

STORY BIBLE for Older Children

(Old Testament)

Anne DeUries

STORY BIBLE
for Older Children
(Old Testament)

Illustrations by
Cornelis Jetses

PAIDEIA PRESS
St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada

First published in Dutch as *Groot Vertelboek voor de Bijbelse Geschiedenis*, © J.H. Kok of Kampen. Translated by Theodore Plantinga.

Copyright 1978 by J.H. Enterprises Ltd. © All rights reserved. Published by Paideia Press, P.O. Box 1450, St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada, L2R 7J8. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form without the written permission of the publisher.

ISBN 0-88815-532-8

Printed in the United States of America.

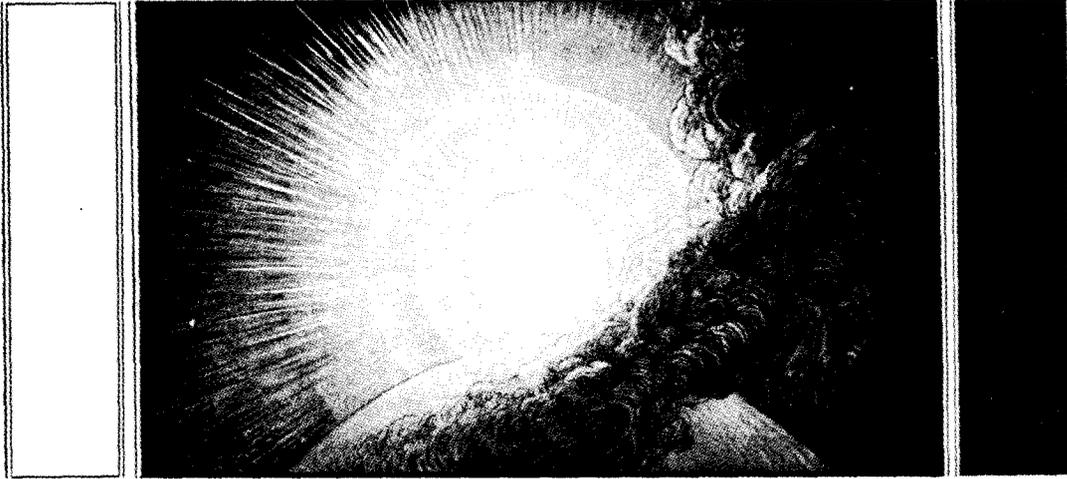
Table of Contents

1. In the beginning	9	36. Deception	57
2. The Creator completes His work	10	37. A promise for Jacob	59
3. Adam in the Garden of Eden	11	38. Jacob's journey	61
4. A wife for Adam	12	39. Jacob and Laban	62
5. The first sin	13	40. The stolen idols	63
6. Judgment and promise	15	41. Jacob's struggle	65
7. Starting over	16	42. Peniel	66
8. Two sons	17	43. Jacob enters the promised land	68
9. Murder	18	44. Joseph and his brothers	68
10. Seth and Cain	21	45. Joseph in the pit	70
11. One hundred twenty years of grace	22	46. Joseph on his way to Egypt	72
12. The final warning	24	47. Joseph as a slave	74
13. The flood	26	48. Potiphar's wife	75
14. God's covenant with Noah	27	49. Joseph in prison	76
15. Blessing and curse	28	50. The butler and the baker	77
16. The tower of Babel	30	51. The king dreams	78
17. Journey without a destination	31	52. Joseph interprets Pharaoh's dreams	80
18. God's friend	33	53. Famine	82
19. Abram and Lot	34	54. Ten brothers in Egypt	83
20. A daring rescue	36	55. Nine brothers return to Canaan	84
21. Waiting for the promised heir	37	56. Judah's pledge	86
22. Ishmael and Isaac	39	57. A banquet in Egypt	87
23. Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?	40	58. Benjamin is arrested	89
24. Abraham pleads with God	41	59. Joseph reveals himself	90
25. Sodom's wickedness	43	60. Jacob's journey to Egypt	93
26. Lot's flight	44	61. The death of Jacob and Joseph	95
27. Sarah and Hagar	45	62. Satan's challenge	96
28. Hagar and Ishmael	47	63. Job's misery	99
29. Abraham's struggle	49	64. Job's vindication	100
30. The sacrifice	50	65. The Israelites in Egypt	102
31. Eliezer's mission	52	66. Drawn from the water	103
32. Rebekah	53	67. Moses the prince	105
33. A wife for Isaac	54	68. Moses flees	107
34. Isaac's family	55	69. Moses in the wilderness	108
35. The birthright	56	70. The burning bush	109
		71. Pharaoh's refusal	111

72.	Snakes and blood and frogs	113	113.	A night attack	174
73.	Plagues in the air	114	114.	A special child	176
74.	Locusts and darkness	116	115.	Samson's riddle	177
75.	The angel of death	118	116.	Betrayed by his own people	179
76.	Exodus	119	117.	Escape and betrayal	181
77.	A detour	121	118.	Samson's secret	183
78.	Walls of rock and walls of water	122	119.	The death of Samson	184
79.	Judgment on Egypt	123	120.	Ruth and Naomi	186
80.	Water in the wilderness	125	121.	Ruth and Boaz	187
81.	Bread from heaven	126	122.	The birth of Samuel	189
82.	Two dangers	128	123.	Samuel and Eli	191
83.	The wings of faith	129	124.	The capture of God's ark	192
84.	Ten commandments	131	125.	The return of the ark	193
85.	The golden calf	133	126.	Samuel as judge	195
86.	Punishment and forgiveness	134	127.	Saul's anointing	197
87.	Gifts for God's house	137	128.	Israel's first king	198
88.	The tabernacle	138	129.	Unbelief and faith	200
89.	Meat in the wilderness	140	130.	Saul's fatal sin	202
90.	Unbelief and rebellion	142	131.	David's anointing	203
91.	The report of the spies	143	132.	David plays for Saul	206
92.	Korah, Dathan and Abiram	145	133.	Goliath's challenge	207
93.	The sin of Moses	147	134.	David and Goliath	208
94.	On to Canaan	148	135.	Saul turns against David	211
95.	Ealaam the magician	149	136.	David and Michal	212
96.	Ealaam and the angel	151	137.	David and Jonathan	213
97.	Ealaam blesses Israel	152	138.	David at Nob	215
98.	Moses looks back	154	139.	Saul and the priests of Nob	216
99.	Moses looks ahead	156	140.	David at Keilah	217
100.	Hahab and the spies	157	141.	Saul in David's power	218
101.	Crossing the Jordan	159	142.	Nabal	220
102.	The fall of Jericho	160	143.	Abigail	221
103.	Achan's sin	161	144.	David spares Saul again	222
104.	The capture of Ai	163	145.	Refuge at Ziklag	224
105.	The Gibeonites	163	146.	Victory over the Amalekites	225
106.	The sun stands still	165	147.	Saul at Endor	227
107.	Settling down in Canaan	166	148.	Saul's last battle	229
108.	Canaanites in the promised land	167	149.	David's lament	230
109.	Deborah and Barak	169	150.	David and Abner	231
110.	Jael and Sisera	170	151.	King of Israel	232
111.	God calls Gideon	171	152.	David and the ark	233
112.	God strengthens Gideon	172	153.	The favor of the king	234
			154.	Bathsheba	235
			155.	Uriah	236

156.	Nathan's parable	238	195.	The high priest's plot	297
157.	Absalom's rebellion	240	196.	The reign of Joash	298
158.	David flees	241	197.	Jonah flees	299
159.	Ahithophel and Hushai	242	198.	Repentance in Nineveh	301
160.	Absalom's death	244	199.	A lesson for Jonah	302
161.	David's restoration	245	200.	Amos warns Israel	303
162.	David's last days	246	201.	The fall of Israel	304
163.	The wisdom of Solomon	248	202.	Isaiah	305
164.	The temple	250	203.	Judah's kings	307
165.	Solomon's reign	251	204.	Prophecies about the Messiah	308
166.	Ahijah's message	253	205.	Hezekiah's reformation	310
167.	Rehoboam	254	206.	Hezekiah's illness and recovery	311
168.	Jeroboam's sin	255	207.	Hezekiah's foolish pride	312
169.	God punishes Jeroboam	257	208.	God's answer to Sennacherib	313
170.	Pious King Asa	259	209.	King Manasseh	315
171.	Drought	261	210.	King Josiah	316
172.	Elijah in Zarephath	263	211.	Jeremiah's calling	317
173.	Elijah returns	265	212.	Jeremiah's message	318
174.	Elijah on Mount Carmel	266	213.	An alliance with Egypt	319
175.	Elijah flees	269	214.	Jeremiah in prison	320
176.	Elijah on Mount Horeb	270	215.	Judah's fall	321
177.	Naboth's vineyard	271	216.	God's people in exile	323
178.	Two death sentences	273	217.	Nebuchadnezzar's dream	324
179.	Ahab's prophets	274	218.	The fiery furnace	326
180.	The death of Ahab	275	219.	Nebuchadnezzar's punish- ment	328
181.	King Jehoshaphat	277	220.	Handwriting on the wall	330
182.	Elijah and Elisha	278	221.	A plot against prayer	332
183.	Elijah's departure	279	222.	Daniel in the lions' den	333
184.	Miraculous warnings	282	223.	The return from exile	334
185.	Miraculous blessings	283	224.	The rebuilding of the temple	336
186.	The God of life	284	225.	Ezra and Nehemiah	337
187.	Naaman's leprosy	286	226.	The rebuilding of Jerusalem	338
188.	Naaman is healed in the Jordan	287	227.	Esther becomes queen	339
189.	Gehazi's sin	288	228.	Mordecai and Haman	340
190.	An army of angels	289	229.	Esther and Haman	341
191.	Undeserved deliverance	291	230.	Haman's humiliation and death	343
192.	Jehu is anointed king	293	231.	By faith	345
193.	Judgment on Ahab's house	294			
194.	Queen Athaliah	296			





1: In the beginning

Next to the path stands a small flower in bloom — a daisy. No one pays much attention to it, but it has a sweet smell as it holds its head high and reaches for the sun. At night, when darkness falls, that little head bows and the petals fold as the daisy goes to sleep.

