuch as he had more than just a feeling that they were at this particular place for more than just resting for two or three nights. (Ex. 19:1-2.)

Not long after the Israelites were settled in their new location, Moses received a divine request to come up Mount Sinai alone to receive instructions directly from the Creator. It wasn't an easy hike up the rock-strewn shoulders, but Moses was spry for his eighty years. God wouldn't have asked him to do something impossible. He had to go up the mountain only far enough to be removed from the people.

God Speaks

Suddenly a clear, booming voice came from somewhere above on Mount Sinai:

"Moses, you will deliver a message to the Israelites in the valley below!" the Voice spoke out. "Remind them that I, the Creator of all, have freed them from the Egyptians and have brought them safely here. Tell them that if they obey My laws, they will become a special people I will treasure above others. They shall become a kingdom of priests and a holy nation!" (Verses 3-6.)

Trembling with fear and awe, Moses remained prostrate for a time where he had fallen when he had first heard the voice. When he felt that nothing more was going to be said, he stood up and hurried back down the mountain. Immediately he called the elders to repeat God's words to them and tell them to tell the people.

The awed elders complied. The excited people solemnly agreed to obey whatever God asked of them. Later, after learning of their unanimous agreement to obey God (verse 8), Moses went back up to report what had taken place. Of course God already was aware of it, but He had further instructions for the people He wanted to convey through Moses, who was told that God would come down unusually close to the people in three days, and that they should be clean physically at that time, and that even their clothing should be washed and unsoiled. Barricades would have to be set up to prevent people or their animals from straying too far up the mountain. Otherwise they would be subject to death because of coming too near God's holy presence on sacred ground.

After three days had passed, the more than 6 million people on the valley floor out from and below the mountain nervously wondered what would happen. The first thing unusual was that thick, dark clouds formed to obscure all but the base slopes of Mount Sinai. The clouds weren't merely masses of water vapor. There was much smoke mixed in, causing growing alarm to the onlookers. Flashes of lightning, followed by stunning peals of thunder, caused every man, woman and child to tremble.

The trembling was greater at the startlingly clear blast of what sounded like a giant trumpet announcing that God was descending to Mount Sinai! (Verse 19.)

As the thunder and lightning subsided, the clouds lifted, exposing most of the mountain to the searching gazes of millions of eyes. Abruptly the peak broke out into towering flames. The top of the mountain appeared to be consumed in a giant holocaust! Pillars of lighted smoke spiraled skyward. The higher elevations seemed about to explode in an awesome burst of eye-paining light!

People shielded their faces. Many of them fell to the ground, which was beginning to quiver from a rumbling earth tremor. The quake loosened huge boulders that crashed down into the ravines. Clouds of dust and smoke floated up from the ground as tons of smaller rock cascaded down to blanket the mountain's base.

Like the others, Moses trembled at this display of divine power, though he had some awareness that it was far from what God was capable of doing, such as causing giant planets to collide or fusing whole suns in celestial cataclysms penetrating billions of miles of space.

The ground stopped shaking and the blasting trumpet sound faded to a silence that was more terrible than the noise, because it caused people to be more fearfully expectant of what would happen next. Suddenly a thunderous voice cracked down from above the mountain, echoing terrifyingly across the valley. It spoke in Hebrew, the mother tongue of the Israelites, though

it's booming quality might have purposely made it difficult to be understood by anyone except Moses.

"Come up the mountain, Moses!" the Voice thundered. "Come alone! Don't allow anyone to follow you!"

Chapter 27

The Ten Commandments

SEEING their leader walk out of sight up smoking Mount Sinai had a strange effect on many of the people. Even though quaking with awe, their curiosity was so strong that they wanted to follow Moses. Before he could get very far up the mountain, God ordered him back.

Moses Rushes Down

"People are trying to follow you," God informed him. "Return at once and warn them against trespassing on holy ground. If they come too close, they will die. You may bring Aaron when you come back, but no one else." (Ex. 19:24.)

On his way down, Moses loudly warned those approaching the barricades to turn back.

"We don't mind you reprimanding us," some of them said, "but we don't want a reprimand from God. We might not live through it." (Ex. 20:19.)

The people having been warned, there were more terrifying sights and sounds, followed by dramatic silence again. Then out of the silence broke the most awesome of sounds.

The Voice of the Eternal Booms Out the Ten Commandments

"I am the Eternal, your God, who brought you out of slavery in Egypt!"

