

Joseph and Esau:

From a bitter to a better way

**A biblical study
for those who feel they have been treated unfairly
and want to keep a pure heart in God's sight.**

In five parts.

Pre-script

Part I:	Oh brother!
Part II:	Esau: bitterness is disappointment solidified
Part III:	The cross is the wood that sweetens the waters
Part IV:	Joseph: from a bitter to a better way
Part V:	Bringing forgiveness home

Post-script

Joseph and Esau:

From a bitter to a better way

A pre-script

“Who are you aiming this at?” would a very good and natural question for you to ask. Is this a plea for anyone who has relationship issues to deal with them? In the current church climate what connotations does this plea have? Am I assuming that everyone who feels negative towards ICOC is bitter? This would indeed be unfair. Someone hurt under the old regime who read an early draft of this piece expressed it like this: “Personally I forgive everyone but I trust very few. If you are assuming I am bitter, this is one more misunderstanding of the way I feel.”

This is actually directed more at ex-ministry staff. There are some 70 I believe in the UK and Ireland. Emily and I are two of them. There is a danger of entrenched hurt and looking backwards. We either go forward together with our critics or we don't go anywhere at all. You have to believe they love God and care about the church. To believe otherwise will destroy you. You will be guilty of the things you hold them responsible for. Just as two wrongs don't make a right, three don't either. People in the ICC were sinned against. You accepted blame and apologised. Instead of it ending there, you received much more “help” so that you would “get it”. Now “they” are in charge. It's not time to look for the chance to prove “them” wrong and rejoice when they make a mess. Three wrongs don't make a right either. “An eye for an eye will make the whole world blind in time,” Ghandi said.

*If this is controversial I suggest it will be in this way. **Can I focus on my heart when the church is in a mess?** The argument goes like this: the normal rules of discipleship only apply when there is a church functioning in the way we used to have it. I am therefore relieved of my obligations to be joyful, love, forgive and reach out due to special circumstances.*

This is not too dissimilar from the following argument: the normal rules of discipleship do not apply when we have a pseudo church with systemic evil. I do not have to respect or honour my leaders who work hard (1 Thess 5:12), give contribution, avoid slander and apply Matthew 18 due to special circumstances. (You may have attributed this argument to others.)

This in turn is not unlike the argument that accompanied the Communist Revolutions¹. Society has an economic sub-structure and sociological super-structure. Men are fundamentally good, but capitalism (a bad sub-structure) brings out the evil in man. Religion is bad because it tells people not to worry about the sub-structure but to focus on the rewards in heaven and their own hearts. It thus delays the revolution that will help everyone be good. Because it distracts it may be called the “Opium of the People.”

If you change “society” to “church” and “economic sub-structure” to “church system” you may see the similarity. Some may feel that papers written against bitterness or such like are distracting from the real issue of bringing about the revolution (or, God help us, the counter-revolution). “What you don't understand”, the thinking continues, “is that unless we get the church fixed, people will not be able to be real Christians, and that includes me.” Using this method, we can subtly be drawn into believing the normal rules are suspended for certain Crusaders, like you the reader. If this applies to people who sought change in the ICOC through vigorous campaigns in the first part of 2003, so be it: they are not the audience for which I am intending to write.

[James Greig the author has been a disciple for 20 years. He joined the full-time ICC staff in 1994 and since then has led congregations, studied Theology at Cambridge University and taught the staff MTP programme from 1998 onwards. He left the ministry earlier this year due to the changes in the UK.]

¹ *Apologies if I misstate Marxist theory, but balancing the value of the analogy against the chances that this is materially wrong and being read by a Neo-Marxist I think it is worth the chance!*

PART I: OH BROTHER!

Oh brother!

I am the oldest of 3 boys. (We have no sisters.) Growing up during the school holidays, fights were not uncommon. Generally, being the biggest, I would end up on top (literally). A frustrated younger brother would resort to threats of doing nasty things to me later in life, which I am glad to say he has not carried out!

Why is it that brothers have a hard time getting on? Here is what one literal younger brother wrote about men-to-men relationships in general.

A song of ascents. Of David.

PS 133:1 How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!

PS 133:2 It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron's beard, down upon the collar of his robes.

PS 133:3 It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion.

For there the LORD bestows his blessing, even life forevermore.

Pleasant but rare is the summary, as it would feel if Mount Hermon's dew were to reach Jerusalem. (Mount Hermon is the highest mountain in Israel in the North and is often seen snow-capped, whereas Jerusalem is in the hot and dusty South. Refreshing dew would be welcome there.) The scent of the oil, not by any means an everyday occurrence, would also have been pleasant. And when brothers do get it together, it is certainly "good and pleasant" from my own experience.²

And yet it is rare. You will see this is the case if you think through the Bible for examples of brotherly relations. James and John seem to have got on OK, but the first two brothers mentioned, Cain and Abel, certainly had their differences. When I think of other brother relationships, like Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers, Moses and Aaron, David with his older brothers and Jesus' brothers initially it does resonate with my own experience. There may well be others. Although it has wider application to the fellowship of God's people, I wonder if David managed a wry smile as he penned the first line of this Psalm. Oh, brother!

If there's one thing to take from this, it is that good relationships are not a given. You do not just fall into them, especially if you are a man relating to other men. If these stories have any meaning for us, and they most certainly do, as we shall see, then we can learn much from what the Bible has to teach us about brotherly love.³

² The same brother who made the threats just spent two days away from his family showing me how to fit shelves and cupboards. Thanks, Pete!

³ The NT writers tell us we have MUCH to learn from the OT narrative passages, for example Romans 15:4 and 1 Cor 10:11. Although not written *to* us, it is written *for* us. ^{RO 15:4} *For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.* ⁵ *May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus,* ⁶ *so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

^{1CO 10:11} *These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfilment of the ages has come.* ¹² *So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall.*

Let brotherly love continue!

This is the King James translation of Hebrews 13:1, and my dad frequently quoted it to us when my brothers and I were not getting on. Would our heavenly father like to say the same thing to us sometimes? He already has done in the New Testament:

^{1PE 3:8} Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble. ⁹ Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing

^{RO 12:10} Be devoted to one another in brotherly love.

^{HEB 13:1} Keep on loving each other as brothers.