That little flower has no great role to play in anyone's life. People walk right past it without seeing it. They may even step on it. All the same, it is a wonder in itself — a divine miracle.

God has given man a powerful mind. Man can therefore do some truly amazing things. He can make cars and trains that skim across the surface of the earth at astounding speeds, and airplanes that soar high above the clouds.

But there is not a person on earth able to make one little fragrant flower that grows and *lives*. That little daisy next to the path is a greater miracle than any of man's inventions. The things that *man* makes do not

live and breathe; they are mechanical — or perhaps electronic. Only God created life, which is the greatest wonder of all.

The earth is full of God's miracles. God makes the grain grow so that there will be bread for us to eat every day. He makes the sun rise in the morning and set at night. He makes sure that the moon and stars follow their assigned paths through the heavens. He makes the rain and the snow and the frightening sound of thunder.

Far beyond the clouds and stars is heaven, which is even more wonderful and glorious than the earth. That's where God Himself lives.

God is almighty and good. He watches everything in His creation. He looks after all the birds and flowers. And He looks after us too. If we love Him, He will let us live with Him forever in perfect fellowship.

Everything begins with God and comes from God. In the beginning He created both heaven and earth.

At first the earth was empty. It had no form or shape. There was no sound or light anywhere.

Then God said: "Let there be light."

Immediately light covered the earth. Heaven was opened, and the still earth was flooded with light. God saw that it was good.

When evening came, it was dark again. God called the light *day* and the darkness *night*.

After the darkness of the night a bright morning dawned — a second day. On that second day God continued His work as Creator. He said: "Let there be a firmament." As soon as He spoke, it was there.

Vapors began to rise from the earth and form white clouds in the blue sky. God sent winds to drive the clouds from one place to another. Then came evening and a new morning; a third day dawned.

The whole earth was covered with water. But on the third day God confined the water to certain parts of the earth. The waves obeyed His mighty voice.

On the land no longer covered with water, there were stones of many shapes and sizes. Some of the land was covered with fire sand. God created sandy dunes and high mountains that the waters would not cover. The dry land He called *earth*, and the areas covered by water He called *seas*.

At God's command, millions of blades of grass began to sprout in the sand and soil, covering the earth with a green carpet. Among them thousands of flowers and trees shot up. There were roses with their exquisite aroma, pale lilies, and many, many more. Almost hidden in the thick grass was the daisy, with its tiny head lifted high.

God saw that His work was good. When darkness came, the flowers folded up their petals and bowed their heads. God watched over them.

That's how the earth looked in the

beginning. But this was only the beginning. The Creator was not finished yet.

2: The Creator completes His work

The deep darkness of night was passing. It was getting light in the east. Many colors were visible on the horizon, for morning was dawning — a fourth day.

The sun was rising for the very first time. God had made the sun to give the earth light and warmth.

The wind sighed in the trees. The sea shimmered in the morning light. The trees looked to the sun to catch the warmth of its rays. The entire earth rejoiced.

God sent the sun along its appointed path and let it set in the west when evening came. But that night it was not as dark as the night before. There was another great light in the heavens — the silver light of the moon. The moon seemed to smile on the sleeping earth. And there were thousands of smaller lights sparkling in the heavens — the stars.

God decreed that the sun would shine by day and the moon by night. He looked at what He had made and saw that it was good.

The night passed and a new morning dawned—a fifth day. It was still quiet on the earth. There was no sound but the wind moving through the trees and the grass.

Once the sun had risen, there was some movement in the quiet waters. On land there were sounds of life. God was creating the fish and the birds.

Doves fluttered above the bushes. An eagle soared toward the clouds. Winging through the sky were countless birds singing their songs in honor of the Creator.

God taught the birds to build nests. He

saw that His work was good. He blessed the fish and birds and told them to multiply, for they were to cover the earth and fill the waters.

Evening came again and a new morning — a sixth day. The creation became even more wonderful and beautiful, as God created the animals — powerful lions, enormous elephants, sheep, rabbits, and many, many more.

A mouse made himself a small hole in the ground. A horse galloped through the fields. Butterflies fluttered by. God blessed the animals and saw that His work was very good.

The entire earth was blossoming. There it lay — like a kingdom in wait. God wasn't finished yet, for the creature that was to be lord over all of it was missing.

God said: "Let Us make man in Our own image and likeness." Using the dust of the earth, He created man to be like Himself and blew the breath of life into his nostrils.

God called the first man *Adam* and made him king over all the fish in the sea, the birds in the heavens, and the animals on the earth. The entire creation was made for man. And man was made for God.

Man belonged on the earth, for his body was made of the dust of the earth. Yet man was not cut off from heaven or from God. He had received life from God and was created in His image. Man was a king, but God was King over man.

God saw all that He had made and declared that it was very good. Evening fell and a new morning dawned — a seventh day.

On that day the Lord God rested from all His work. He paused and delighted in His creation. His holy eyes surveyed all His creatures, large and small. In his unbounded power, He cares for His creatures and



watches over them.

God blessed that seventh day and made it holy. From then on, all people were to rest from their work on the sabbath day. It would be the Lord's day.

3: Adam in the Garden of Eden

The most beautiful place on the young earth was in the east, where the sun rises. There the Lord had placed a garden, a paradise — the Garden of Eden. There the flowers were more beautiful than anywhere else. The trees in that garden bore the most delicious fruit.

Adam was allowed to make the Garden of Eden his home. He was responsible for looking after the garden. God had made him the king of creation.

It was glorious to live in that garden, for there was no more wonderful place on earth. Nothing on our earth today compares with it, for sin had not yet come into the world. Peace and joy were everywhere. Lions played with the cattle and did them no harm. Even the wolf played with the lamb.

Adam was very happy, for the Lord had entrusted everything to him. Because the Lord loved him and took care of him, he felt safe.

The most glorious thing of all was that he was as close to God as a child is to his

father. The wind made a rustling sound in the trees, and Adam heard God's voice. The Lord Himself would come to His child and speak to him. The happiness that grew in Adam's heart was so great that it went beyond all understanding.

Adam's happiness would continue to increase if he always obeyed the Lord and loved Him. Then Adam would grow in knowledge and wisdom — and he would be rewarded with the deepest happiness, eternal joy.

But if Adam should disobey God and turn away from Him, he would find out what it is to be unhappy. Then he would die. There is life and happiness only with the Lord.

All of this was discussed with Adam. The Lord pointed out two special trees growing in the middle of the garden, where Adam walked every day. The two trees were just as beautiful and appealing as any of the other trees. One was the tree of life. The other was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

God forbade Adam to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Adam listened to this command, but he did not ask why eating that fruit was forbidden. Later he would find out. All he knew was that what the Lord said was always right.

Adam was perfectly willing to obey God. There was no reason why he couldn't obey, for there was nothing difficult about the command God had given him.

Adam's heart was holy and good. He trusted in the Lord in simple faith, happy to obey God's command.

4: A wife for Adam

One day God brought all the animals to Adam to see what names he would give them. Giving each animal a name would be Adam's responsibility.

The animals appeared before their master in a great procession, from the largest to the smallest — elephants, lions, birds, butterflies, beetles. All the animals came in pairs — a male and a female. Once they had received their names, they went their way again.

When they were gone, Adam stood still for a while. He was thinking. He looked around him. He seemed to be looking for someone. All the animals had come in pairs: with each male there had been a female. Each animal had a companion. But he, Adam, was alone; he was all by himself.

God in His wisdom had waited for this moment. He said: "It is not good for man to be alone. I will make him a suitable companion, someone to help him." Even before Adam asked for his heart's desire, God gave it to him.

The Lord made Adam fall into a deep sleep. When he woke up and opened his eyes, another human being stood before him. That person was created in God's image, just as he was. Yet, Adam saw some differences: the person before him was a woman. God had created her to be Adam's wife. He had made her from a rib taken from Adam's body.

She belonged with Adam, and Adam belonged with her. They loved each other at once. The two would always be one; no one would ever separate them.

Adam was deeply thankful, for his happiness had been made still greater.

The two of them walked together through the garden that gave Adam so



much joy. They ate the fruit of the trees and looked after the animals and flowers. They listened respectfully whenever God spoke to them.

Adam showed his wife the trees in the middle of the garden. He told her what God had said about one of the trees — the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. He told her about the eternal joy the Lord would give to them — and to their children — if they remained obedient. And he also told her about the horrible punishment they would receive if they were disobedient.

Death — that was a strange word they still didn't understand, a word with a dark

threatening sound, a word that made them pause and think.

Adam and his wife lived without guilt in that beautiful paradise. They were happy—happier than any other people have ever been. ✓

5: The first sin

In the quiet, peaceful garden of Eden, there was an enemy prowling around — satan. Originally satan was one of God's angels in heaven, but in his great pride he had rebelled against God. He had

hoped to force God from His throne so that he could be God instead. His pride had made him blind to his own foolishness. How could satan — or anyone else — ever defeat the almighty God?

Satan was severely punished for his sin, which was the greatest of all sins. The foolish angel and all his proud helpers were thrown out of heaven.

Now he wandered around on the earth, full of bitter hatred. Revenge was his strongest desire; he wanted to ruin God's work.

Yet, he could not even trample on a flower against God's will. God's children are always safe under the protection of their Father. But what if God's children would rather listen to satan than to the voice of God?

Satan knew that the two people on earth could be happy only if they trusted in God and obeyed Him. Satan would try to mislead them. Perhaps he could trick them into disobeying.

He could not appear to them in person. They would never listen to him, for they did not know him. He would use the serpent as his instrument, for the serpent was the most cunning of all the animals.

One day the woman was walking alone in the middle of the garden. The serpent went up to her and asked her a question in a friendly way: "There are so many beautiful trees in the garden. Is it true that you're not allowed to eat their fruit?"

The woman did not have to think long before answering. "No, that's not true. We may eat from any of the trees except this one. God commanded us not to eat from this tree. If we disobey His command we will die. That's what God said."

She thought to herself: "We may eat of any tree except this one. That's strange! I

wonder why this one is forbidden."