This pronouncement from the God was followed by more disturbing silence. An ear-splitting trumpet blast then preceded God's thundering out His ten great laws -- THE TEN COMMANDMENTS!

"YOU SHALL HAVE NO GODS BUT ME!" boomed the thunderous voice after the echoes of the trumpet had died away. Moses, Aaron and the seventy elders, huddled back from the barricades, hardly dared glance up at the brilliant light above them. After a short silence a second commandment rumbled from the sky:

"YOU SHALL NOT CARVE IMAGES OF THINGS IN HEAVEN OR ON EARTH FOR THE PURPOSE OF BOWING DOWN TO THEM IN WORSHIP! I AM A JEALOUS GOD! I PUNISH THOSE WHO HATE ME DOWN TO THEIR THIRD AND FOURTH GENERATIONS, BUT I SHOW CONSTANT LOVE TO THOUSANDS WHO LOVE ME AND OBEY MY LAWS!"

Again there was a short period of utter silence. Then:

"YOU SHALL NOT USE THE NAME OF THE ETERNAL YOUR GOD IN ANY WRONG OR USELESS MANNER! I WILL PUNISH THOSE WHO UTTER MY NAME WITHOUT RESPECT AND REVERENCE!"

Intense silence prevailed shortly, to be broken by the tremendous Voice giving a fourth Commandment:

"REMEMBER TO OBSERVE THE HOLY SABBATH! YOU SHALL LABOR AND DO ALL YOUR BUSINESS ONLY ON THE FIRST SIX DAYS OF THE WEEK! THE SEVENTH IS A HOLY DAY IN HONOR TO YOUR GOD. ON THAT DAY YOU SHALL DO NO SERVILE WORK! NEITHER SHALL ANY OF YOUR FAMILY, YOUR SERVANTS, YOUR ANIMALS NOR ANY PERSON LIVING WITH YOU! YOUR GOD REBUILT THE EARTH IN SIX DAYS AND RESTED ON THE SEVENTH! HE THEREFORE MADE THE SEVENTH DAY HOLY TIME!"

The next silence was longer than the others because it was the division between the four Commandments that have to do with man's duty to his Creator and the six that show his duty toward his fellow man. All ten add up to perfect love for God and man. The last six were separated by short spans of silence.

"GIVE SPECIAL RESPECT TO YOUR PARENTS, THAT YOU MAY LIVE LONG IN THE LAND YOUR GOD GIVES YOU AS A GIFT!"

"YOU SHALL NOT MURDER!"

"YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY!"

"YOU SHALL NOT STEAL!"

"YOU SHALL NOT LIE ABOUT ANYONE!"

"YOU SHALL NOT DESIRE TO WRONGFULLY OWN THE HOME OF ANOTHER PERSON! YOU SHALL NOT COVET HIS WIFE, SERVANTS OR ANY OF HIS POSSESSIONS!"(Ex. 20:1-17.)

The trumpet sounded again, signaling the conclusion to the uttering of the Ten Commandments. These were and are the vital laws through which an all-wise and all-loving God reveals to mankind the way to find happiness, good health, protection and prosperity.

In Force from the Beginning

The ten holy laws had been in effect long before then. Adam and Eve knew about them, and bitterly regretted breaking several. Men of ancient times, including Abraham, were aware of and obeyed them. (Gen. 26:5.) Down through the centuries pagan ways had become so mixed in with God's laws that God chose this time at Mount Sinai to distinctly set forth His rules for living in a clear way to His people.

They were meant for all human beings. Obedience to them results in the best of everything. If all people kept the Commandments, there would be no war, poverty, sickness, misery, jails, asylums or unhappiness!

Down through time most people have chosen not to follow God's laws. They have foolishly believed man's ways are easier and better. However, man isn't capable of successfully leading a long and happy life without obeying God's spiritual and physical laws.

Millions of people have never so much as heard of God, mostly because their ancestors chose to ignore their Creator. The result has been six thousand years of suffering, poverty and

unhappiness for a lot of people. Today the opportunities to find out about God are greater in some nations than they were in the past, though pagan beliefs are again increasingly mixed with so-called Christianity. One of the most harmful, taught even by respected church leaders, is that keeping the Ten Commandments isn't necessary. The Bible states that "false shepherds" will spring up to try to hide the truth. (Acts 20:29, 30 and II Peter 2:1.)