Given the tendency of brothers' relationships to sour, does it not seem strange that God should use brothers' love as though it was something we had all experienced and as a paradigm for our own relationships in the church? Perhaps it does a little, except that we believe in the potential and strength of bond that brothers can have. Why else have the churches of Christ historically liked to use the phrase "the brotherhood" as an alternative self-designation? Phrases like "brothers in arms", the black culture's use of "brother" to refer to all male relationships and the French revolution's call to "Liberty, Freedom, Brotherhood" all speak of a near universal aspiration to the ideal of what brotherhood should be.

But perhaps the existence of these verses tells us the opposite. If brothers in the early church were already close, there would be no need for these exhortations. Certainly we need this encouragement. Can you say these things and mean them?

- "I will love as a brother"
- "I will be devoted to the church with brotherly love."

As someone once said, "Feel the fear and do it anyway." Whether it is fear, insecurity long memories or sheer laziness, God our heavenly father tells us in regard to our relationships in the church and in particular brother to brother to "Do it anyway."

A birthday insight

I was baptised into Christ on 1st June 1983. It was in the mainline Church of Christ's baptistry in Bermondsey. Both my parents were there to support me (and find out what their son was getting into, no doubt!) This year I just passed my 20th spiritual birthday. How do you commemorate your spiritual birthdays? Maybe you don't, and that's fine too.⁴ The last few years I have studied out the chapter and verse references that related to my spiritual age, e.g. for my 18th birthday I looked at Genesis 18:18, Exodus 18:18 etc all the way to Revelation. (I don't recommend this as your normal Bible study method, and I will only do it myself once a year!) This year I did the

⁴ ^{RO 14:5} One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. ⁶ He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord.

20:20s and found many helpful nuggets, not least Numbers 20:20. This got me thinking about this area of brother-to-brother relationships.

^{NU 20:20} Again they answered: "You may not pass through."

Then Edom came out against them with a large and powerful army.

Initially this was not a very promising verse from which to glean an insight, but if you mine the vein "as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure"⁵ you never know where it may take you.

This is the Israelites journeying from the Red Sea up towards the promised land of Canaan. They have a simple request of the Edomites – to pass through. They do not want anything from the Edomites. What do they get? A large and powerful army comes out! Why? Did they want money from Israel? What did they have to lose? It almost seems like spite.

Actually, this is not far wrong, for the Edomites were the descendants of one man, Esau, just as Israel was descended from just one man, Jacob. Jacob and Esau had once been brothers – more than that, twins – and there was lasting enmity between their descendants.

^{GE 36:1} This is the account of Esau (that is, Edom). ² Esau took his wives from the women of Canaan: Adah daughter of Elon the Hittite, and Oholibamah daughter of Anah and granddaughter of Zibeon the Hivite-- ³ also Basemath daughter of Ishmael and sister of Nebaioth....

^{GE 36:40} These were the chiefs descended from Esau, by name, according to their clans and regions: Timna, Alvah, Jetheth, ⁴¹ Oholibamah, Elah, Pinon, ⁴² Kenaz, Teman, Mibzar, ⁴³ Magdiel and Iram. These were the chiefs of Edom, according to their settlements in the land they occupied. This was Esau the father of the Edomites.

For those who know the story, the enmity may be surprising. After all, Esau and Jacob made up in a wonderful, tearful embrace on Jacob's return to Canaan described in Genesis 33. But sadly this personal forgiveness expressed by Esau was not passed on to his offspring, who for all future generations were cut off from the land and blessings promised to Abraham as a result of what happened in that small but important dysfunctional family in which Jacob and Esau grew up.

For those who don't know the story, the enmity may be still more surprising. Hadn't Israel just come out of slavery? Who would not want to help them? They had been suffering there for some four centuries.⁶ This means the grudge between Edom and Israel was over 400 years old, which must be close to the record! It was still deep enough to prompt a large and powerful army in response to a plea for help from undoubtedly the weaker nation. Can't we let bygone be bygone? The answer from around the world is a resounding no. We don't seem to be able to. In the church it should be different, but is it? We should be warned. Even if personally we make up, what seeds of discontent have we been sowing in the meantime? These seeds may grow up into vast trees of division that it is too late to cut down, and only the innocent suffer.

I remember one brother in Oxford with whom I had the privilege of studying the Bible. During our Bible Studies I was unkind and disrespectful on one occasion in

⁵ Proverbs 2:4

⁶ Exodus 12:40 and Galatians 3:17

particular. Later on I invited him to come on a short holiday break and he came. On holiday he told me how I had made him feel. I was deeply convicted that what I had done had been wrong. I was equally impressed with this godly man, not yet baptized, who had been willing to go on a holiday with someone who had hurt him. He could easily have run away or “been busy”. Who wants to go on holiday with someone who is not nice to you? After all, it could happen again. In addition to his willingness to take the hand of friendship from someone who seemed to have disqualified himself he told me that he had refused to explain his feelings towards me with anyone until he had brought them up with me personally. I was so impressed. I was learning from him.

Are you still feeling hurt by someone? If for some reason you are not willing to resolve it right now, whom are you influencing in the meantime? You may be able to make up later, but “woe to the one who causes another to sin” and those you influence may not be able to forgive as well as you. The Edomites followed Esau in his initial desire for vengeance but it seems they did not follow him in his forgiveness. The harm had been done.

Have you made up with someone? Have you built up the relationship as publicly as you tore the person down before? Do you allow others to keep thinking a rift exists? Sometimes the damning can be subtle. “It is appalling how you have been treated,” someone said to me once, and a little part of me enjoyed it and grew. That part was a cancer sometimes called “Self-Pity” and also going by the name of “Bitterness.” It was a mortal cancer but one that by God’s daily grace for now has been cured. But what did I say in response? A response of silence on your part can be enough to foster further bitterness in the other person. Like a cancer, it is not contagious and cannot be passed from one person to another. Bitterness is a personal response. But are you curing others or nurturing this cancer in them?

PART II: ESAU: BITTERNESS IS DISAPPOINTMENT SOLIDIFIED

“Two houses, both alike in dignity...”

Shakespeare begins his play *Romeo and Juliet* with these words. The houses are the Montague and Capulet families who nurse an “ancient grudge” towards each other, resulting in the unnecessary deaths of the two lovers.

Many unnecessary tragedies begin with grudges. The “ancient grudge” between the houses of Edom and Israel began a long time before with a prophecy given to Rebekah as she was pregnant with the twins Esau and Jacob who were to be the fathers respectively of these two houses.

GE 25:23 The LORD said to her,
"Two nations are in your womb,
and two peoples from within you will be separated;
one people will be stronger than the other,
and the older will serve the younger."

