

**By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph's sons, and worshipped as he leaned on the top of his staff.**

**(Hebrews 11:21)**

First broadcast in 2004, BBC TV's genealogy documentary series, 'Who do you think you are?'

- is not only a popular programme in Britain, now in its twelfth series
- but also has had counterparts in at least 10 other countries
- in the programme, the family tree of someone from public life is explored
- I don't think many people would have found it surprising when news presenter, Natasha Kaplinsky
- Showed her emotions when she was shown official documentation relating to family members
- Who had been massacred at the Slonim Jewish ghetto by the Nazis
- Similarly actress, Patsy Kensit, after hearing about the criminal activities of her father and grandfather
- Was overwhelmed at how her ancestors, once affluent artisans, fell into terrible poverty
- But one of her ancestors had also been a remarkable vicar, dedicating his life to helping the poor

When I visited Warsaw, I was touched by the war memorials, particularly those to the Warsaw Uprising

- A heroic, tragic and unsuccessful 63-day struggle in 1944 to liberate Warsaw from Nazi occupation
- Resulting in the loss of nearly 200,000 lives, mainly civilians, including those killed in mass executions
- But when I went to Ypres, to the commonwealth war graves, it was a bit different
- Because there were rows and rows of gravestones with names that were familiar, regiments I knew
- Because these men were our men, men from Britain, from my country
- And although none of my ancestors served in either the First or Second World Wars
- My father at 10 being too young to serve in WW2, and my grandfather at 11 too young for WW1
- I looked along the wall of the great Tynecot Cemetery for one name 'Haley' – and found more than one

There are people, indeed Christians, and certainly among my Methodist congregations

- Who take very little or no interest in the Old Testament – even the patriarchs
- But this is to their inestimable loss – perhaps I need to explain why

The line that we are considering in the Old Testament is the line from which the Messiah is traced

- When I was a theological college student in Bristol, four of us were allocated a placement church
- The placement in downtown Bristol was not all that promising but we entered into it with enthusiasm
- And decided to start a midweek Bible study – at the first planning meeting one student could not come
- So, having agreed to do Matthew's Gospel, we gave him the first 17 verses
- He had the last laugh, because it was one of the best Bible studies I have ever attended (cf. Matt. 1:1-2)
- 'A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham
- Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers'
- The Gospel writer is telling us something important – that the writer to the Hebrews now confirms
- These people are our people, their story is our story, they are our spiritual ancestors
- They are not simply tales of people long ago – they are testimonies of lives of faith
- These are not alabaster saints – they are real people, they made mistakes but they were driven by faith
- Most importantly, their God is our God, their Father is our Father, their family is our family
- Their people are our people and their name is our name

More than one quarter of Genesis is devoted to the life of Jacob but the writer to the Hebrews selects one thing

- The blessing of Joseph's sons as Jacob's outstanding act of faith (Gen. 48:15-16)
- It has the great quality of reaching towards the promise of God, even in the face of death
- And it celebrates the God who promises, the God who cares and the God who saves

## I THE GOD WHO PROMISES

As far as I know, an arrangement for Methodist people to celebrate the covenant service is made every year

- And while some people consider it to be a dreadfully dull ‘cold turkey’ (New Year) service
- There is no doubt that, entered into properly, the covenant service is the high-point of the Methodist year
- John Wesley borrowed the service from the Puritans, Richard and Joseph Alleine. Richard Alleine wrote:

“Good news from heaven. The Lord God has made and established a covenant ... which, if you lay hold of it, will recover all you have lost, ransom you from death, redeem you from hell, and advance you to a more sure and blessed condition than the original state from which you have fallen.”