Moses Returns Atop Sinai

When finally Moses and Aaron got up from where they had been kneeling, the strong light above them had dimmed and the guiding cloud still obscured the mountain's peak. The seventy elders walked away to tell the people that Moses would go up the mountain to hear more from God. This relieved the crowd, which had become increasingly fearful of God's closeness and His voice.

When he was well up Mount Sinai and obscured by the cloud, Moses was informed of many things he was to tell the elders to pass on to the people.

"They need further rules to spare them from trouble," God said to Moses. "Remember these judgments I will give you."

Thereupon Moses was given rules covering many circumstances and situations requiring God's wisdom. They included how to deal with murderers, thieves, sorcerers and the disorderly, how to settle various charges and claims, how to observe God's yearly Sabbaths and even how to handle vicious animals. (Ex.21, 22 and 23.) It was pointed out that rebellion was a serious sin, but that willing obedience would result in helpful miracles.

"You will be confronted with nations of idol-worshippers when you near Caanan," God continued. "I shall weaken their armies with swarms of hornets, so that you will take the land bounded by the Red Sea, the Mediterranean Sea, the deserts of Arabia and the Euphrates River. I shall free you from sickness and disease, cause your women to bear many children and your flocks and herds to multiply greatly. I will not allow other peoples to remain in your land, lest you mingle with them and serve their gods." (Ex. 23:28-33.)

Moses returned to the valley to tell the elders what he had been told. The elders passed the information on to the people, who readily agreed to abide by it. Moses recorded the rules and conditions of this agreement between the Israelites and their Creator.

The Making of the Covenant at Sinai

Next morning Moses directed the building of an altar on a slope of Mount Sinai. Around it were placed twelve large stones to represent the twelve tribes of Israel. Young men prepared animals for peace offerings placed on wood on the altar. Moses took half of the blood from the animals and sprinkled it over the wood fuel. As flames crackled through the wood, he read aloud the newly-written agreement before the people.

"So be it!" the elders exclaimed after the reading. "We will be obedient to whatever God asks!"

"So be it!" the people chorused. "We will obey God!"

"Then witness this blood of agreement with our Creator!" Moses proclaimed as he sprinkled the other half of the blood on the elders who represented the people. (Ex. 24:4-8.)

Moses, Aaron, Joshua, Hur, Aaron's two oldest sons and several elders, later went up Mount Sinai. Part way up, as they paused to rest, the guiding cloud lowered to envelop the upper part of the mountain. An alarming darkness resulted, out of which grew a strange light. The climbers looked above to take in an awesome sight. The cloud had vanished, leaving a sapphire-like expanse flecked with beautiful beams of light. (Ex. 24:10.)

"God has come down to us!" Moses declared to the astonished onlookers, who could scarcely believe they were witnessing this event.

At first the men were afraid, but gradually such a relaxing exhilaration came on them they were able to rest and even eat in the presence of the One who had created the universe! (Verse 11.) This was a very special privilege few men have experienced. Most people fail to realize it is also a special privilege to talk to the Creator, something that can be done simply by a proper attitude and prayer.

After a while the view faded and the cloud reappeared to cover the peak of the mountain. God's voice rumbled out of the cloud, telling Moses to come on up to receive tablets of stone on which God had written the Ten Commandments to take to the people. Realizing he might be gone quite a while, Moses told the men to wait until a certain time and then go back down if he hadn't returned. He chose Joshua to continue upward with him. Farther up, their progress was stopped by the increasing density of the cloud, through which strange, flickering beams of light could be seen.

What Was the Covenant?

The covenant or agreement made at Mount Sinai between God and Israel was nothing to be taken lightly. It was later referred to in the Bible as a sacred marriage contract between God, as the husband, and Israel as the wife. It was a binding promise God would always take care of His wife, Israel, who would always be faithful and never have anything to do with the false gods of other nations.

The rules of the marriage covenant were the Ten Commandments and the civil laws later given on Mount Sinai. The terms were that Israel was to remain faithful by obeying God's laws to insure happiness, good health, many children and prosperity. Unfaithfulness would mean misery, disease, poverty and possible DIVORCE.

To better understand about the old covenant, it's necessary to jump ahead in the chain of events and divulge that Israel failed to live up to its terms. The covenant was broken. Israel was punished and divorced and sent out of the Promised Land. (Jer. 3:6-10.)