GE 25:24 When the time came for her to give birth, there were twin boys in her womb. ²⁵ The first to come out was red, and his whole body was like a hairy garment; so they named him Esau. ²⁶ After this, his brother came out, with his hand grasping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when Rebekah gave birth to them.

GE 25:27 The boys grew up, and Esau became a skilful hunter, a man of the open country, while Jacob was a quiet man, staying among the tents. ²⁸ Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob.

GE 25:29 Once when Jacob was cooking some stew, Esau came in from the open country, famished. ³⁰ He said to Jacob, "Quick, let me have some of that red stew! I'm famished!" (That is why he was also called Edom.)

GE 25:31 Jacob replied, "First sell me your birthright."

GE 25:32 "Look, I am about to die," Esau said. "What good is the birthright to me?"

GE 25:33 But Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore an oath to him, selling his birthright to Jacob.

GE 25:34 Then Jacob gave Esau some bread and some lentil stew. He ate and drank, and then got up and left.

So Esau despised his birthright.

The stage is set here. We see the two boys entering the world. We learn about their different characters. We are told their destinies before they are born, that the older will serve the younger i.e. that Jacob will rule Esau. We then see this graphic, memorable transaction of selling the birthright for some stew – “red pottage” in the KJV.

Beware the quiet ones! Aren't they the most dangerous? You never know what they are thinking. This is certainly true of Jacob. We are told he was a quiet man, staying among the tents. Exactly what *was* he thinking about all the time? It is hardly brotherly love when your brother asks you for a dish of food you have already cooked and you start bringing inheritance rights into question! What *had* he been thinking about all day? As if it's not bad enough, there is a second stage. Esau loosely says, “Fine, have it,” and then Jacob pulls out an already prepared legal document and pen and tells him to sign on the dotted line before giving him his spoon. Obviously there

is no paper and pen, but this is today's equivalent of the guaranteed oath that Jacob demands. Oaths, blessings and curses were all taken very seriously in those days, as the rest of the story makes clear.

In terms of setting the scene, it is implied that Isaac and Rebekah both had their favourites. My wife added the helpful comment that any mother would be likely to compensate if she saw her husband showing any favouritism, and in Rebekah's partial defence that could well be what happened here.

Robbed!

Isaac prepares to confer the blessings of the firstborn, and therefore also of the covenant the Lord had made with his own father Abraham, on his favourite Esau. The special moment between father and son is carefully planned down to the meal, and old blind Isaac no doubt even rehearses the words he will use. Rebekah overhears and sets about making plans that will involve Esau's part in the blessing ceremony being played by her favourite, Jacob.⁷

We chance upon the scene just as Jacob kneels down before his blind father, wearing Esau's clothes and bringing the meal that Esau was supposed to have prepared, with the knowledge that at any moment Esau might arrive, flinging back the curtain across the tent-mouth. Isaac is speaking

GE 27:25 Then he said, "My son, bring me some of your game to eat, so that I may give you my blessing."

Jacob brought it to him and he ate; and he brought some wine and he drank.²⁶ Then his father Isaac said to him, "Come here, my son, and kiss me."

GE 27:27 So he went to him and kissed him. When Isaac caught the smell of his clothes, he blessed him and said, "Ah, the smell of my son is like the smell of a field that the LORD has blessed.

GE 27:28 May God give you of heaven's dew and of earth's richness—
an abundance of grain and new wine.

GE 27:29 May nations serve you and peoples bow down to you.

Be lord over your brothers, and may the sons of your mother bow down to you.

May those who curse you be cursed and those who bless you be blessed."

GE 27:30 After Isaac finished blessing him and Jacob had scarcely left his father's presence, his brother Esau came in from hunting.³¹ He too prepared some tasty food and brought it to his father. Then he said to him, "My father, sit up and eat some of my game, so that you may give me your blessing."

GE 27:32 His father Isaac asked him, "Who are you?"

"I am your son," he answered, "your firstborn, Esau."

GE 27:33 Isaac trembled violently and said, "Who was it, then, that hunted game and brought it to me? I ate it just before you came and I blessed him--and indeed he will be blessed!"

GE 27:34 When Esau heard his father's words, he burst out with a loud and bitter cry and said to his father, "Bless me--me too, my father!"

GE 27:35 But he said, "Your brother came deceitfully and took your blessing."

⁷ The deliberate fulfilment of God's pre-declared purposes is an interesting topic. Does God need us to plan to fulfil his wishes? Jesus said "I thirst" on the cross so that Scripture would be fulfilled, and he chose to enter Jerusalem on a donkey. However, in neither of these cases did he sin. At first sight, Rebekah just wants to get her baby the best deal she can, and is willing to trick her husband for it. But what if she remembered the terms of the prophecy and feared that God's plans would not be realised? Does this in some way excuse her action? The answer would have to be no, even if one supposes that God foresaw her sin in advance and took this into account in giving her the original prophecy. The fact is that there is never any excuse for sin, and any arguments based upon predestination will not wash in the final analysis. The film *Minority Report* explores this theme further and supports the idea that we all have free choice for which we are truly accountable.

^{GE 27:36} Esau said, "Isn't he rightly named Jacob? He has deceived me these two times: He took my birthright, and now he's taken my blessing!" Then he asked, "Haven't you reserved any blessing for me?"

^{GE 27:37} Isaac answered Esau, "I have made him lord over you and have made all his relatives his servants, and I have sustained him with grain and new wine. So what can I possibly do for you, my son?"

^{GE 27:38} Esau said to his father, "Do you have only one blessing, my father? Bless me too, my father!" Then Esau wept aloud.

^{GE 27:39} His father Isaac answered him,

"Your dwelling will be away from the earth's richness, away from the dew of heaven above.

^{GE 27:40} You will live by the sword and you will serve your brother.

But when you grow restless, you will throw his yoke from off your neck."

^{GE 27:41} Esau held a grudge against Jacob because of the blessing his father had given him. He said to himself, "The days of mourning for my father are near; then I will kill my brother Jacob."

There are few more bitter moments in the entire Bible than those in verses 34 and 38. Esau's loud and bitter cry, "Bless me – me too, my Father" and the knowledge that it is all too late, rips at the heart of all who believe in fairness.

Esau has been robbed. Twice now his brother Jacob has robbed him in broad daylight. As if this is not hurtful enough, his own mother has aided and abetted the robbery – how should he feel towards her? Lastly, it must have seemed that God had robbed him too by allowing it to happen.