The serpent then said to her quietly: "You won't die if you eat from this tree. God knows that as soon as you eat its fruit, your eyes will be opened and you will be like Him, knowing the difference between right and wrong."

The woman listened, and then looked carefully at the tree. She saw what a beautiful tree it was. Suddenly it seemed that the fruit of that tree must be the most delicious fruit in the entire garden. She reached out for the fruit — and ate some.

At once the woman knew what evil was, for it was already within her. Her heart was pounding. She felt strange, anxious, upset.

She realized that the serpent had deceived her. She ran away from the tree, but the evil went with her. The birds fell silent wherever she went, and the animals stayed out of her way. She was alone with her sin and the sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach.

She found Adam and told him what she had done. But she did not tell him how unhappy and afraid she was. She deceived her husband just as she had been deceived herself. She repeated the serpent's lie and showed Adam the fruit she had picked from the forbidden tree. She urged him to taste the fruit too.

Adam let himself be misled. The woman God had given him to stand at his side and help him became his downfall. Adam ate some of the fruit, and evil entered his heart too, along with the deep-rooted fear that banishes joy.

Now they both realized that it was satan who had deceived them, and that only God is holy and faithful. But it was too late.

Quietly they slipped away, driven by their fear. Where could they go to escape



the punishment that God would surely impose?

They sought out the darkest places. Whenever they looked at each other, they read sin and fear in each other's eyes.

Each was ashamed to be naked before the other, now that they had lost their innocence. They gathered some fig leaves and made themselves aprons.

6: Judgment and promise

In the cool of the evening, the man and the woman heard the voice of God as He walked in the garden. The voice that had been a source of joy to them now made them shake with fear.

They went deeper into the bushes. They huddled close together in the darkest bush

they could find. They waited in silence, hoping they would be safe. How can anyone ever hide from the One who sees all and knows all?

They heard God's voice again — this time much closer. "Where are you?"

There was no getting around it: Adam would have to answer. He appeared before God with his wife and bowed deeply, trembling in awe and fear. He stammered: "When I heard Your voice in the garden, I was afraid, for I was naked. Therefore I hid."

That was a lie, but it didn't fool the Lord. He asked: "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten some of the fruit that I commanded you not to eat?"

What anger and disappointment there was in God's voice! Again Adam bowed deeply. He said: "The woman You gave me — *she* offered me some fruit from that

tree, and then I ate.”

The Lord God said to the woman: “What have you done?” But she, too, was overcome with fear. She followed Adam’s lead and tried to put the blame on someone else.

“The serpent misled me,” she sobbed. “That’s why I ate the forbidden fruit.”

God then cursed the serpent for serving as satan’s instrument: “You will crawl on your belly and eat dust as long as you live.”

There was also judgment for Adam and his wife. God told them that their life would be full of trouble, pain, sorrow, and distress. Their work would now become very hard for them. Adam would have to sweat daily just to make the earth bring forth food to eat. He would have to wrestle with the earth, for he would be plagued by all sorts of weeds choking his crops.

Worst of all, death awaited them. God had warned them about death, and they would see that His warning was not in vain. “You are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

But even in God’s anger, His love shone through. He remained a Father to His lost children, for satan’s punishment contained a rich promise for fallen man.

God said to satan: “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed. He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel.”

Those were strange, difficult words, but the woman quickly sensed something of their meaning. There would always be conflict between man and satan. Satan would do man a great deal of harm and would often lead him into sin. Yet, one day a special child would be born, a child who would overcome satan. That child, a descendant of Adam and his wife, would crush satan’s head and put an end to his power. That child would be the Redeemer.

7: Starting over

God still wanted to be a Father to His lost children. He was determined to give them eternal joy — if they would only love Him and fix their hopes on the Redeemer to be born one day. The Redeemer would bear their punishment and earn eternal joy for them. He would be obedient — obedient unto death.

Death would still claim the people on earth one by one, but it would not mean eternal darkness. Death would not be allowed to win the final victory. Instead death would be a dark gate that the redeemed would pass through in order to receive what God chose to give them.

What wonderful love! The Redeemer whom God chose to send into the sinful world was His own Son, Jesus Christ, who would be born in Bethlehem. On Golgotha He would die for our sins.

Adam and his wife did not know just how God would carry out His promise. But they did know that the woman would become a mother, and that the Redeemer would come into the world one day as a child. In their misery they clung to that promise.

From then on Adam called his wife by a new and very beautiful name — *Eve*. That name means *mother of all living*.

Eve had not been much help to Adam. She had helped satan instead. But one day she would be a good mother — perhaps even the mother of the Redeemer.

The Lord God made clothes for Adam and Eve from the skins of animals. Now that they had fallen into sin, they would wear clothes.

He drove them out of the Garden of Eden so that they would not eat from the tree of life. Cherubs (holy angels with flaming swords) saw to it that no one ever entered

that garden again.

Adam and Eve were driven away to another part of the earth. There they would suffer greatly and face many dangers. The regret in their hearts caused them intense pain.

But they knew that God's love continued to watch over them from on high. That thought took away some of their fear.

No longer would they hear God's holy voice. They lived far away from Him, in a dark night of sin and guilt. But the glorious mother-promise was like a star shining in the darkness, a star that kept them from getting completely lost.

In their sorrow they cried out: "Lost! Everything is lost! And it's our own fault!"

But their hope gave them strength. Quietly it whispered to them: "All is not lost. The Redeemer is coming!"

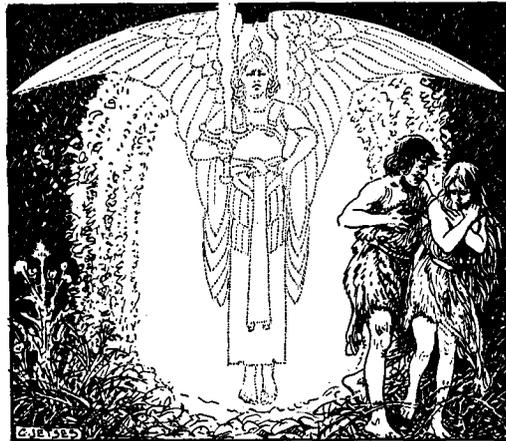
8: Two sons

Adam and Eve had to live their lives outside that beautiful garden. They had not enjoyed its delights for long!

They didn't hear God's voice anymore, and the Lord didn't walk with them as He had done in the garden. Their lives were filled with sin and sorrow instead of peace and joy. Sin and sorrow belong together — that much they had learned.

But sin and decay also go hand in hand. Once sin, that evil, contagious sickness, entered the world through man, the entire earth was infected. God's perfect creation was spoiled. The animals turned on each other viciously. The lion devoured the lamb. The snake bit the rabbit. Large birds attacked smaller birds.

The plant world was also affected by sin and decay. The flowers in bloom were not



as beautiful as they had been. Sometimes the grass dried up and turned brown in the burning sun. Weeds shot up everywhere, just as God had said they would.

Suffering and death entered the creation. The creation felt the heavy hand of God's curse.

On this spoiled earth, the first man and woman had to work hard just to stay alive. Sometimes the searing sun beat down on them. At other times they shivered in the cold. When the wild animals roared, they fled in terror. When storms or earthquakes struck, they shook with fear. During the long, dark nights, they sought shelter in a hole in the ground or in a cave — two frightened, lonely people clinging to each other. How sorry they were when they thought of the great joy they had thrown away through their sin!

But they knew that God's love watched over them from on high — even now. They knew He would keep His promise and send the Redeemer.

Without that promise, their punishment would have been too much for them. They might well have given in to their sorrow and disappointment by dying.

In time a special day dawned for them — a wonderful day. Eve became a mother: she gave birth to a child, a son. She took the baby in her arms and cried out: “With the Lord’s help I have borne a son.” She called the child Cain.

She had no blankets to keep her baby warm and no cradle for him to sleep in. She could only offer the baby her love.

She did the best she could as she took care of him. She kept him warm and offered him her breast when he was hungry. In her joy she assumed that her child was the Redeemer, the one who would reconcile sinners with God.

But sin lived even in the tiny heart of this child. Cain was in the grip of the forces of decay. How could such a child ever be the Redeemer?

Soon a second child was born — another boy. This son they called Abel. Eve looked after the two children while Adam worked to support the family.

As the children were growing up, Adam taught them to pray. He told them about the Creator, about the beautiful Garden of Eden, about sin and Satan, and also about God’s love and goodness. Sometimes he took them along into the field to offer the Lord a sacrifice.

Once Cain and Abel were grown up, they had to work every day, just as their father did. Cain became a farmer. He worked with the soil, planting grain and other crops. When his grain was ripe, he harvested it, ground it into flour, and baked bread.

Abel became a shepherd. He tended his flocks and sought pastures for them. The sheep provided milk to drink, wool for making clothes, and nourishing meat. Abel’s flock got larger and larger because many lambs were born.

Cain and Abel were the first children to walk the earth. Their parents loved them both. Eve loved Cain, her first-born, even more than she loved Abel. But she did not know her sons well.

The Lord saw the wickedness in Cain’s heart. He knew that Cain was indifferent to Him. Cain did not care about God. He thought only of himself and his work.

There was also sin in Abel’s heart, for no human being is sinless. Yet, Abel loved the Lord. He thought about God a great deal, and he prayed and struggled against evil. There was faith in Abel’s heart — but not in Cain’s heart.

9: Murder

Cain and Abel were out in the field offering a sacrifice, just as their father had taught them. They began by making an altar from a pile of stones. They laid wood on the altar to get the sacrifice burning.

Abel thought: “The Lord has given me everything I have. I want to show Him how thankful I am.” He chose the finest ram from his flock for a sacrifice.

Cain thought: “Since it’s customary to offer sacrifices, I’ll do it too. But why should I be so thankful for what I have? Haven’t I worked hard for everything I own?” He laid some grain and fruit on the altar, but he did not offer his sacrifice out of love.

The two brothers lit their sacrifices. As the flames consumed the offerings, they knelt down to pray. Abel spoke very respectfully to his Father in heaven, whom he trusted with his whole heart. His prayer ascended to the throne of God.

Cain knelt down too and addressed a few words to God. But how could he truly



pray if there was no faith and thankfulness in his heart?