Many religious denominations teach that because the old covenant is broken and dead, the Ten Commandments are dead and not to be obeyed. Nothing could be further from the truth. Belief in that lie has caused much misery to mankind. The Ten Commandments were the basis of the old covenant. They are living, unchanged spiritual laws, staying in effect as does God's physical law of gravity, regardless of what anyone has to say about it. Those ten spiritual laws are meant for all men in all nations down through time. The breaking of the covenant didn't lessen their effect. They existed before the old covenant was made. They are

the main spiritual laws of the new covenant. Jesus had to die because they were broken. The ceremonial and ritual laws after the old covenant agreement to remind the Israelites of their sins were not a part of the Ten Commandments. (Jer.7:22 and Gal.3:19)

For six days Moses and Joshua waited in the heavy vapor. There were times when they had the urge to try to return to the valley, but they patiently waited for whatever God expected of them. On the seventh day a voice called for Moses to proceed upward. Moses asked Joshua to wait for him, and disappeared into the mist, which opened just enough to show the way.

Chapter 28

The Golden Calf

THOUSANDS of Israelites had watched up Mount Sinai from the time Moses had gone up with a few men. They had seen the cloud come down to cover the summit, and had stared in awe at the long, multi-colored flames shooting up from the mountain and through the cloud as though from a belching volcano. Some were still watching when some of the men returned.

Then there was growing concern. People wondered how the two men could remain on a mountain that was afire. Many decided they had become lost or had fallen into some deep ravine.

"God will protect them," was Aaron's assurance.

Days passed into weeks. Probably the most concerned person was Joshua, who didn't dare try going up to look for Moses or groping his way down through the mist. During the first days Moses felt almost like a prisoner, but there was something about being so close to the Creator that soon imparted to him a feeling of warm satisfaction. As for his physical needs, there was a small brook close by and a fresh supply of manna six days a week.

Rebellion Against God's Law

Regardless of the miracles God had performed for Israel in the time of adversity, some of the people desired to cling to the habits of idol worship they had acquired in Egypt. Even while fire and smoke on Mount Sinai proclaimed God's presence, these people complained that Moses' absence showed God had forgotten them.

"We need a leader to take us to a better place!" the rebellious ones declared. "And we need a god we can see and who will do more for us!"

This outbreak of feeling was quickly taken up by those who were critical and disorderly. Within only a few days the complainers had created such confusion in the camps that thousands were stirred into an angry pitch. Aaron and Hur sent officers to seek out the offenders, but too late. A sullen crowd surrounded the tents of the Israelite leaders. Aaron and Hur could scarcely believe so many men were so anxious to cause unrest and trouble.

"I'll try to calm them down until Moses and Joshua return," Aaron told Hur.

Silently praying that he could talk the unruly crowd into returning home, Aaron strode in among the men and held up his hands for quiet.

"I hear you are dissatisfied with matters!" he declared. "Why are you unthankful for the protection you have received?"

A loud babble erupted from the crowd as everyone tried to voice his opinion. One man managed to out-shout the others, who quieted a little.

"When we were back in Egypt, both the Egyptians and the Israelites had all kinds of food and drink!" the man yelled. "Yet the Egyptians didn't worship the invisible God you keep talking about! We want a god like one of theirs! We want one we can see and that doesn't have a lot of laws!"

"But the Egyptian gods are powerless!" Aaron exclaimed. "They are anything from oxen to lifeless pebbles! Why would you want such things to worship?"

"Because we want something we understand and don't fear!" someone shouted, and the crowd sounded loud approval.

Aaron was dismayed. It was obvious these demanding people didn't intend to give up until they were at least promised something, no matter how ridiculous.

"Would you be satisfied with some kind of animal image made of gold?" Aaron queried.

Silence followed. Aaron was about to suggest something else equally absurd when shouts of agreement started ringing out. This was small relief to Aaron, who realized those around him were actually expecting him to build an idol for them!

"Make it now!" someone bellowed, followed by a loud chorus of accord.

Aaron Makes a Golden Statue

"Then bring me all the gold earrings you can find," Aaron uneasily told the noisy crowd. "I will have the gold fused together to make you the false god you insist you want making for you. But I won't do this willingly. Only a few days ago you promised to obey the one real God. Going back on that promise could be most unwise!"

A volley of angry shouts swelled up from the crowd. The people moved in even closer, glowering menacingly at Aaron and the officers who stood with him. Aaron held up his hands and nodded his head in consent.

"I shall arrange for your idol to be made," he told them in a faltering voice. "But you will have to help. Every man, woman and child wearing golden earrings must take them off and bring them here. We will fashion them into one piece, and from that gold will come the metal calf you desire for your god."