Do you feel cheated? Esau did. Perhaps the only one he did not feel betrayed by was his father Isaac. In a frantic move he tries to win favour from his father by marrying from Abraham's people (which he had not done before), but it is too late. (Gen 28:6-9) It adds to the poignancy.

Bitterness is disappointment solidified

A turning point, a crucial moment came in verse 41, which reads

^{GE 27:41} Esau held a grudge against Jacob because of the blessing his father had given him. He said to himself, "The days of mourning for my father are near; then I will kill my brother Jacob."

Before this point, Esau was in deep distress and emotional pain. At this point, he sins. The move is now made – and the hand taken off the chess piece. Instead of the pain sweetening into forgiveness, it hardens into a settled grudge. Concrete plans are made for revenge and the timing of the revenge. It is no longer just Jacob who is the schemer. Someone expressed the relationship between disappointment (the feeling with which God sympathises) and bitterness (the sin for which God will judge us) in this way: **bitterness is disappointment solidified**. For Esau before verse 41 sin was crouching at his door and desired to master him. In verse 41 he opens the door and lets sin in. Before this point a choice lay before him. After this moment he hardens his heart and, as happened to Judas when he took the bread, "Satan entered into him."⁸

⁸ John 13:27. There is a clearly consistent theology here of the individual's choice to sin from as far back as Genesis through to the gospels. Cain is presented with a choice – and he decides to sin. *So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast.* ^{GE 4:6} *Then the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? ⁷ If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it."* The evangelist John hints that Judas kept his choices open right up until this moment – then hardened his heart as he left to betray Jesus.

(One might add as the evangelist John does as Judas left the upper room, “And it was night.”)

There is nothing wrong with disappointment. We all feel hurt. It is part of what defines us as human beings. “Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, sense, affections, passions?”⁹ asks Shylock in the play Merchant of Venice. Yes, we all feel disappointment at times. It is an essential part of being human.

These are some possible emotional reactions that could turn into bitterness.

- You are unhappy today, and it can be traced back to disillusionment
- You pushed yourself to come to all the meetings, gave your contributions and had the daily quiet times. “Fat lot of good that did me.”
- The church did not turn out to be all you believed it to be
- God’s plan seems bewildering, if not downright mistaken
- Hurt feelings because someone was unkind or not the friend you thought they were
- Lonely because no-one calls (or practically no-one).

Feelings of disappointment are not sin. When we let disappointment solidify in our hearts and choose to allow a bitter root to develop we have sinned. There is no justification for bitterness towards a brother or sister, a family member, any church or human organization, God or even ourselves. All must be forgiven.

Are you at a point of disappointment? What are the signs of bitterness setting in? If others were to write your story in a few years’ time, could they see a moment in your life when your disappointment solidified, as is recorded for Esau in Genesis 27:41?

⁹ This memorable and - at the time it was written - controversial passage from Act III, scene I continues “Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer?”

PART III:
THE CROSS IS THE WOOD THAT SWEETENS THE WATERS

As dangerous as a snake pit

If Satan is a serpent, **the present situation for an ex-staff person is as dangerous as a snake pit.** For every problem you are spoilt for choice who to blame! The “buck” can be given to almost anyone. As you do, the viper bites. The fangs release their venom. Action must be swift and radical before the venom reaches the heart.

Imagine the situation where your friend Gary, whom you studied the Bible with, is now wandering spiritually. You can’t help him because as an ex-staffer he has recently been influenced not to trust you (perhaps justified to an extent?) Notwithstanding the fact that he might have struggled anyway (or perhaps was never as mature as you thought he was), you have a wonderful choice of targets to aim at. Each one can deliver you back a fatal bite. Who are they?

1. Those who made me redundant by withholding their contribution. (You can imagine the face.)
2. The higher-up ICC leaders who created this mess.
3. The “friends” I thought I had who betrayed me by omission.
4. Those who claimed we didn’t need full-time staff.
5. Those who didn’t plan ahead but acted on emotion.
6. The interim leadership groups for not doing more to help Gary.
7. God, for allowing the “whole stinking mess”!

You will see that getting bitter is not that hard. You are in a veritable snake pit.

If you want to guard your heart, you must first get humble and to do that we will look at Esau. Secondly, as the Israelites were cured from snakebites by looking to the bronze snake, we must learn to look to Jesus on the cross. This is not theory any more. It is the only remedy for the venom, and time is of the essence.

First, get humble

While I have painted Esau in a sympathetic light till now, it must be remembered that he was a sinner. The NT calls him godless.¹⁰

HEB 12:16 See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son.¹⁷ Afterward, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. He could bring about no change of mind, though he sought the blessing with tears. How else was he a sinner? Here are some of the ways.

¹⁰ Immediately before this verse is the one about not allowing a bitter root to grow up. Exegeting the passage correctly, Esau is held out as a warning for godlessness, not bitterness. In fact the passage has nothing to do with bitterness. The reference to a “bitter root” is to a weed, the weed of sexual immorality and godlessness. Weeds grow fast! Bitterness spreads too, but this is not the point the passage is making. The use of the word “bitter” is confusing. It is as much part of the picture (rather than being the teaching point) as the floodwaters of 1 Peter 3:20.

1. He dishonoured his parents by marrying outside the fellowship of his monotheistic extended family. (Gen 27:46, 28:8)
2. he chose bitterness, nursed a grudge and planned his own brother's murder (Gen 27:41)
3. he showed contempt for sacred things like his birthright, even making oaths lightly, in the incident with the stew. The Bible calls this 'godless' and we may not take this less seriously. (Heb 12:16)
4. He was not holy.¹¹ (Heb 12:14)

Are you sympathetic to Esau? It is not wrong to be compassionate. But do you have God's attitude towards sinful man? Would it give us licence for our own grievances if we failed to condemn Esau as roundly as Scripture does? Few verses slam this form of pride and self-pity better than Lamentations 3:39.

^{LA 3:39} Why should any living man complain when punished for his sins?

May God forgive us for our steaming pride. He was here long before we were and owes us nothing. It is time to stop painting ourselves as pure as the driven snow, revisit our hearts and apply the Bible to them. (We can all remember how refreshing – and convicting - that was!)