The Lord saw the offerings and looked into the hearts of the two brothers. He was pleased with Abel's offering, but He refused

to accept Cain's offering.

Cain soon became aware of this. In his anger and disappointment, he began to envy his brother and hate him. In time his wicked thoughts and feelings became so

strong that he could think of nothing else. His feelings were written all over his face.

The Lord, in His love, warned Cain. He said to him: "Cain, why are you so angry? Why that scowl on your face? Sin is crouching at your door and wants to rule you. If you overcome sin and repent, I will accept your sacrifice too." But Cain would not listen to the voice of God.

One day Cain talked Abel into going to a remote field with him. Once the two were alone, he struck his brother in his horrible wrath and killed him.

There lay Abel's body in the grass, his blood slowly draining into the earth. Cain was suddenly frightened at what he had done and ran away from that terrible place, driven by his fear.

His brother's blood was on his hands. His fear and the blood on his hands went with him everywhere.

Cain was not able to run away from God, of course. Soon God asked him: "Where is your brother Abel?"

There was no remorse in Cain's heart. He replied: "I don't know. Am I my brother's keeper?"

The Lord was not fooled. "What have you done?" He asked. "Your brother's blood is crying out to Me from the ground."

Cain then felt the force of God's wrath: he was cursed. And the earth was cursed for his sake. God told him that when he tried to grow crops, the soil would not give him a rich harvest. Weeds would overcome the seeds he planted.

In despair Cain cried out: "This punishment is too hard for me to bear. Anyone who finds me will kill me."

The Lord did not want one murder to lead to another. He put a sign on Cain so that anyone who saw him would not attack him. The Lord promised that if Cain was mur-

dered, he would be avenged sevenfold.

Cain was the first murderer. He paid a heavy price for what he had done. And Abel was the first martyr, the first person to die for his faith.

In one day, then, Adam and Eve lost both their sons. Cain went to a faraway land. And they found Abel in the field among his sheep, which were bleating anxiously. His body was pale and cold and covered with blood.

Carefully Adam and Eve carried their son's body back to their home. They must have watched over the body for hours, hoping and fearing. Would he open his eyes again and speak to them when they called his name?

They tried to wake him from his deep sleep, but they couldn't. Never again would they hear his voice.

Finally Adam and Eve understood: Abel was *dead*. That horrible enemy of whom God had spoken while they were still in Paradise had claimed Abel as his first victim. All the grieving father and mother could do was to bury their son's body in the dark earth.

Darkness filled their minds and hearts. What could they hope for now? Who would deliver them from the power of sin? God had promised that their enemy would be crushed, but hadn't Satan won the battle already? The faith of Adam and Eve was shaken, but the Lord comforted them in their sorrow and despair.

In time He gave them more children — sons and daughters. One of those sons was a lot like Abel and took Abel's place. He, too, loved the Lord and possessed a strong faith. They called him Seth, which means *replacement*.

The birth of Seth kindled fresh hope in the hearts of Adam and Eve. They realized



that satan had not won the battle after all — and never would. The Redeemer would surely come, for God was faithful to His promises.

10: Seth and Cain

Many years went by. Adam and Eve grew old. They were surrounded by descendants, for Seth had married and had children. In time Seth even had grandchildren and great-grandchildren. He had become a great people.

Like Cain and Abel and Seth before them, all the children in Seth's family enjoyed the privilege of hearing Adam's stories about God and Paradise. Seth's family was filled with a longing for the Redeemer promised by God.

Far away, in the land of Nod where Cain had settled, there lived another people. Cain's family was different from Seth's. The children were *not* told about God's love and power, and they were *not* filled

with a longing for the Redeemer.

In that faraway land stood a strong man in the door of his tent. He was singing a song. Listening inside the tent were two women — his wives. There were many other people standing around and listening.

The man's name was Lamech. In his hand he held a sword that glistened in the sun. Just as fearful and frightening as that sword was the hatred in his eyes. The song he sang was a song of hate:

Adah and Zillah, hear my voice.
Wives of Lamech, listen to me.
I have killed a man for wounding me,
a young man for striking me.
If Cain is avenged sevenfold,
Lamech shall avenge seventy-sevenfold.

Those were Lamech's words. The people listening enjoyed his song. That was the way to live, they thought. Be hard, cruel, bloodthirsty!

Cain's descendants had built a strong city so that they would be safe from their enemies. And the three sons of mighty

Lamech made some amazing discoveries. Jubal was the first to make tents. Now it was no longer necessary to suffer the cold when spending the night in the field with the sheep. Jubal found out how to make musical instruments. Tubal-cain, the first metal-worker, learned how to make swords. Now that Cain's people had swords, no one could harm them.

They did not think about God. Their father Cain used to offer sacrifices, but now that their father was gone, they did away with such foolishness. Why should they offer sacrifices? After all, they had to look out for themselves!

When they sat in their warm tents after overcoming their enemies, they were not content until Jubal and others arrived with the zither and the flute to make joyful music. Then there would be a wild feast to celebrate the victory.

As far as they were concerned, there was no such thing as sin. They did as they pleased, whether it was right or wrong. That's what Cain's people were like.

Much closer to the Garden of Eden there was a different song to be heard — a song of praise and adoration. That song was often raised when Seth's family gathered out in the field. Someone would speak about God's wonders. Together the people would offer a sacrifice and pray, calling on the name of the Lord.

Those worship services had begun in the days of Enosh, the son of Seth. Adam was still alive then and could participate. When their sacrifices were accepted and their prayers were heard and they thought about the Lord's goodness and greatness, the worshipers sang in delight.

Seth's people did not have warm tents to sleep in, nor did they have musical instruments or sharp swords. They were not

as clever as Cain's people, who sought their happiness in their own power.

All the same, the simple songs that Seth's people used to praise the Lord were much more beautiful than Jubal's music. Under God's protection they were safer than they could ever be in a city. They knew that happiness is to be sought not in wealth and power but only in God's love. That's what Seth's family was like.

In time something unfortunate happened: young men of Seth's family who were away from home caring for the sheep met members of Cain's family. They heard the music of Cain's family and saw strange but appealing sights, including some beautiful young women.

They began to desire the beautiful things that Cain's family possessed. They said to themselves: "We should make friends with those strong, clever people. We want their daughters for wives."

They did not worry about all the sin in Cain's family. In fact, they began to fall into the very same sins. Before long, Lamech's sin had infected Seth's family.

11: One hundred twenty years of grace

The members of Seth's family were going the way of Cain's family, even though they had been warned. One man had warned them repeatedly — Enoch.

Enoch loved God so much that he thought about Him day and night. He lived in intimate fellowship with God and walked with God as a man walks with his friend.

Enoch warned the godless about their sins. He was much braver than proud

Lamech, for he went to the godless without the protection of a sword. He spoke to them in stern language about their wickedness and warned them that the Lord would punish them for their godless deeds and shameful words. But they refused to listen to him. They hated him and made plans to kill him.

Finally even the godless had to admit that Enoch's trust in God was not in vain. When the plotting against him reached its climax, God took him away. Enoch was nowhere to be seen. Yet, he was not dead. God had taken him to heaven, where His faithful servant would be safe from the murderous plans of men.

Enoch was 365 years old when God took him. By the standards of those days, he was still a fairly young man. His son Methuselah lived to the age of 969.

When Enoch was taken away, Adam was already dead. He, too, had lived to a very old age — 930 years. Eve wasn't alive then either. She did not live long enough to see the Redeemer, as she had hoped. Yet, because she had fixed her hopes on Him, she died as one of the redeemed. When the Redeemer finally came, He would bear the punishment for her sins too.

The wickedness on earth increased as the families of Seth and Cain grew closer and closer together. Eventually the two families became one people.

At last there was only one man left who feared the Lord and led his family to do the same — Noah, a grandson of Methuselah. Noah walked with God, just as Enoch had done. Like Enoch, he warned the godless about their wickedness, but they would not listen to him. They continued to curse and commit the most frightful sins.

The people of Noah's time were as cruel and bloodthirsty as wild animals. They

laughed at the very idea of judgment and paid no attention to the God who had created them. The whole earth was filled with their brutality.

But they would not make fun of God's holiness forever. After He gave repeated warnings and saw that they refused to listen, He decided to punish them.

The entire earth had been spoiled by sin, and the hearts of the people were full of hatred and resentment of God. By then the Lord was sorry He had made man. The wickedness on earth caused Him great pain. He declared: "I will wipe out the people I have created, and the animals and birds as well. I regret that I have made them."

Yet, there was still one man who found favor in the eyes of the Lord — Noah. Noah continued to live an upright, blameless life among his sinful neighbors.

So great was God's patience with the sinful world that He was willing to give mankind 120 years of grace. If the people on earth would repent during that time, He would not destroy them. The Lord said: "My Spirit will not remain in man forever, now that he has gone astray. Man is flesh. From now on, people will not live beyond the age of 120."

He decided to allow the people on earth a full life-span to repent — 120 years. If they refused to listen after all that time, He would strike them with a frightful punishment. The Lord would send a great flood to cover the earth, and all the godless would die a horrible death.

Noah, who was over 500 years old at the time, was called to be a preacher proclaiming God's righteousness. All through the 120 years of grace, he was to warn the people of the judgment to come.

If the people refused to listen and the



judgment finally struck, righteous Noah would be spared. The Lord would make a covenant with him and protect him in a miraculous way.

At God's command, Noah was to build an ark -- a ship bigger than any ship ever built. In that ark he would be safe with his wife, his three sons, and his sons' wives. At least one pair of each kind of animal and bird would join them in the ark until the period of judgment was over. Then the animals and birds would spread across the earth and fill it again. Noah's family would be the beginning of a new race of people that would fill the earth.

One day long after that, a special child would be born -- the child that God had

promised in Paradise. That child would be the Redeemer.

12: The final warning

Full of trust in God, Noah went to work. Shem, Ham and Japheth, his three sons, helped him in the great project. They carried out the orders Noah had been given.