Aaron hoped that the Israelites would refuse to give up their ear jewelry, thereby sparing him from his promise to create a golden calf. But his hope faded when he later witnessed the long lines of people filing up to give their earrings.

He sent for carpenters, metal workers, designers and sculptors to come from the multitude, who took only a few days, to completely build the large mold in which to pour the hot, melted gold to make a molten gold calf. (Exodus 32:1-4.)

Aaron then ordered a large altar built in front of the tent in which the calf image stood. When it was finished, he sent out messengers to all the people to proclaim that the next day would be a feast day to God.

He hoped that the people would change their minds and make their offerings to God instead of the golden calf. But it was a rather futile wish, what with an altar built so close to the idol.

Early next morning people started thronging toward the calf idol, bringing animals for burnt offerings and peace offerings. The creatures were slaughtered not far from the altar that had just been built, and before long the idol was loaded with their carcasses.

When Aaron saw men about to set fire to the altar wood under the intended offerings, he hurried out before the altar and raised his hands in protest.

"This is a feast to the God of Israel!" he shouted to the crowd. "These carcasses belong on the other altar -- the one over there by the twelve stone pillars!"

"If you don't want us to sacrifice here, then why did you make this golden idol and the altar before it?" some of the rebellious leaders demanded in loud voices.

"Because I knew that so many of you wanted it so badly that you would get it one way or another," Aaron replied. "I had hoped that Moses would return before the idol could be finished, or that you would realize how wrong it was and would give up the mad idea of serving and worshipping an idol!"

"We know what we want!" the men shouted back, pointing to the idol. "THIS represents the god who brought us out of Egypt!" (Exodus 32:4.)

Aaron walked slowly back to his tent, where he turned to watch a plume of smoke billow upward from the crackling fire. Looking out over the crowd, he shuddered to witness thousands bowing before the calf image, which now appeared to him as something very ugly and evil.

The People Declare a Holiday

A short time later many of the people were consuming meat from the altar. As many more people arrived and more carcasses were placed on the altar, a spirit of revelry was developing. It was obvious that the altar before the calf image would be busy all day roasting animals and birds for the hungry crowd.

The careless mood caught on with most of the people standing in line waiting to sacrifice. Large groups, moved by the music of musicians banding together, began to dance. Contagious laughter broke out. Profanity from lower characters erupted. By the middle of the afternoon there was such misconduct that thousands of other Israelites stood back to avoid being embroiled. (Ex. 32:6.)

One might wonder how those people would dare conduct themselves so carelessly with God so close. One might wonder also how professed Christians today often allow themselves to live carelessly. As back at Mount Sinai, it's still a matter of lack of fear of, and respect for, God, who is present everywhere.

Moses Talks with God

To go back a few weeks to when Moses left Joshua to go on up Mount Sinai, Moses found that the higher he climbed, the less tired and more exhilarated he became. As he neared the summit, he could sense the powerful presence of the Almighty Creator of the universe.

"Stay where you are, Moses!" a strong Voice called out.

Startled, Moses halted and looked around. He was on a fairly flat area out of which jutted massive rock pinnacles. Although the shining aura from above wiped out shadows, visibility extended only a few yards.

"You will remain here while I tell you more to speak to the Israelites and other things you are to do," the Voice continued.

Moses fearfully bowed his head to the ground until God told him to seat himself.

During the next forty days Moses spent many hours listening closely to God's instructions. Every word and vision was etched sharply into his mind, made especially alert by God's presence, without which he would have at times been miserably cold, thirsty and hungry. An unusual energy from the Creator supplanted the need for heat, food and water. (Deuteronomy 9:9.)

Among the things Moses learned he must do was remember the instruction for building a portable tabernacle in which contact with God could be made during the trip to Canaan. He learned that Aaron and Aaron's sons were to be the chief priests, whose duties and equipment were explained. (Ex. 25-31.)

Sabbath Command Repeated

God stressed the importance of Sabbath observance, referring to both weekly and annual Sabbaths.

"My Sabbaths are holy," God reminded Moses. "They are a sign forever between Me and you who observe them that I am your God and you are My church, a people chosen for a very special task. It shall remain a sign throughout every generation forever. It is an everlasting agreement that your people will be blessed as long as they obey Me in respect to My holy days. Those who refuse to obey will die!" (Ex. 31:12-17.)