Perhaps you like to paint yourself in a sympathetic light, or others do it well for you (as with the brother I referred to earlier who sympathised with me). We too, like Esau are sinners in need of forgiveness.¹²

1. Are you perfect? Are you self-righteous? (Luke 9:18)
2. Are you thankful? (2 Tim 3:1-5)
3. Have you committed adultery with the world in thought or action? (James 4:4)
4. Have you delighted in another's misfortune instead of praying blessings on your enemies? (1 Cor 13:6) Any record of wrongs?
5. Are you a lover of pleasure more than God for the moment? (2 Tim 3:1-5))
6. Are you a holy man or woman? (1 Peter 1:15, 16)

With less accountability and more sermons on grace, are we sinning less? Is our desire for holiness greater? Or is there apathy? Do we eagerly long to see fellow-Christians? (2 Th 3:10) When last did you have a special time with God? Are you hungry in your Bible study? Are you looking at how to please God more (2 Th 4:1ff) or just studying out doctrines? Do you tell God you love him? Are you throwing yourself into career, hobbies, home improvements or family to find satisfaction that used to be provided by the mission (and really must be found first with the Lord)?

¹¹ It seems fair to follow the Hebrews writer's train of thought this way through his themes in this paragraph and the example chosen of Esau.

¹² We can learn a lot from our children, as every parent knows. Sometimes your own words come back at you. How about this for a reminder that we are all sinful? My wife Emily got onto a bus recently with both our small children and a kind man helped her with the pushchair. Everyone was seated on the bus when my 3 year old noted approvingly to his mum, "He is a kind man, isn't he?" Then in full hearing of everyone on the bus he added the cautionary note, "But he's naughty sometimes too, isn't he?!"

Secondly, look up to the cross

The first escape from the snake pit is to get humble and accept our own sinfulness, both in general and in the present context. We do have some responsibility.

The second, then, is to look up to Jesus. Was he not lifted up for this very purpose, so that all who looked on him and believed might find healing?

^{JN 3:14} Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

We find healing when we see him on the cross and see his serene – and gutsy – trust in his Father.

^{1PE 2:23} When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. ^{1PE 2:23} When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.

There are few places we see his trust in God more than in his quoting of Psalm 31:5 on the cross – for look at the prayer with which the quote ends! (For all that the breath failed to carry the words onto his lips, I know inside and believe that the rest was in his heart!)

^{PS 31:5} Into your hands I commit my spirit;
redeem me, O LORD, the God of truth.

He looked to God to redeem him. The path out of the snake pit is upwards – to the grace of God and to the cross!

We have through the cross all we need to be able to fulfill the Lord's expectation – and condition that we forgive. We pray in the Lord's Prayer

^{MT 6:12} Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

^{MT 6:13} And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. '

^{MT 6:14} For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵ But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

God's forgiveness is here stated to be conditional on our forgiving men's sins against us. Is this somehow works-based salvation? No, faith-based because the one who won't forgive his brother cannot really grasp either his own indebtedness to God or the fact that by God's grace he has been completely forgiven!

When I think of someone who could not forgive I think of the unmerciful servant in Matthew 20. (As the Lord's Prayer indicates, forgiveness and the canceling of debts are linked images.) He was forgiven his debt of millions of pounds and then tried to get his fiver back by bullying. There are many lessons from this parable, but one has to be our tendency not to really grasp how much we owe God and how total our forgiveness is – and it shows in our actions. [Cf. Matt 5:21-24] Let there be no mistake: God is mad about it when bitterness develops between his children. Jesus says it:

MT 18: 34 In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. ^{MT 18:35} "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

Why does the master punish him so dreadfully? **Because he had provided the grace first.** God doesn't say "Measure up to my standards, including the 100% forgiveness one, and if I'm satisfied it's genuine you'll get into heaven." He says, "Believe!"

This is why the conditional passages work: they force us back to repent of the real issue, which is our pride and lack of belief.

The cross is the wood that sweetens the waters

There is a great picture in the Old Testament of how the cross cures bitterness. It is in Exodus 15, when the Israelites had their hopes dashed. An oasis turned out to contain undrinkable water. In some ways we have had our hopes dashed too.

EX 15:23 When they came to Marah, they could not drink its water because it was bitter. (That is why the place is called Marah.) ²⁴ So the people grumbled against Moses, saying, "What are we to drink?" ^{EX 15:25} Then Moses cried out to the LORD, and the LORD showed him a piece of wood. He threw it into the water, and the water became sweet.

God led Israel to Marah (which means bitter), but it was not a mistake. He already had the miracle at hand which would sweeten it, if they would just believe and not panic!

In the New Testament, the Lord who desired the evangelisation of the Greeks and all nations **allowed** a terrible persecution and the stoning of an outstanding, promising Christian leader Stephen in Acts chapter 7 to bring it about. (Acts 11:19) (This brings glory to God of course, not a pardon to Saul or all the sinners who stoned him.) At the time it must have appeared an unmitigated disaster and tempted some to doubt their faith. How was this disaster Jesus building the church? If this was the new Israel of God, where was the promised protection of Almighty Yahweh?

To use a third example back in the Old Testament, God who allowed Haman's plot against the Jews to incubate and hatch already had the solution worked out. Esther was the Jewish Queen in the palace and he gave the Persian King one sleepless night to add to the fun.

We know that for the institutionalized problems in the ICC to change something pretty drastic needed to happen. Whether there was another less painful way for the UK and Ireland we will sadly never find out. One thing is for sure: God will treat everyone fairly and with grace. The end does not justify the means and the God who knew how to deal with a Haman and a Saul knows how to deal with those who in their anger against the old system sinned. But one wrong does not justify another wrong either and so the priority for all of us now has to be to look at the cross and keep our own hearts pure before we apportion blame and try to judge planks and splinters.

Jim Elliot was an American missionary to native tribes people in Ecuador. The Auca Indians martyred him and his four teammates on the sandy beach of a jungle river where their little plane had landed. He was just 23. He left a young widow Elizabeth who collected his letters and quiet time notes together in a book called "Shadow of

the Almighty.”¹³ Amazingly in love for the tribes people she and the four other newly widowed women continued their work. She had a clear opportunity to get bitter about the purposes of God for her life but instead she and her beloved Jim had deep convictions about always trusting God. Indeed in an early letter to her he had written of how God himself sometimes leads us into tough times for his purposes. This is what he wrote:

“Remember Marah. ‘And the Lord showed him a tree, which, when he had cast into the waters, the waters were made sweet.’ The *cloud* led Israel to Marah.”¹⁴

Truly the cross is the wood that sweetens our waters. And although he lived before the cross, Joseph is an outstanding example of grace in the face of unfairness from whom we will now learn.

¹³ Jim Elliot’s most famous quote is “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.” I had the privilege to meet Elizabeth at Redhill Baptist church in the 90s, some 10 years or so after I was first inspired by her husband’s notes as a young teenager.