The four men cut down large trees in the woods and chopped them into strong beams and planks. They brought the wood to the site where the ark was to be built. Day after day, week after week, year after year the work went on -- measuring, fitting, ham-

mering, cutting, trimming. Bit by bit, the colossal structure began to take shape.

The four builders followed the Lord's instructions to the letter. The ship was 138 meters long, 23 meters wide, and almost 14 meters high. There were three levels or stories within the ship. Each level was divided into many rooms. Noah included a door for entering and leaving the ark, and also a single window. All the seams between the planks were covered on both sides with pitch. Not a single drop of water would get inside the ark.

While Noah was working, there was great joy in his heart, for God in His mercy had seen fit to spare him and his family. Yet, he felt truly sorry for his corrupt neighbors, who might well be lost forever once the flood came.

Naturally, people came by from time to time to see what Noah was doing. They had heard stories about the foolish old man and his strange project. Why would anyone build a ship — and such a big one at that — on dry land where there was no water in sight?

Noah's neighbors did not help him with his work. All the same, Noah often put down his hammer and addressed them in an earnest, somber way, telling them about the horrible punishment God had in store for them. All they did in response was laugh. When he warned them in God's name and urged them to repent and beg forgiveness, they scoffed. No one repented — not one.

The rhythmic sound of the hammer and the ax was God's way of warning Noah's neighbors. The godless heard that sound when they got up in the morning after a night of sin. And in the evening, after they had passed another day in their wicked pastimes, they heard the same rhythmic

sound. With each hammer blow, time was running out for them.

Despite all that Noah said and did, they refused to listen. Then, one day, they heard the hammer and the ax no more. The ark was finished!

It was time for an amazing parade. Just as the animals had come to Adam in the Garden of Eden, they now came to Noah in the ark. They came in twos — a male and a female. But there were *seven* pairs of each clean animal and bird. They were the animals and birds that could be used for sacrifices.

The beasts of prey forgot their blood-thirstiness for the moment. The small animals that normally hid timidly in the bushes overcame their shyness. Although they approached the ark full of fear, ready to flee at any sudden move, they calmed down once they were inside. Noah led them to the place he had reserved for them. He had food ready for them to eat.

This great miracle was the last of God's many warnings to mankind. But the sinners of Noah's time were so blinded by their sins that they still refused to listen.

Now it was too late. When God gave the command, eight people entered the ark — Noah, his wife, his three sons, and their wives. God Himself shut the door behind them.

The ark with its precious cargo did not move. Inside the ark was life that God had looked upon in grace. Outside the ark was death. Yet, the sun continued to shine. Those proud, wicked people who refused to listen to Noah lived on for another week in their horrible sins.



13: The flood

The time had finally come. God's punishment could be put off no longer. No one was more sorry about this than the Lord Himself.

Heavy black clouds began to gather. Soon there was nothing to be seen of the blue sky. The sun disappeared. It got darker and darker — and strangely quiet. There was a fearful swishing sound in the trees. In the woods a few anxious animals cried out in fear. The earth trembled.

Then it happened. It was as though the sluice gates of heaven had been opened — that's how hard it rained. The thunder rumbled near and far. Lightning struck the earth repeatedly. The surface of the earth opened, and great underground supplies of water welled up like a fountain.

The huge ship stood still in the darkness. The driving rain spattered on its wooden roof. The water streamed down its wooden sides. In that howling storm, the ark seemed small and insignificant.

Before long water swept across the fields, for the rivers and seas overflowed their banks. Water surged against the door of the ark. It sought an opening between the planks. The wind blew fiercely and shook the ark's window.

Inside the ark sat eight people huddled close together in the darkness. They were safe and dry. Full of awe in the face of God's majesty, they listened to the fury of the storm. They were sorry about all the

destruction outside. But there was no need for them to be afraid, for the ark was not Noah's work but *God's* work. Above the howling winds and raging waters, God was keeping watch over them.

✓⁴¹The water rose. It beat against the side of the ark and climbed higher and higher. Soon the waves were so high that they picked up the ark and carried it along above the trees and hills. Higher and higher went the ark toward the black sky. The wind drove it on. Where would it come to rest? There was no way to steer the ark. Yet, God would watch over it.

For 40 days and 40 nights the heavy rain continued. Then the clouds finally broke up, and the wind blew them away. It got light outside as the sun shone once more.

It looked like the first day of creation, for the entire earth was covered with water — a great, immeasurable sea. But the sun was shining.

Somewhere on that great sea bobbed a wooden ship — a small, dark chip on the waters. Within the ship, animals of all sorts were making sounds of relief and satisfaction. And the people inside were singing songs of gratitude.

What had happened to all the others, those proud, godless people who refused to listen to Noah? When the rain first began to fall, they thought it was just another storm. But when the water flooded their houses and kept on rising, they began to think of what that old man Noah had been saying. They finally realized that he had spoken the

truth — but it was too late. In their despair they cried out for help, but their cries were drowned out in the thunder and wind and raging waters.

The people climbed onto the roofs of their houses, but the water rose to meet them. They climbed to the tops of the trees, but the water found them there. They fled to the hills and mountains, but even the high places were eventually covered by water. Wherever the people went, the water swallowed them up.

Eventually the water rose almost seven meters above the highest mountain. The godless mouths guilty of so much cursing and mocking finally fell silent. The hands that had done nothing but evil were motionless. God had carried out His threat of judgment.

v into

14: God's covenant with Noah

The ark bobbed on the water for a long, long time — 150 days. Finally it bumped^v something — a high mountain in the Ararat range. Slowly it settled on the mountain, but it did not tip over. God saw to that.

From the window of the ark Noah could watch the movement of the water. Slowly the water level went down. Some of the water was absorbed into the earth, but much of it evaporated.

Noah was eager to live on the earth again. Every day he stood at the window to see what the earth looked like. In time he saw dark islands protruding above the waves. Every day they got a little bigger, and every day there were more of them. Those islands were the tops of other mountains. Noah was delighted to see them.

About 40 days later, he fetched a raven

from the room where the birds were kept and threw it out the window. The bird flapped its large black wings and croaked joyfully as it soared above the bleak world. It flew back and forth, finally disappearing on the horizon never to return. As a bird of prey, the raven could live off the dead bodies floating on the water and scattered on the land.

Noah also released a dove. As a bird that eats seeds, the dove would have to seek food on the ground. It could eat only if plant life was reviving. The dove circled around the ark and flew far away, but that evening it returned to the window of the ark, worn out and dispirited. The dove had not been able to find a place to live. Noah brought it back to its safe place in the ark with the other birds.

A week later Noah sent out the dove again. It returned the same evening with a fresh olive leaf in its beak. Noah was delighted to see it, for the olive leaf was a message from God: "Take courage! Some of the trees are already above water and have leaves again."

Noah's heart was beating fast in hope and anticipation. He waited another seven days. For the third time he let the dove go, but this time it did *not* come back. This meant that the earth was dry.

Noah then opened the door of the ark and waited for God to speak. A month passed. Finally, after the eight people had spent more than a year inside the ark, God gave Noah the command he had been waiting for: "Leave the ark, you and your family and all the animals. Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth."

The people and animals all went outside. The birds flew away. The people and animals went down the mountain in search of food, for the grass below was green and

the flowers were beginning to bloom. A new earth lay ready to receive them. The animals spread out in the bushes and fields. The birds had already found places to build their nests.

Noah built an altar and offered the Lord a great sacrifice. He had taken extra clean animals and birds with him into the ark to use in a sacrifice. The eight survivors of the flood kneeled down before God and thanked Him for their miraculous deliverance. The Lord saw their sacrifice and knew that their hearts were filled with gratitude.

God made a covenant with Noah. He said: "I will never again flood the entire earth and destroy all that lives, as I did this time. As long as the earth exists, I will see to it that sowing and harvest, cold and heat, winter and summer, night and day follow each other in regular succession."

As a sign of the covenant, God put a rainbow in the sky. He said: "I have established the rainbow in the heavens as a sign of the covenant between you and Me. Whenever I send clouds over the earth and you see the rainbow in the sky, I will remember My covenant with you and with all living creatures. The waters will never again become a flood that destroys all living things."

Noah and his sons built houses and tilled the soil as they had done before. When bad weather struck and it rained for a long time, Noah and his family were not afraid, for they would see the rainbow shining above the earth when the sun broke through the clouds. They recognized that rainbow as a colorful sign of God's covenant. It reminded them of His promise that there would never be another flood to cover the earth.

The ark remained where it was high in

the mountains. From time to time, people came upon it. Although it could not speak, it had a message for them: "Do you remember what happened long ago, when you were saved from the floodwaters? Do you remember how God took care of you? Do you still think about God? And do you live close to Him?"

15. Blessing and curse

Once there was a wise old man who planted a vineyard on a sunny mountain slope. He took good care of his garden, uprooting the weeds and trimming the vines so that they would bear luscious fruit—lots of it. Once the grapes were ripe, he pressed them and made wine from the juice. He poured the wine into pitchers and drank it himself from time to time.

The old man was very pleased with the fine wine he produced. But in his delight he forgot that it is wrong to drink too much wine. One day he became giddy from all the wine he drank. The old man had gone too far: he got drunk.

When he was drunk, he acted like a madman. He staggered to his tent and took off all his clothes. He sprawled across the ground, naked, and fell into a deep sleep. He no longer cared what he was doing or what he looked like. That's how foolish he had become because of the wine.

Who was that old man? It was Noah, the same man who had warned his godless neighbors about the flood in such an earnest and somber way. Noah had found favor in God's eyes, and God had made a covenant with him.

The flood had not washed sin off the face of the earth. Sin continued to dwell in



human hearts. No amount of water could ever wash it away.

There were still evil desires in every human heart, just as there had been before the flood. Satan was still trying to mislead people, just as he had done in Paradise.

Satan had certainly succeeded in leading Noah astray. There lay the old servant of God in his tent, drunk and naked.

Someone approached the tent, but Noah heard nothing. A large, dark-skinned man stopped at the door of the tent and looked inside. It was Ham, one of Noah's sons. When he saw the spectacle, he laughed; he made fun of his drunken father. Off he went to find others in the family and tell them what he had seen.