On the fortieth day near the top of the mountain, God ended the meeting by producing two slabs of elegant stone, on both sides of which were beautifully engraved the Ten Commandments. (Ex. 31:18 and 32:15-16.)

"Leave here now!" God commanded Moses. "Hurry back to your camps!"

Puzzled that God would request such a hasty departure, Moses firmly gripped the stone slabs and strode swiftly down the trail. As he hurried on, God's voice followed him with the startling information that the Israelites below were at that moment breaking the covenant by indulging in riotous deportment around a metal idol. Moses was so dismayed that he dropped to his knees to beg God to be merciful to the people.

"I know your people!" God thundered. "They are unruly and stubborn! From you, who have been a faithful servant, I can still produce a great nation. As for most of the Israelites, I should wipe them out with a shower of fire in the valley!" (Ex. 32:7-10.)

"In your mercy you have brought them this far. Please don't give the Egyptians reason to say that you used your power to deliver them from Egypt only to slay them at Mount Sinai!" Moses pleaded. "Remember your promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob! You told them their offspring would number as the stars! You promised Canaan to their children! How can they receive it if you destroy them?" (Verses 11-13.)

There was a short, awful silence. To Moses' relief, God then spoke in a less wrathful tone.

"You deal with those who have committed idolatry today!" God told Moses. "Seek them out and punish them! If you fail, I will destroy them!"

Moses hesitated only long enough to express his gratitude. In a short while he reached the spot where he had left Joshua forty days previously. He hardly expected Joshua to still be there, but Joshua was still waiting, and naturally happy to see him. When Joshua asked what had happened and what he was carrying, Moses hardly heard him.

"I'll explain matters later," Moses told Joshua. "We must hurry down to the valley to stop terrible thing happening there!"

The Return to Camp

At that moment the loud voices of the reveling people reached Moses' and Joshua's ears. Assuming that only a state of war would produce such loud yelling, Joshua observed that the Amalekites must be attacking again.

"Unfortunately, that's not the situation," Moses answered gravely. "Hear that singing?"

Without further talk the two continued down the trail. A few hundred feet below they emerged from the cloud. They could see a large throng grouped together, but they were too distant to make out what the people were doing.

In a tent down there, Aaron and his family sat in glum silence while celebrants laughed and chanted wildly. Suddenly an officer outside the tent called to Aaron.

"There is a report that Moses and Joshua have been seen coming down the mountain!"

Chapter 29

Moses Breaks the Ten Commandments

As MOSES and Joshua walked up to the edge of the crowd, people who saw them quieted down and stared in silence. Moses was shocked and angry when he saw and heard so many, bowing, parading, dancing and singing around the gold-covered calf statue. Still carrying the stone tablets, he grimly elbowed his way through surprised onlookers to a spot in front of the pagan altar.

"Engraved here is the agreement we made with the Creator only a few weeks ago!" he shouted, holding the tablets aloft. "You promised to keep it, but you are already breaking it!"

Because there was so much noise, only those who were closest looked for the source of the new voice. When they recognized Moses, they quickly directed the attention of others to him. Within seconds silence ensued. Thousands of pairs of eyes stared with disbelief. A murmur of awe rumbled up from the people.

Moses was too filled with fury to say more. For the moment he lost control of his temper.

Tables of Stone Broken

He hurled the stone tablets down with such force they shattered on the altar, the fragments flying in all directions. (Ex. 32:19.) Even before the rash act was finished, he realized how impetuous he was acting by breaking something holy that had come from God.

Onlookers stared soberly and began to slink back toward their camps. Before long the throng had dissolved. The few who remained, being mostly of those who had prevailed on Aaron to produce the idol, gathered in sullen groups. Aaron, Hur and the officers and elders had little to say, and stood uncomfortably by. It was obvious to Moses that they deeply regretted having handled matters poorly.

"Build a roaring fire around the statue!" Moses suddenly commanded. "Melt down all the gold in it! As soon as it cools, pick every bit of it out of the ashes and grind it into fine powder! Then dump that powder into every source of water the people use!"

Most of the Israelites were relieved to see the image melt to the ground, though there were many who bitterly resented seeing their idol come to such a swift end. Hours later, it was impossible to draw water from any natural sources without including much gold dust. Those who had to drink it who weren't guilty were warned by the pollution of the folly of idolatry. Those who were guilty were reminded of their sin. (Ex. 32:20.)

Aaron Repents

"How did the people manage to talk you into this terrible situation?" Moses asked Aaron after matters were in hand.