In the covenant service, John Wesley urged the Methodists to do together what had been a private devotion

- Celebrating the promise, “‘I will be their God’ (Jer. 31:33)’. He is the friend and the portion of the saints.’
- The Alleine’s emphasis was, despite opposition, to triumph in faith and walk humbly with God
- So Jacob, heir of the promises made to Abraham, reaches out towards the promise, even in face of death
- The writer of Genesis collectively calls Joseph’s sons, ‘Joseph’, ‘Then he blessed Joseph and said ...
- “May the God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked faithfully”’ (Gen. 48:15)

When we say in the covenant service, ‘we meet as generations of our fathers have done’

- We say we want to be heirs of the promises of God – Wesley, Luther, saints, apostles are our people
- Thomas Olivers, born in 1725 at Tregynon, Wales, converted under the preaching of George Whitefield
- met John Wesley, preached with him, mainly in Cornwall, and wrote, ‘The God of Abraham praise’

## II THE GOD WHO CARES

Jacob moves on from remembering that God is the covenant God who made great promises to his fathers

- and recalls how God had steadied his own faith in many crises – not least at Bethel (Gen. 28:10-19)
- when, on the run from Esau, in fear for his life, Jacob had a dream (most of us know about the ladder but that is not the important bit) – above the ladder stood the LORD who said to him

‘I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.’

It was the presence and promises of God that sustained Jacob’s faith (cf. 28:13; 31:5, 42; 32:9; 46:3)

- this is the essence of testimony – of God working in the life of a believer – testimony that encourages
- and this is what the writer to the Hebrews is doing now – when their faith is wavering (shrinking back)
- he reminds them of people in their own generation who, when persecuted, persevered and did not give up
- and then, he reminds them that they stand in a great heritage of men and women of faith
- including the patriarchs, and including Jacob, who did not see the coming of the Christ (Messiah)
- or live in the knowledge of his coming –but who walked by faith, believing the promises of God
- and who, in all the ups and downs of life, believed that God was with them – as Jacob said:
- ‘the God who has been my shepherd, all my life to this day,’
- But if there was a decisive moment in the life of Jacob it was at Peniel – when Jacob met:

### III THE GOD WHO SAVES

After living for many years with his uncle, Laban, and marrying into his home clan, as his father wished

- But a major falling out with Laban meant that it was time for Jacob and family to leave
- Jacob decided to head home and to meet his estranged brother Esau from whom he had fled
- In order to pacify Esau, he sent all he had before him, with great gifts for Esau
- But on the night before the two met, Jacob was left alone, and here at night he met the ‘man of God’
- In the blessing of Joseph’s sons, Jacob calls this ‘man of God’, ‘the Angel who delivered me’

The story of Jacob at the ford of Jabbok (Peniel) raises many questions that cannot be answered

- But it seems to be that this ‘angel of God’ (angel meaning ‘messenger’) is not a created being
- But God in human form, technically called ‘a theophany’ – effectively God in appearance as a man
- The struggle with God that night is a summary of the struggles of his whole life
- But it comes down to the answer to one question – Jacob asks the man he wrestles to bless him
- But in reply, the man asks the question that has probably haunted Jacob for years, ‘what is your name?’
- Jacob had wrestled with his brother, he had struggled with his father, his father-in-law and now with God
- When Jacob answers honestly, ‘Jacob’, he receives a new name ‘Israel’ – ‘he struggles with God’
- a confirmation of the promise – Jacob describes the angel as the one ‘who rescued me from every evil’
- when he fled from his brother only to find himself in the clutches of his uncle and had no human rescuer
- God stepped in and rescued him from his uncle (Gen. 31:42) and from his brother (Gen. 32-33)
- In the wrestling, surely a metaphor for an intense pouring out of the heart in prayer – he ran away
- from his parents, his brother, an unhappy marriage, his second wife died and, as he thought, Joseph too
- The significant thing is, finally, Jacob faced up to his own identity and is immediately given a new name

If Abraham received Isaac back from death, figuratively speaking, so Jacob received Joseph back

- Joseph's (figurative) resurrection allowed Jacob to die in peace – in Jesus we have a 'greater Joseph'
- One who allows many to face death with courage and hope (1 Pet 1:3; cf. Phil 1:21–26).