Shem and Japheth, Noah's other sons, were not like Ham. They did not laugh when they heard what had happened. In-

stead they went to Noah's tent carrying a robe between them. They entered the tent backwards. Without looking at their father, they covered his naked body with a robe. Then they went their way without saying anything.

When Noah woke up, he was deeply ashamed of what he had done. But the Lord forgave him.

Noah found out how his sons had reacted to his shameful behavior. He summoned them. The words he addressed to them were not his own words; they were words that God had placed in His servant's mouth. Noah had become a prophet.

He raised his aged hands above Shem's head and gave him a rich blessing in God's name. Shem would become a great people. The Redeemer would be born as one of Shem's descendants. He would make

people's hearts free of sin — including Noah's heart.

Japheth also received a blessing. He, too, would be the father of a great many people. His descendants would approach the descendants of Shem to share in the salvation brought by the Redeemer.

Ham was cursed for his wickedness. His son Canaan would be a servant of Noah's other descendants.

Noah lived for many years after this episode. God finally took him away when he was 950 years old. Then he was forever free of raging floodwaters and the clutches of satan.

16: The tower of Babel

The flood had not wiped sin off the face of the earth. It seemed as if the people who lived after the flood had learned nothing at all from that horrible divine judgment.

When Shem, Ham and Japheth became great peoples, mankind turned away from the Lord again. The people on earth believed they could provide for their own happiness. They did all they could to make themselves strong. They wanted to be rich and powerful. But that was impossible in the mountainous country of Ararat.

Most of mankind therefore migrated to the east and found a more promising place to live — a fertile plain in the land of Shinar. This area contained a lot of clay, which they could use to make bricks. It also contained lime (a kind of asphalt), which could be used for mortar.

They liked the new area so much that they said to each other: "Let's build a city here. Then we can stay here permanently." That's just what they proceeded to do.

They knew it was wrong for all of them to stay together in one place, for the Lord had said that they were to spread across the earth. But the Lord's command did not concern them.

Once they had built their city, they became even more proud and foolish. They said to each other: "Let's build a tower as well — a strong, high tower. When we wander away from our city, we'll always be able to see the tower. The tower will keep us together. We don't want to split up into small, weak groups. We want to become a large, powerful nation."

They baked huge bricks and dried them in the sun. They laid a broad, strong foundation and began to build walls on it. Every day the walls rose a little higher. Week after week, month after month, they worked and sweated, pouring all their strength into the project.

They didn't think about God while they worked. They weren't interested in listening to His commands, for they considered themselves safe in their own power. "It's going very well!" they cried out. "We'll make the tower so high that its top reaches all the way to heaven."

The Lord God in heaven watched the work of the little people on earth and heard their foolish words.

Then something very strange occurred — a quiet miracle that the people didn't even notice at first. The Lord changed the words they used.

Until then they had all spoken the same language. Now they suddenly found themselves speaking all different languages. The sentence spoken by one man was a collection of meaningless sounds to his neighbor. The people building the tower didn't understand each other anymore.

Soon quarrels broke out among the



people. Small groups of people speaking the same language went off on their own. As they traveled away in different directions, they could still see the unfinished tower in the distance — a stubby finger pointing to heaven. But they no longer cared about the tower or looked at it.

Only a small number of people stayed behind in the city. There were not enough of them to continue with the great building project.

They called their city Babel, which means *confusion*. The tower they were so proud of, the tower by which they hoped to glorify themselves — that tower now became their shame. It stood there for centuries as a reminder of a foolish plan made by little people on earth who refused to take God into account.

17: Journey without a destination

High on his camel sat Abram, the shepherd prince. Behind him was a great caravan made up of family and servants and possessions.

The heads of the camels bobbed up and down as they walked, and their shadows bobbed with them. The sheep trudged along behind the camels, with the lambs pausing occasionally to play. Cattle and donkeys followed with their calves and foals. The animals made their usual noises, and the herdsmen called out to each other. The caravan stirred up clouds of dust. The animals left thousands of footprints behind them in the sand.

The herdsmen were strong men with brown skin. Their job was to keep the



animals together and drive them along. They also had to watch out for robbers and wild animals and be prepared to fight to protect their master's life and property.

In the safest place in the caravan rode the women, including Sarai, Abram's wife. Next to Abram at the head of the caravan rode another man—his nephew Lot.

✓ Slowly the people and livestock inched ahead through territory that Abram had never seen before. The caravan traveled around high mountains, across green plains, and through deserts where there was nothing but hot sand and burning sun.

In the evening the tents were set up near a spring or a well. But the caravan rested only till the next morning. The people slept in tents, while the animals spent the night under the stars. The herdsmen took turns standing guard. In heaven above, God watched over the caravan at rest.

Where was Abram going with all his possessions? How did he find his way through all the unfamiliar territory?

The sheep and camels did not know where they were going. They simply walked along as the shepherds drove them on. The herdsmen didn't know where they

were going either. They were following their master. Not even Sarai or Lot knew. *Abram himself* did not know where they would wind up. Only God knew.

God had called Abram when he still lived in the city of Ur, where his father Terah and his brother Nahor also lived. God told Abram to leave the land of his birth. Yet, He did not tell him *where* he was to go.

Terah and Nahor left Ur with Abram. Terah died along the way, and Nahor stayed behind when they reached the city of Haran. But God did not tell Abram to stay in Haran. Therefore Abram pushed on.

God told him what direction to take and guided him along the way, but He did not tell him the destination. He told him to travel in the direction of the setting sun. And Abram, seated on his camel at the head of the caravan, answered reverently: "I go, Lord." Calmly he traveled on, trusting completely in the Lord.

18: God's friend

Mankind spread across the earth after God put an end to the building of the tower of Babel. The different language groups became different nations, each with its own customs and way of life. But in one respect the nations remained the same: they turned away from God. They still knew something about God and even prayed to Him, but they also made idols of gold and silver. Those idols were given positions of honor in their homes. The people bowed down to their idols and began to pray to them. In their foolishness, they believed that the idols they had made with their own hands could help them and protect them.

How did God respond to this turn of

events? He said: "I will choose *one* man and separate him from all others. I will speak to him and bless him. He shall serve only Me. That man will be *My* child. I will make a great people of him, and that people will be *My* people. From that people the Redeemer will be born. The Redeemer will be My own Son."

The man God chose was Abram, the son of Terah. The Lord said to him: "Arise, take your family, and leave the land of your birth. Go to the land that I will show you. I will make a great people of you and bless you and make your name great. And you will be a blessing to others. Blessed will be all those who bless you, and cursed will be all those who curse you. Through you all the nations of the earth shall be blessed."

What glorious promises! Abram promised to do what the Lord commanded. Soon he was on his way.

He left behind much that was dear to him as he journeyed into a vast, strange, dangerous world. But he undertook his journey like a child relying on his father. His heart was at peace, for he trusted in God. God had called him, and God would show him the way.

One day Abram came to a river. Somehow he had to get to the other side with his caravan. There was no bridge spanning the river and no ferry to take the people across.

Abram found a place where the water was shallow. There he waded across. Behind him followed the people and animals. The lambs, too small to cross on their own, were carried by the herdsman.

Once Abram had crossed the river, he was in a glorious land — the land of Canaan. Clear streams flowed between green hills. All around him he saw lush grass for his flocks.

At the city of Shechem, which was in the shadow of some beautiful trees with leafy crowns, Abram pitched his tents and let his sheep graze on the hills. The Lord appeared to him and said: "This is the land I shall give to your children."

To your *children*? Abram was already 75 years old, and his wife Sarai was 65. They had no children. Surely they were too old to have children!

And what about the land? It was indeed a beautiful land, but it was already inhabited. The Canaanites — strong, powerful people descended from Noah's son Ham — lived there. Abram lived among the Canaanites as a stranger. How, then, could the Lord give the land of Canaan to Abram's children?

Although these questions rose in his mind, Abram believed the Lord. He thought to himself: "If God says so, it must be true. How all of this will come about I don't know, but the Lord knows."

This conviction made Abram calm, content and happy. It was a great power in his life.

Abram was God's friend. He traveled throughout the land of Canaan, moving from place to place. But wherever he went, he felt safe under God's protection. And he made sure to build the Lord an altar whenever he decided to settle down someplace for a while.

19: Abram and Lot

In the green fields of Canaan grazed the flocks of Abram and Lot. The animals spread across the countryside. There were thousands of them on the hillsides and in the valleys.

When the animals had enough to eat, they would lie down to rest or chew their cud. But the peace was often disturbed by angry quarrels between Abram's herdsmen and Lot's herdsmen. The men would shake their fists at each other and exchange angry words.

This had been going on for weeks. The herdsmen argued about who was to have the best pastures. They quarreled over a single sheep that had gone from one flock to another. In the evening they could not agree whose flocks would drink from the well first.