"You know how the people are," Aaron answered. "They so often want to do the wrong thing."

Moses considered that a poor answer, and Aaron wasn't anxious to explain all about how he had tried to stall for time. Moses was far from happy with Aaron's eventual account. "If I could have delayed the idol's construction one more day," Aaron weakly pointed out, "you would have arrived in time to prevent most of the trouble."

Feeling that further words to the shame-faced Aaron would be of little value at a time when other things needed accomplishing quickly, Moses sent officers through the camps to find the men who had staunchly refused to have anything to do with worship of the golden calf. Later, a crowd of men was brought to the camp where Moses' tent was pitched.

"These are the ones who claim loyalty to God," Moses was informed. "They are of the tribe of Levi, and are anxious to do anything to please God." (Ex. 32:26.)

"Good!" Moses said. "I have great need of them. God expects the covenant breakers to be punished. He will do it through the swords of these dedicated Levites!"

The Levites stared in uncomfortable silence.

"I know how you men must feel," Moses went on. "Some of you may be friends of the guilty, but God intends for them to die by your weapons. No blood will be on your heads, because you will be carrying out divine justice."

This was a difficult and grisly task for the Levites to carry out, but they were determined to be obedient. By the end of the day about three thousand men had been arrested and executed. (Verses 27-28.)

Next day, during mourning for the dead, Moses called the elders.

"Go remind your people what a great crime has taken place here," he instructed them. "Though the guiltiest have died, God is angry with all the people for allowing it. I will climb back up the mountain to plead with Him not to bring punishment that will be too severe."

By this time, Aaron had become so conscious of his weak role in things that he was busy doing his own praying.

Moses Returns Atop Sinai

"My people have sinned more than I realized at first," Moses told God when he was again up the mountain. "I beg you to forgive them. If you don't intend to, I pray that you will take my life instead of dealing harshly with them!"

"I shall not cause the innocent to suffer," God answered. "Neither shall the guilty escape my anger. Go back and tell the people that because of breaking my covenant, I will no longer remain close to them, lest I blot them out if again they so carelessly break my laws. I shall send an angel to do the leading to Canaan, and will decide how to deal with them after I find out how much they regret their sins." (Ex.33:1 -3)

The people were unhappy at learning God was going to remove Himself from them somewhat. To show their regret for the idolatry that had taken place, they denied themselves the use of their jewelry and ornate clothing, having been instructed by Moses that they should show humility. (Ex. 33:4-6.) God was so moved by this spirit of repentance that He withheld the punishment He had in mind.

In past weeks, Moses had gone to a special tent outside the camp when he needed to talk to God. People would know when he was doing this, because the guiding cloud would descend over the tent. But after God decided not to be so close to the Israelites, Moses had to have the tent moved away quite a distance before God would meet him in the cloud. The people noticed this, and were perturbed, but they were thankful that Moses and God didn't leave entirely.

Plans for the Future

In one of his visits with God, Moses boldly inquired how he should go about getting the Israelites started again toward Canaan. God was pleased by Moses' concern for the people. He rewarded him by the welcome news that He would continue helping guide the Israelites. Moses had a sudden strong desire to see what this merciful Creator looked like, but God informed him that it wouldn't be possible to see His face.

"I want you to bring two stone tables up Mount Sinai for Me to write the Ten Commandments on again," God said. "When you do, I shall pass very near to you, and you shall see My presence."

Next day Moses forcefully warned Aaron, Joshua and Hur he would be gone for a time, and that it would be up to them to preserve order in the camps or risk the lives of all the Israelites. Taking the expertly-cut tablets, he went up Mount Sinai early next morning. At the same time the cloud floated down to cover the peak of the mountain.

"Conceal yourself in the small cave here on the ledge," a voice instructed. "Do not emerge until your God has passed by the cave."

Moses stepped into the opening in the solid rock and waited. Suddenly he found himself shaking nervously. There was a dazzling light. The Creator of the universe was approaching! "I am the Eternal God!"

The tremendous voice, seeming to come from all directions, cracked like lightning without being unduly loud. The growing brilliance became so strong it stabbed through Moses' closed eyelids. In another instant it became so dazzling Moses could make out a rather indefinite figure standing back to him. It lasted only for a moment, and was gone before he could clap his hands over his closed eyes to protect them. (Ex. 34:5-6.)

"I am merciful and gracious," the Voice continued. "I am slow to anger, loving and faithful. My love for thousands is not to be swayed. I forgive men of their sins, but I will punish those who continue in their guilt. I will bring punishment on their children, their grandchildren and even their great grandchildren."