¹⁴ The italics are his. Elisabeth Elliot, *Shadow of the Almighty*, Bromley 1979, p.90

PART IV: JOSEPH: FROM A BITTER TO A BETTER WAY

A bitter way to a better way

How encouraging God is to give us positive examples to inspire as well as negative examples from which to take warning! How encouraging Joseph's story is! He went through much of what Esau went through "yet was without sin" one could almost say!¹⁵

How were his circumstances similar? First, he had terrible relationship sibling relationships. He was sold into slavery by his brothers where Esau was tricked by his.

Secondly, Joseph had a special relationship with his earthly father Jacob (or Isaac), just as Esau had been his father Isaac's favourite. In Joseph's case the favouritism has been immortalized in the "amazing technicolour dreamcoat of many colours" his father gave him.

Next, although both Joseph and Esau were sinners, their punishment in earthly terms somehow seems out of all proportion. Esau lost the privileges that were rightly his under the cultural norms of his day and missed out on the covenantal blessings promised to his grandfather Abraham. We admit he was not perfect, but did this punishment fit the crime? Joseph was insensitive in telling his family his rather Joseph-exalting dreams, but that he had these dreams is not in question. I know (truthfully, I do!) how annoying younger brothers can be, but when there are ten of you there are many other ways of putting him in his place than to plot his murder and then to settle on selling him into lifelong slavery for some beer money. (We get counseling for much less these days – wouldn't this mess you up?) To further appreciate Joseph's emotional scarring it must also be remembered that the ten brothers still had their mother. Joseph's mother Rachel had died giving birth to little Benjamin. Leah, mother of the Ten, could hardly be counted to show the same affection to Rachel's children given their own dysfunctionality as sisters.

This leads on to our last and obvious link between the two men: the schemer Jacob. If Esau and Joseph's stories smack of *unfair suffering* (until one qualifies unfairness), Jacob really seems to have had *undeserved blessing*. He robbed his brother, wrestled with God, had favourites and was slow to learn grace. Whichever family he left claimed to have been robbed by him! (Do you know anyone with that knack?) Rather than trust God to work things out (David becomes our model of this in the OT, refusing to "claim" his anointing by killing Saul or "defend" it by dealing with the

¹⁵ Hebrews 4:15, about Jesus. Joseph was clearly not Jesus, and did indeed have sin, but God has given us a story that leaves the tortured wrestling of Joseph's soul to our imagination and leaves us in Scripture only with his triumph by faith. The extent to which Joseph was a type of Jesus is covered in many other places, I am sure: the dead one who was alive, the one whose "death" saved the world, the one who "died" faithful and was vindicated by his "resurrection". Luke gives Jesus an age at the start of his ministry which is imprecise – about 30 (Luke 3:23) – and one wonders if he, or Paul, is trying to make a link to Joseph as a type because of the clear statement that Joseph was 30 when he entered the service of Pharaoh. (Gen 41:46) Certainly 30 is not an age that comes up often in either the OT or NT, but David was 30 when he became king too, so that may be another messianic link the evangelist wants to make. (2 Sam 5:4)

young pretender Absalom), he always insists on working his own deliverance.¹⁶ For example, God promised him supremacy over his older brother Esau through a prophecy given to his mother as we have seen – but in case God found it hard to fulfil, he thought he would help himself to the birthright and blessing. These failings have led to my having a love-hate relationship with Jacob since we have the same name.¹⁷

Life is 10% what happens to you and 90% how you respond to it. (There are many other sayings that make this point.) How do Esau and Joseph compare?

	Esau	Joseph
Life circumstances	Unfair	Unfair
Turning point	Gen 27:41	??
Response	Bitterness	Faith

What was Joseph’s turning point? When did he have the choice to get bitter and decided to choose a better way? We don’t know. The Dreamworks animated film Joseph King of Dreamers suggested it happened when he was in prison, nursing a young plant.¹⁸ (After overcoming his unfair treatment once to rise to management in an Egyptian’s household he was thrown into prison, being framed and punished for allegedly making sport of his master’s wife. Isn’t it harder to make a comeback and forgive a second time?)

Why did Joseph choose the better way? He chose to put his eyes back on God. Perhaps Joseph learnt at his father Isaac’s knee about his old uncle Esau. Perhaps he decided then never to be like him.

“You are greater than I”

The Dreamworks film has a great soundtrack. In his darkest moments, somewhere between the cistern and Pharaoh’s palace he got his eyes back on God. Against all the evidence Joseph chose to believe in his Father’s plan for his life. Perhaps he learnt this too under the tents at home, hearing stories of his great grandfather Abraham, granddad Isaac and even his own father Jacob’s life. My favourite song in the film

¹⁶ Later after his vision of the staircase God appears to him and repeats, unconditionally, the promises of offspring and land given to his illustrious grandfather Abraham. Instead of giving thanks for God’s grace, Jacob strikes a bargain. (The emphasis is mine.)^{GE 28:20} Then Jacob made a vow, saying, “**If** God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear²¹ so that I return safely to my father’s house, **then** the LORD will be my God²² and this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God’s house, and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth.” This striking of a bargain always seems to have been his modus operandi, e.g. with Laban in Genesis 29:18 and 30:22 and even God himself in Genesis 32:6. Why was this? Sometimes we project our own weaknesses onto God. Jacob knew that himself to be untrustworthy and deceitful, but that does not mean that God is that way and needs to be bound with bargains. Such a preference for bargains with God over trusting his grace is an exhausting way to live. What a sad epitaph his comments to Pharaoh would make in Gen 47:9 “And Jacob said to Pharaoh, “The years of my pilgrimage are a hundred and thirty. My years have been few and difficult...”

¹⁷ Every James who has studied the origins of his name will know this. I am Jacques in France, Jakob in Germany, Iago in Spain – further confirmation of the origins of my name! It means both “he grasps the heel” and “the deceiver” – neither particularly inspiring. At least we Jameses can console ourselves that we have a book of the Bible named after us.

¹⁸ Interestingly Nelson Mandela in his autobiography Long Walk to Freedom testifies to the therapeutic affect of gardening when in prison. It gave him something living to care for.

contains two great declarations to God that have helped me in my own time in my soul's dark cell: "You are greater than I" and "You know better than I."

I know of another man in captivity more recently who made a decision to focus on God and not get bitter. He was in solitary confinement for almost four years. His name was Terry Waite. His trust in Western politicians as well as Muslim guards was abused. He was determined to choose the better way and not the bitter way when he realized what had happened.