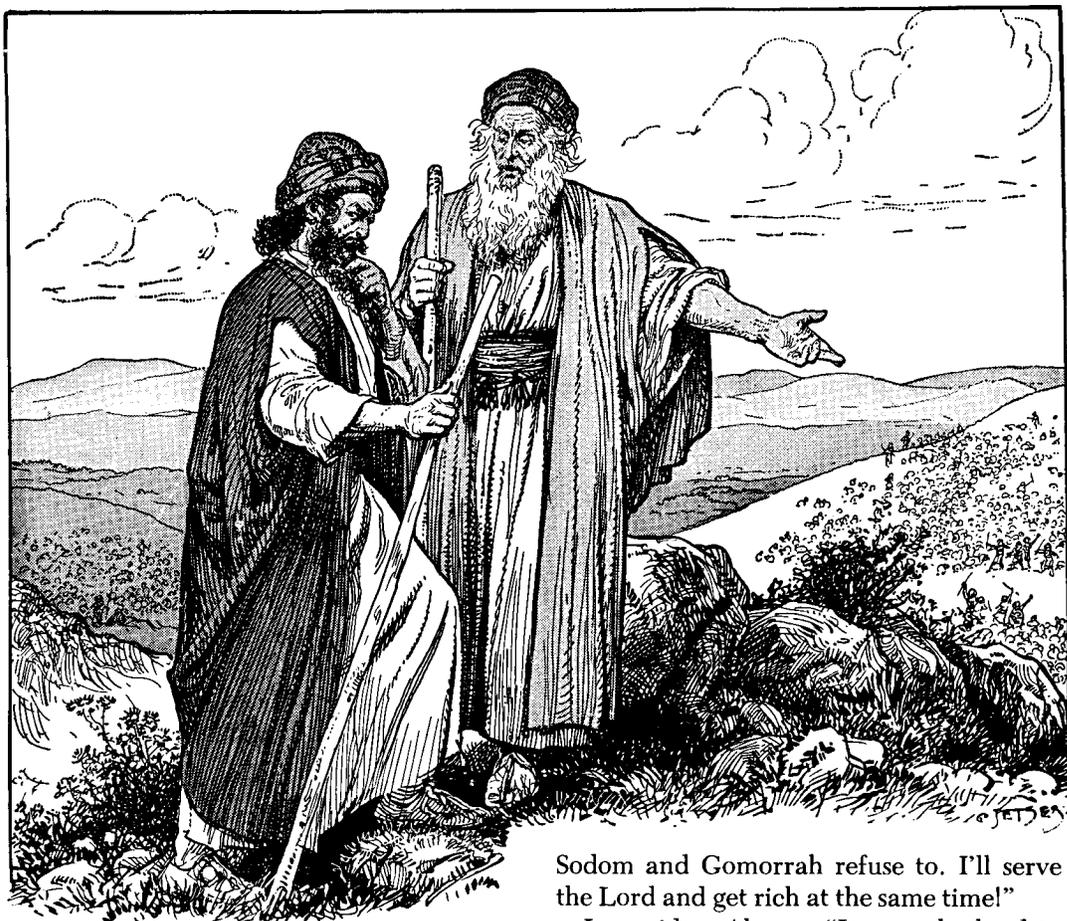
Their complaints often reached Abram and Lot. Abram was very unhappy about the situation, for he was by nature a man of peace. He told his herdsmen not to be stubborn. Why couldn't they just give in to Lot's men?

The flocks of the two men were growing steadily. And as the flocks grew, so did the impatience and anger of the herdsmen. The two flocks were getting too big to live side by side.

Finally there was only one way to put an end to the trouble. Abram took Lot to the top of a mountain from which they could see the land all around them. In the east the Jordan River flowed through a broad green plain — an area almost as fruitful and beautiful as Paradise. The land to the west was much less fruitful. There were hills and valleys and small rivers. The sea shone in the distance.

Abram said: "Let there be no more disputes between the two of us or between my herdsmen and your herdsmen, for we are of the same family. The whole land is open before you. If you go to the left, I will go to the right. But if you choose the right, I will go to the left."

Abram was being very generous. He



would let Lot choose.

Now, Lot should have responded in an equally modest and gracious way. He should have refused to choose first.

That's what he should have done, but it's not what he did. He looked long and hard at the beautiful, green Jordan Valley. He said to himself: "That's the land for me! My flocks will always have enough pasture there. They will keep on growing, and I will get even richer. There are a couple of cities in that area inhabited by wicked people, but that doesn't matter. I'll go on serving the Lord even if the people of

Sodom and Gomorrah refuse to. I'll serve the Lord and get rich at the same time!"

Lot said to Abram: "I want the land to the left." He pointed to the beautiful area he had chosen.

Abram was left with the land to the right. That land, too, was fruitful and beautiful, but it was not as desirable as the Jordan Valley. Sometimes there were great droughts that made the land dry up and turn brown.

Greedy Lot moved his household and possessions to a rich but dangerous area. And Abram, who was more humble and modest, went on living in the area of Mamre and Hebron.

Yet, Abram was satisfied. The Lord, who

observed all that had happened, said to him: "Abram, look once more at all that land. Look north, south, east, and west. All the land you see I will give to you and to your descendants. Your offspring will be as numerous as the dust of the earth. Just as no one can count the grains of sand on the seashore, no one will be able to count your descendants."

Abram was happy to receive those promises. He felt as if he were living in a paradise. The area left to him was not as nice as the area Lot had chosen, but Abram had the Lord's blessing. In that blessing he was rich.

20: A daring rescue

One day some years later, a man came running across the hills to Abram's tent. His clothes were torn, and his eyes were full of tears. Gasping for breath, he fell down before Abram and said: "My lord, something terrible has happened! Chedorlaomer, a powerful king, has come with his allies and a great army to make war against Sodom, Gomorrah, and the other cities of the Jordan Valley. He has taken the people of Sodom prisoner. Lot has been captured too, along with his wife and children. Chedorlaomer is taking them to his own land as captives."

When Abram heard the news, he did not think about Lot's ingratitude and greed. Instead he quickly sent a messenger to his three friends Aner, Eshcol and Mamre, asking for their help.

Then he called all his servants together. "Grab your weapons and saddle the camels," he said. "Quickly!"

Soor the old, gray shepherd prince was

on his way in pursuit of Chedorlaomer with over 300 armed men. The earth shook as they passed by.

Abram did not worry about his flocks. Nor did he worry about the size of Chedorlaomer's army, which was much bigger than his band of men. He prayed: "Lord, help us rescue Lot."

Abram and his allies finally caught up with the enemy in a foreign land. Abram divided his band of men into two groups. They slipped into the great camp from different sides under cover of darkness. The enemy soldiers were sleeping, and the captives were tied up. The only men awake were some watchmen guarding the captured livestock.

That night there was a bitter struggle between the small band of shepherds and the army of the powerful robber king. By morning, the enemy soldiers were in flight. In their fear, they scattered. Abram and his men pursued them almost to Damascus. They would never return to rob the people of Canaan.

What a joyous return to Canaan! All the captives were freed, including Lot and his wife and children. They were given back the livestock and goods that the enemy had taken from them. Lot was thankful, but he could not help feeling ashamed.

The king of Sodom was so thankful that he said: "Abram, I'll let you keep everything that belongs to me. Just let me have my people back."

But Abram did not want anything that belonged to Sodom's king. He thought of how the Lord, the King of heaven and earth, had promised to bless him. He was to trust in the Lord — and no one else. If he was to receive anything, it would be from the Lord's hand.

Therefore Abram replied: "Give something to my servants and to my friends

Aner, Eshcol and Mamre. As for me, I will accept nothing that is yours — not even a thread or a sandal strap. I don't want anyone to say: 'I am the one who made Abram rich.'"

The Sodomites traveled back to the Jordan River with Abram's band. The rest of the way home, Abram was accompanied only by his servants and his three friends.

The news about the daring rescue had outstripped them. An old, honorable man sought them out on their way home. This old man had come from Salem (Jerusalem), the city of peace built on a group of hills. With the old man were his servants, carrying bread and wine to refresh the weary fighters. The old man was the king of Salem, and he was also a priest of the Most High God. His name was Melchizedek, which means *king of righteousness*.

Melchizedek blessed Abram. And Abram, the victor in battle, bowed deeply before this emissary sent by God. He gave Melchizedek many gifts — one tenth of all the booty taken in the raid on Chedorlaomer's army. Then Abram continued on his way to his tents, where the women were waiting anxiously.

Many centuries later there was another Prince of Peace, who was an even greater king and priest than Melchizedek. That Prince, too, was God's emissary.

On Him Abram's hopes were fixed. His whole heart longed for Him. That's why Abram bowed so deeply before Melchizedek, the lesser prince of peace.

God had sent Melchizedek to Abram to strengthen his faith. Melchizedek was a living sign that the Redeemer would surely come.

21: Waiting for the promised heir

The years slipped by quickly. Lot went on living in Sodom's plain, where he grew rich. Abram's flocks were also growing, but the most important of God's promises had not yet been fulfilled.

A solitary woman went about her work in her tent. In the evenings she was joined by an even older man — Abram. It was quiet, very quiet, in their tent. They were alone with their great desire for the child the Lord had promised them.

"Nothing will ever come of it," said Sarai, feeling depressed.

Abram tried to comfort her. "We must wait patiently until God's time has come. His promises are sure."

"We have already waited so long," Sarai replied. "We're getting older and older."

Ten years had passed since their arrival in the land of Canaan. But Abram wanted to go on trusting, however difficult that might be.

Abram was fighting a fierce battle in his own heart — far more fierce than the battle against Chedorlaomer, the robber king. The battle raging in his heart was against doubt and unbelief. His opponent was satan himself.

Satan said to Abram: "God has forgotten about you! Why wait for Him any longer?"

But Abram's faith replied: "No! God never forgets His promises."

Abram listened to the voice of faith. Despite all his questions and concerns, he never let go of God. He struggled to cling to his faith. With the help of God, he triumphed repeatedly. But the struggle in his heart caused him a lot of fear and pain.

The Lord knew what was going on in Abram's heart. One night, when Abram was having an especially hard time, He

spoke some words of comfort to him: "Fear not, Abram! I am your shield, your protector. Great shall be your reward."

Then Abram spoke to God in a reverent way and told Him why he found life so difficult. The Lord had promised him many descendants who would live in the land of Canaan. Yet, after all these years, he didn't even have one son. He was getting older, and his wife Sarai might well die before long. What would happen then? His oldest servant, Eliezer, would inherit everything. Would *Eliezer's* descendants inherit the land of Canaan?

The Lord answered: "No, your heirs will not be Eliezer's children. Your own son will be your heir — a son that I will give you."

The Lord led His aged, weary servant outside. That night the wind was sighing through Mamre's terebinth trees. God led Abram away from his tent to an open area. High above the earth Abram could see millions of twinkling stars in the heavens.

"Look at the heavens and count the stars if you can," said the Lord.

What could that mean? Surely God, who had created all those heavenly bodies, was the only one who could count them! Abram was puzzled, but he looked at the stars. Then he heard God's voice: "That's how numerous your descendants will be."

There was that glorious promise again! This time the promise was richer than ever before.

"I believe, Lord," Abram stammered. "Help me to go on believing always. Give me a sign that these things will surely come to pass."

God then made a covenant with Abram. God, in His greatness and majesty, made a covenant with a small, sinful man. That covenant was a sign that would strengthen Abram's faith. In a dream the Lord



showed Abram that his descendants would be *God's* people. They would live in a foreign land and suffer greatly, but God Himself would deliver them, take care of them, and lead them back to the land of Canaan.