Although once again the natural order of the firstborn is bypassed (blessing Joseph not Reuben)

- a difficulty with our text is that ancient Hebrew manuscripts have no vowels
- without vowels, the Hebrew word for bed and staff are the same – the Greek translation of the OT (LXX)
- says 'staff' and that is what the writer to the Hebrews quotes – 'bed' is clearly a possible translation
- but 'staff' would have been an appropriate object to symbolise Jacob's pilgrimage (Gen. 32:10)
- physically, the old man was weak, but his faith was strong – his blessing shows that
- He anticipated a time when his descendants would inherit their own land and by God's mercy prosper
- His blessing expressed 'the assurance of things hoped for' – his God would not fail them
- Jacob made Joseph promise that he would not bury his father in Egypt but in Canaan (Gen. 47:28-31)
- Which, itself, was an expression of faith in the promise of possession of the land – it was worship
- Later, the blessing of the 12 sons is recorded, including Judah, from whom comes David and the Messiah
- For God will ultimately bring about all that he has promised – that will be fulfilled in Jesus Christ
- But for now Jacob ('Israel' Gen. 48:8) says of his God – "may he bless these boys
- may they be called by my name and the names of my fathers Abraham and Isaac,
- and may they increase greatly on the earth." We are that increase, these people are our people
- their story is our story, they are our spiritual ancestors, their testimony, their story matters to us
- their God is our God, their Father is our Father, their family is our family, their name is our name
- Early in her career, someone suggested to Natasha Kaplinsky that her surname was not 'telegenic'
- She replied, 'Kaplinsky is my identity, it's my heritage, it's everything to do with my family.'

The God of Abraham praise, who reigns enthroned above;  
Ancient of everlasting days, and God of Love;  
Jehovah, great I AM! by earth and Heav'n confessed;  
I bow and bless the sacred Name forever blessed.

The God of Abraham praise, at Whose supreme command  
From earth I rise—and seek the joys at His right hand;  
I all on earth forsake, its wisdom, fame, and power;  
And Him my only Portion make, my Shield and Tower.

The God of Abraham praise, whose all sufficient grace  
Shall guide me all my happy days, in all my ways.  
He calls a worm His friend, He calls Himself my God!  
And He shall save me to the end, thro' Jesus' blood.

He by Himself has sworn; I on His oath depend,  
I shall, on eagle wings upborne, to Heav'n ascend.  
I shall behold His face; I shall His power adore,  
And sing the wonders of His grace forevermore.

Tho' nature's strength decay, and earth and hell withstand,  
To Canaan's bounds I urge my way, at His command.  
The wat'ry deep I pass, with Jesus in my view;  
And thro' the howling wilderness my way pursue.

The goodly land I see, with peace and plenty bless'd;  
A land of sacred liberty, and endless rest.  
There milk and honey flow, and oil and wine abound,  
And trees of life forever grow with mercy crowned.

There dwells the Lord our King, the Lord our righteousness,  
Triumphant o'er the world and sin, the Prince of peace;  
On Sion's sacred height His kingdom still maintains,  
And glorious with His saints in light forever reigns.

He keeps His own secure, He guards them by His side,  
Arrays in garments, white and pure, His spotless bride:  
With streams of sacred bliss, with groves of living joys—  
With all the fruits of Paradise, He still supplies.

Before the great Three-One they all exulting stand;  
And tell the wonders He hath done, through all their land:  
The list'ning spheres attend, and swell the growing fame;  
And sing, in songs which never end, the wondrous Name.

The God Who reigns on high the great archangels sing,  
And "Holy, holy, holy!" cry, "Almighty King!  
Who was, and is, the same, and evermore shall be:  
Jehovah—Father—great I AM, we worship Thee!"

Before the Saviour's face the ransomed nations bow;  
O'erwhelmed at His almighty grace, forever new:  
He shows His prints of love—they kindle to a flame!  
And sound thro' all the worlds above the slaughtered Lamb.

The whole triumphant host give thanks to God on high;  
"Hail, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost," they ever cry.  
Hail, Abraham's God, and mine! (I join the heav'nly lays,)  
All might and majesty are Thine, and endless praise.