"I would make three resolutions to support me through whatever was to come: no regrets, no sentimentality, no self-pity. Then I did what generations of prisoners have done before me. I stood up and, bending my head, I began to walk round and round and round and round... You fool, Waite, you stupid fool. Tears come to my eyes, but I steel myself... No regrets, hear that? I thump my fist into my palm out of sheer frustration and anger. No self-pity, remember? Whatever else you feel, no self-pity."¹⁹

Somewhere, or perhaps in many places on many occasions, Joseph hammered out his own resolute faith in God. No regrets. You know better than I. No sentimentality. You are greater than I. No self-pity. "Do not say, Why were the old days better than these? For it is not wise to ask such questions."²⁰ He did what Moses was to do 400 years later. "He persevered because he saw him who is invisible."²¹

All this is hidden from our eyes. However it undoubtedly took place. How do we know? Well, how else does one come to such complete serenity as this, when you meet again those brothers who had abused you so terribly? Even though it may be familiar, let us read what happened at that famous meeting again.

GE 45:4 Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come close to me." When they had done so, he said, "I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! ⁵ And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. ⁶ For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will not be ploughing and reaping. ⁷ But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance.

GE 45:8 "So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God.

It was not you who sent me here. This challenges me to the core, I who tend so often to take things personally. The transformation from bitterness to a better way of faith in God was complete. "Lord, help me."

Some years later Jacob died. What would happen to the ten brothers now? We read before that when Esau was planning to kill Jacob, he wanted to wait until his father had died to spare him grief. Here again, Joseph chose a better way than Esau. There is no doubt that Joseph had completely grasped God's grace to the world (to save people from starvation) and that his part in it was not of his own merit. His remarkable rise to power and the reconciliation with his father was all by God's grace, not what he had earned. Seeing by faith God's grace to him and the world in this way how could he not forgive his brothers from the heart?

¹⁹ Terry Waite, *Taken on Trust*, Sevenoaks 1993 pp. 8 and 77. He manages humour in one part of his captivity when he is put in a fridge and carried to a new holding centre. He said he found out what he had always wondered. Did the fridge light ever really go out when you shut the fridge door?! (It did.)

²⁰ Ecclesiastes 7:10

²¹ Hebrews 11:27

GE 50:15 When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?"¹⁶ So they sent word to Joseph, saying, "Your father left these instructions before he died:¹⁷ 'This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.' Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father." When their message came to him, Joseph wept.^{GE 50:18} His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. "We are your slaves," they said.^{GE 50:19} But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God?"²⁰ You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.²¹ So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children." And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them.

PART V: BRINGING FORGIVENESS HOME

The acid test: Can I forgive?

Some might say, ***“I would forgive if things turned out as well for me as they did for Joseph.”*** Would you? Isn't the opposite generally true? Don't those with bitterness who come to power tend to inflict revenge on those who hurt them? Adolf Hitler who had bad experiences of Jews as a child in his native Austria comes to mind. It was not his “good luck” that made Joseph forgive – it was seeing God.

Sometimes we want to wait for the silver lining before we feel any obligation to show grace and forgive. In my experience, and I believe from the Bible, it is normally the other way around. His grace is sufficient for us, and he lets us learn the lesson of forgiveness and *then* opens the floodgates! Why delay the blessing? Change now!

Perhaps we say, ***“I would find it easier to forgive if I knew that God was going to punish the wickedness.”*** This sounds worrying like Jonah. So can I forgive while asking that God bring on the wicked what he or she deserves? The answer to that seems to be no. Jesus and Stephen prayed that their Father forgive those who treated them unfairly. They had God's grace in their hearts. Jesus himself taught us to love our enemies and pray for them – not just tolerate or avoid them.

LK 6:27 "But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you,²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.²⁹ If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic.³⁰ Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back.³¹ Do to others as you would have them do to you.

LK 6:32 "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' love those who love them.³³ And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' do that.³⁴ And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' lend to 'sinners,' expecting to be repaid in full.³⁵ But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked.³⁶ Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

“This is great teaching in theory but nobody has ever really been able to practise it. I'm sure the early Christians were more realistic.” Amazingly, this principle was even extended (if that is possible) by writers in the early church. Here are some of their writings.

“The spiritual man never cherishes resentment or harbours a grudge against anyone – even though deserving of hatred for his conduct.”²²

“Rather, Paul teaches that a Christian does not keep count of injuries. For Paul does not allow him even to pray against the man who has done wrong to him. For he knows that the Lord expressly commanded us to pray for our enemies.”²³

“We may not hate. And we please God more by rendering no return for wrong.”²⁴

“For what difference is there between provoker and provoked?... Each one stands condemned in the eyes of the Lord for hurting a man... In evil doing, there is no account taken of order... The commandment is absolute: evil is not to be repaid with evil.”²⁵

²² Clement of Alexandria c. 195AD, 2.540

²³ Clement of Alexandria c. 195AD, 2.548

²⁴ Cyprian c. 250AD, 5.465

²⁵ Tertullian c.200AD, 3.713

“If an injury is done to you, look to Jesus Christ.”²⁶

“I’ve never been on staff and I can’t relate to the feelings you are describing.”

While your circumstances might be different, bitterness can be temptation for us all. Bad or unfair things have happened to us all in our pasts that can still affect us; for example, our family background, the country we were born in, our education (or lack of it), our looks, our poor health, being passed over at work or a character weakness we have.

During a group study on Joseph recently a sister in Oxford said how she could relate to him. She had left her country, her parents and her 3 year old boy in fear of the man who was her husband. Those to whom she told the story would say, “That man was terrible.” (Her child later came to join her here.) Then she was invited to church and studied the Bible. Instead of relying on herself, she realized that without what had happened she wouldn’t have had this chance to know Christ! Was she at all bitter? “No, I did not feel bitter towards him. It was for the good. Because of that I got to know God, and my sister and her husband and now my parents are studying the Bible. So it was for good.”

When she decided to respond to God’s love she did not know the good that would come later. With Joseph, Terry Waite and all in the cell of unfairness she had to reach out in the darkness and by faith put her hand in God’s, saying: “You know better than I.”

“Well, I just can’t and I’m not ready to.” Ah, now you’re being honest. As for “can’t”, would it encourage you to know that Esau changed back again? He nursed a grudge. Later on however he chose the better way himself, as the Scriptures record:

GE 33:1 Jacob looked up and there was Esau, coming with his four hundred men; so he divided the children among Leah, Rachel and the two maidservants. ² He put the maidservants and their children in front, Leah and her children next, and Rachel and Joseph in the rear. ³ He himself went on ahead and bowed down to the ground seven times as he approached his brother.