Trembling and almost blinded temporarily, Moses stumbled out of the little cave and dropped face downward.

"If I have found favor with you, forgive the sins of my stubborn people!" Moses exclaimed. "Dwell with us! Don't cut us off from your protection and blessings!" (Verses 7-9.)

"I will renew the covenant!" God said after a short period of silence. "I will do great and marvelous things for your people that have never been done before!"

God went on to repeat many of the plans He had already disclosed during Moses' previous forty days and nights on the mountain. Moses stayed again for the same time, fasting and being sustained by divine power. For the second time God engraved the Ten Commandments on stone. When at last Moses returned to camp, he was happy to find no trouble there and pleased to bring the new tablets and the promise of a renewed covenant. (Verses 27-28; Deut. 10:1-5.)

On reaching the slopes of the mountain, he was startled because the first people to meet him stared and backed away in fright.

"Look at his face!" they muttered fearfully.

Chapter 30

Moses Returns

WHY ARE you people staring?" Moses asked. "Don't you recognize me?"

No one answered. The wide-eyed onlookers silently kept backing away from him. As Moses increased his pace, the crowd retreated faster. Suddenly Moses spotted Aaron, and beckoned to him. Even Aaron seemed hesitant to approach.

"Why is everyone backing off?" Moses asked Aaron.

Soon it was evident to both men that closeness to God had caused Moses' skin to shine with such a divine radiance that his facial features were hardly discernible. It was necessary for him to cover his head to prevent onlookers from becoming alarmed.

Moses Summons the Elders

Next morning he gathered the elders to tell them what had happened. Because his skin still glowed brightly, he kept a veil over his face. This was necessary, especially later when he addressed crowds, to keep children from becoming upset. When he talked to all the people, he reminded them they should faithfully and carefully observe the Sabbaths.

"They are eternal signs that God is our God and we are His people," Moses pointed out. "I have news of a special work we must carry out right away. Some of you will feel so ambitious about it you will be tempted to work on it on the Sabbath. God knows this. He has instructed me no fire shall be kindled on a Sabbath for the purpose of sharpening tools, melting metals or anything having to do with unnecessary work. God is aware of your needs. He doesn't forbid the use of fires on the Sabbath for light, heat or other necessities." (Ex. 35:1-3.)

Moses had been discouraged by the way many Israelites had failed to obey the Fourth Commandment. Probably he would have been dismayed if he could have foreseen how so-called spiritual leaders of the future would distort and even ignore that law.

How Men Misrepresent God's Law

Posing as ministers of God, such men proclaim that it isn't possible to obey these eternal spiritual laws, and that those who try to are placing themselves under a curse. One of the arguments is that it isn't possible to observe the Fourth Commandment because people can't live without kindling a fire every day.

"Jesus nailed the Ten Commandments to the cross," they claim.

The Ten Commandments weren't nailed to the cross. Christ was impaled on a stake to pay for people's sins by dying instead. Because He was the supreme sacrifice, the temporary laws having to do with the sacrifices are no longer necessary. They were given in Moses' day to remind man of his sin and of his coming Saviour. Since Christ has already come, we don't

need them today. (Gal.3:19 and Heb. 10:3-4.) But the Ten Commandments are everlasting. They're spiritual, not ceremonial.

Eternal life, a gift from God, can't be earned, and God won't give it without obedience to Him. There must be repentance of sins, which is a deep regret for wrong things done. Every human being has sinned. That is failing to obey God's sacred laws, the foremost being the Ten Commandments.

On repentance, God is pleased to forgive and remove sin by blotting out all past mistakes, but to gain everlasting life, one must live from then on by the Creator's rules, which are for happiness, good health and success. Often they are difficult to obey, but God gives ability to overcome and a growing hope of becoming a spirit being. (Matthew 10:22.)

When one considers that most so-called Christian churches teach the opposite of many things God shows through the Bible, one begins to realize how carefully the remarks of self-styled spiritual leaders must be regarded. The matter of "kindling fire" may not at first appear of great importance, but it's just one example of how some will vainly try to eliminate the Ten Commandments.

Having warned the people of the importance of observing the Sabbath, Moses outlined for them the wonderful plan for a place in which God could be with them as they moved toward Canaan.

"Even though we have sinned greatly, our God has promised to stay in our midst as long as we obey Him," Moses told the Israelites.