GE 33:4 But Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. And they wept.

It is like an early version of the prodigal son! The sinner returns to the older brother, only to find the one aggrieved running to meet him and embrace him with tears! While Esau was excluded from the birthright and found the door to his earthly father Isaac closed, did he not find the way to his heavenly Father wide open when he repented and forgave Jacob? With this kind of repentance I fully expect to see Esau in heaven!²⁷ If “I’m not ready” is you, put yourself in Esau’s shoes. If Esau could find it in his heart to forgive Jacob, then we can all find grace to forgive.

“I am just numb and doubt if I will ever be able to engage with these issues.” I can relate. I recently was able to write a circular email summarizing family and church events month by month this year, which I sent to friends. Someone responded that it was healthy that I was able to do that; she was not at that point. A brother showed me one more Scripture from Joseph’s life that I had overlooked. It has to do with the naming of his sons, and it shows that it was not easy for Joseph.

²⁶ Theonas of Alexandria c. 300AD, 6.161

²⁷ Notwithstanding Hebrews 12. Here Esau’s reprehensible treatment of his *earthly* birthright is used to make a spiritual point that does not depend on Esau’s final separation from his *heavenly* father

GE 41:50 Before the years of famine came, two sons were born to Joseph by Asenath daughter of Potiphera, priest of On.⁵¹ Joseph named his firstborn Manasseh and said, "It is because God has made me forget all my trouble and all my father's household."

He knew who it was that had enabled him to move on from a pain that was too great – God. God was the same one who had brought him to Egypt – not his family. Next Monday I start back in an office job. God is taking me there and saw it long ago. It is not a mistake or second best. It is God's plan for my life for this stage. I am coming to realize and believe it. Can I believe it? Can I forgive? With man this is impossible, and rarely happens, but with God I can.

"I felt the sword taken out of my hand"

While relational sins are common to both brothers and sisters, most of the instructions and examples relating to relationships are addressed in the first place to the brothers. With the momentous changes that have taken place in the ICC there will be few brothers, especially if they have had any kind of leadership role, who will not need to examine their own hearts in relation to God's desire for close brother to brother relationships. There is no doubt it is difficult, but it is not an optional challenge to overcome. It goes to the root of our grasping the Lord's grace in the gospel and our response. The prizes are great: the dew of Hermon; the fragrance of perfume on Aaron's beard; the pleasure of a Father.²⁸ "Forgive us our sins – as we forgive." "How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity."

Aren't the characters in Esau's and Joseph's stories relatable? The father Jacob who can't trust his sons. The savagery that siblings can display. The brotherly wranglings between Jacob and Esau. Manipulation, disappointment, covering up guilt, grudges: it is all so real!

The film Ben Hur ends in a magnificent way. A Jewish and a Roman boy grow up friends and are separated by the politics of their country. Neither chooses the way of grace and they become implacable enemies. Ben Hur, the Jewish prince sees his land ravaged, is imprisoned for a crime he did not commit and is sentenced to almost certain death rowing the galleys of the Roman navy. He finally escapes and returns home to his wife and mother to find both these women in isolation, their faces eaten away by leprosy. They plead with him not to take revenge but he will not listen. Unbeknown to Ben Hur, Jesus' crucifixion is about to take place and he finds himself at the foot of the cross. (His mother and sister watch from a distance in a cave and

²⁸ Paul, the apostle of grace and justification by faith, believed in our living to please God. His was the God who, when he sees our close relationships, "is delighted, like a wise and generous parent with a child who starts to be a cheerful and responsible member of the family", writes N.T. Wright in *Paul for Everyone*, London 2002, commenting on the following passage:
^{1TH 4:1} Finally, brothers, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more. ² For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus. ^{1TH 4:3} It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; ⁴ that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, ⁵ not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God... ^{1TH 4:9} Now about brotherly love we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. ¹⁰ And in fact, you do love all the brothers throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers, to do so more and more.

they are miraculously cleansed in the storm that follows Jesus' death.) From where he stands Ben Hur can hear Jesus' words of forgiveness from the cross, so different from his own heart. Something breaks inside him. The last line of the epic film is powerful. This rugged giant of a man (played by Charlton Heston) made more bitter by the forces of a mother's pain and repeatedly suffering cruel injustices is overcome by the greater power of the love of God shown in Christ. His features wreathed in wonderment, he speaks of the peace his soul has traveled miles to find:

"I felt the sword taken out of my hand."

Through the power of the cross, may every disciple find this grace to cure the pain and hurt, and so in turn find our place in God's plan for the future of his church.

James Greig
Oxford, July 2003

For further reading on bitterness and hurt

Patricia St John, *Treasures of the Snow* (children's book and powerful video, published by Scripture Union)

Gene Edwards, *Crucified by Christians, The Exquisite Agony, Letters to a Devastated Christian, a Tale of three Kings*.

Corrie Ten Boom, *The Hiding Place* (suffering for doing good in Nazi Germany)

And now for a postscript...

CONFIDENTIAL TRANSCRIPT - that somehow fell into the hands of former neighbours of ours in Oxford

(Excerpt from intercepted transmission on Divine Frequency. Apparently part of regular weekly divine review session)

God: Who's next?

Seraph: James and Emily Greig sir.

God: Well?

Seraph: (Sound of rustling papers) It appears that the church that they were in sort of dissolved underneath them...Er...James is now a solicitor again. Both worried that their ministry has come to an end.

God: Typical human eh? You send them on a journey and they think at every stopping point they've arrived. "Are we there yet?" – it' all you hear from them.

Seraph: Well, you can see their point sir. They gave up careers. I mean they were in the ministry for ten years...

God: Still are. Up to their necks. Except now those necks don't have the reassuring label saying Minister round them.

Seraph: But they liked running their small church

God: I'll bet they did. Look, I've spent ten years giving these two people skills, wisdom, training and a powerful voice. Now it's time for them to be heard. These lights won't stay under the bushel for long. Find them a hill. And make it dark and windy. Ministry over indeed!

Seraph: So what should they do?

God: Work it out for themselves. If they don't get it in twelve months we'll try another prod in the rear. Next.

Seraph: The Anglican Church sir.

God: What is that exactly...?

(Transmission fades. Occasional sound of loud divine laughter. Silence)