After this wonder, Abram was content. Whenever doubts arose in his heart, he would say softly: "My descendants will be

as numerous as the stars in the heavens.”

Abram believed in God, and the Lord regarded him as righteous. God loved His servant and forgave all his sins.

22: Ishmael and Isaac

Sarai's faith was weakening again. She said to Abram: "God must mean that the promised child will be yours but not mine. I'm already too old to have a child. Apparently God wants you to have a child by some other woman. Take my Egyptian slave Hagar as a wife. If she has a child, we'll consider it *our* child. That child will receive the great blessing promised by God."

It was wrong of Sarai to make such a suggestion to Abram. And Abram was wrong to accept it. In those days it was not unusual for a man to have two wives, but it was still a sin in God's eyes. Sin never leads to happiness. Instead it brings us sorrow and pain.

Hagar was proud when she became Abram's wife. She forgot that she was really a slave. She thought to herself: "Now I'm just as important as Sarai."

When the Lord let Hagar know that she was carrying a child, her pride swelled even more. "Now I am greater than Sarai," she thought. "I will be a mother, but she will not." She began to scorn her mistress, refusing to obey her.

There was no peace in Abram's household. Each day Hagar became more haughty and scornful, and Sarai became more spiteful and unhappy. Abram sighed and became unhappy too.

Things got worse instead of better. One day, when Sarai punished her slave, Hagar

got so angry that she ran away into the wilderness. She traveled south, toward Egypt. Egypt was the land of her birth, and that was where she wanted to go now.

After she had wandered around for a while in the vast desert, with its sand and burning heat, she sat down to rest by a well. By that time she was lonesome and no longer felt as brave as when she first set out.

"Hagar, slave of Sarai!" A voice was calling her. It was the Lord's voice.

Hagar was startled. How could anyone so far out in the desert know who she was? She trembled with fear. She bowed her proud head and listened reverently.

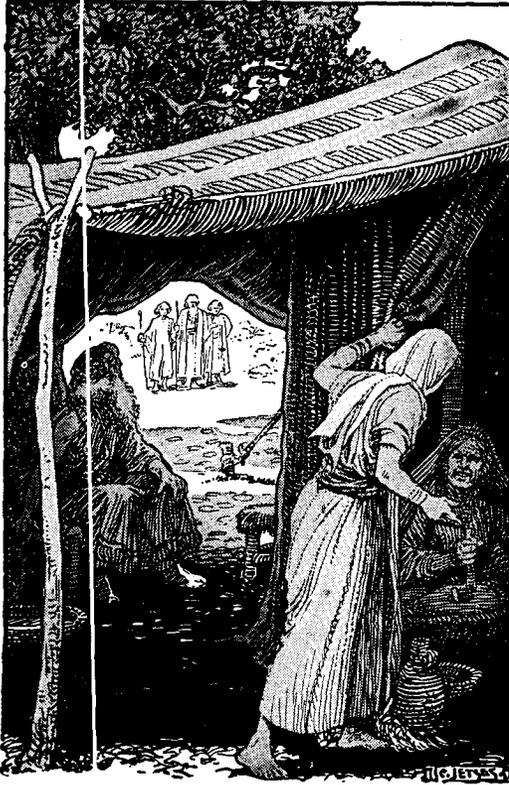
The Lord told her to go back to Abram's tent. She was to obey her master and mistress and do her work humbly. He also promised rich blessings to her and to the child within her. That child would become a strong, clever man. The Lord would make a great nation of him, a nation of valiant warriors.

Hagar's heart was filled with love and gratitude. "I had completely forgotten about God," she said, "but God was concerned about me and watched over me." She called the well where God had spoken to her *the well of the one who sees*.

Quickly she went back down the long, hot road to Mamre. Once she was back in Abram's tent, she asked Sarai to forgive her. Her pride was broken. She knew that she was only a slave. Yet, she was happier than her mistress.

Sarai was not happy, for she no longer trusted in the Lord's promises. When Ishmael was born, she took him into her arms as if he were her own son. But her joy was not genuine, for he was not really her son. He was the son that the Lord had given to Hagar.

If Sarai's faith had not sunk so low, she



would have realized that her slave's son could not be the promised heir.

More years went by. Abram got older and older. By now he was almost 100, and Sarai was an old, wrinkled woman of almost 90. She looked like a grandmother, but she wasn't even a mother.

Sarai had given up hoping for a child. She forgot about God's promise. And when Abram looked at Ishmael, a healthy, strong boy of almost 13, he thought: "Ishmael is the promised heir, the one who will inherit the great blessing."

The Lord spoke once more to Abram and told him that Ishmael was *not* the promised heir. Abram's heir would be a child that Sarai would bear. That child would be named Isaac, which means *laughter*. As a

sign that these things would surely come to pass, the Lord gave Abram and Sarai new names—*Abraham*, which means *father of many peoples*, and *Sarah*, which means *queen*.

Abraham laughed in amazement and joy when he thought about God's might. The child to be born of these two old people would truly be a miraculous child!

Abraham believed the Lord, but Sarah shook her head. "I can't believe it," she said. "A child in *my* womb? *Me* a queen? No, it's impossible!" And then the queen laughed out loud.

23: Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?

One hot day Abraham was resting at the entrance of his tent, enjoying the shade. He looked down the dusty road that passed by his tent and saw three men approaching.

At once he stood up and went out to greet them. No doubt the three men were travelers on a long journey. Abraham wanted to be friendly to them; he wanted them to rest in his tent and refresh themselves before they went on.

When he was close enough to the three men to get a good look at them, he was surprised: the one in the middle looked like a powerful prince. Why should such a man be out walking in the heat of the day when everyone else was resting? Why did he make his journey on foot, as if he were a poor man?

Suddenly Abraham realized who this prince must be. The very thought was strange and glorious; it startled him. Yet, he could not hold back the rising joy in his heart.

He addressed the leader: "My lord, don't pass by the tent of your servant. Let me get you some water and wash your feet. Why don't you lie down under the tree and rest? I'll get you some food to strengthen you for your journey."

The three men accepted his invitation and sat down in the shade. Abraham went into the tent. "Sarah," he said, "take some of your finest flour and bake bread for our guests." He picked out the best calf in his herd and ordered one of his servants to kill it and roast it.

He brought his guests some water and washed their feet. He placed bread, butter, milk, and meat before them. While they ate, he waited patiently under the tree, ready to bring them more food if they should ask for it. Although Abraham was a wealthy prince in his own right, he waited on his guests as if he were a servant.

The question in his heart would not go away. Could it be? Or would that be too much to ask?

One of the guests asked where Sarah was. Abraham replied that she was in the tent.

The leader of the group told Abraham: "I shall visit you again in one year. When I return, your wife Sarah will have a son."

Abraham's heart was filled with joy. Now he was sure! The Lord Himself had come to his tent with two of His angels. The Lord was willing to be a guest at Abraham's table! But why? Because He wanted to strengthen the faith of Abraham and Sarah and let them hear the glorious promise once more.

Abraham bowed respectfully. But what about Sarah? She had been listening to the conversation behind the door of the tent, unaware of the identity of Abraham's guests.

When she heard that she was to have a

son, she looked at her wrinkled hands and remembered how old she was. How could a barren woman who was almost 90 expect to hold her own child in her arms? It was too much to believe. Sarah could not help laughing.

She did not laugh long, for the voice outside the tent immediately asked: "Why is Sarah laughing? Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?"

The old woman was caught by surprise. What could she say? "I didn't laugh," she protested.

The lie got her nowhere, for the Lord knew perfectly well what she had done. "You certainly did laugh," He said.

The three guests stood up. It was time for them to continue their journey to Sodom. Abraham accompanied them part of the way, as a good host was expected to do.

Sarah stayed in the tent, trying to cope with her feelings of amazement and shame. In her heart she could feel her faith swelling. Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?

Sarah knew the answer: there is nothing too wonderful for the Lord. She had heard the promise from His own mouth. What was there for her to do but pray and wait?

Slowly her heart was filled with a peace that she had not known in years.

24: Abraham pleads with God

Abraham walked with his guests as they went their way. In the distance they could see the beautiful Jordan Valley with its green pastures and shimmering river. The palm trees and white houses of Sodom and Gomorrah were shining in the sun.

The Lord said to Himself: "Shouldn't I

tell Abraham what I am about to do? After all, he is My friend, the one I have chosen, the one whose seed I will use to carry out My plans.”

There was a note of deep disappointment in the Lord's voice when He said to Abraham: “There has been a great outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah. The people living there are guilty of horrible sins. I have come down to find out if the things I've heard are true. I want to see for Myself.”

Abraham stood still and pondered what God had said. He knew about the awful sins committed regularly in those two cities. The people there lived as if there were no God. Now that God Himself had come down, they would be punished severely.

But Sodom was the home of Lot and his family. Perhaps there were more people in Sodom who still wanted to serve the Lord. Would that horrible punishment strike them too?

The two angels kept on walking. Down the hill they went, heading for Sodom. But the Lord waited.

Abraham approached Him and bowed low before Him in deep respect. “Lord,” he

stammered, “You are the Judge of all the earth. It may be that there are 50 righteous people living in Sodom . . .”

The Lord replied: “If I find 50 righteous people in Sodom, I will spare the entire city for their sake.”

Abraham was happy to hear that, but his fears about Lot were not yet put to rest. He prayed: “Lord, I am a sinful and insignificant creature. Forgive me for daring to speak to You again. It may be that there are only 45 righteous people in Sodom. Will You then destroy the city?”

The Lord answered: “If I find 45, I will spare the city.”

Abraham bowed even deeper. “And if there are only 40, Lord?”

“Then I won't punish the city.”

“Or 30?” Abraham whispered.

“Even then I will spare the city,” God said.

“Lord, don't be angry with me,” begged Abraham. “What will You do if there are only 20?”

The Lord answered him: “For the sake of 20, I will spare the city.”

Abraham did not dare go any further. But when he remembered how merciful God is, he spoke once more: “Lord, please don't be angry with me for speaking one last time. Perhaps you will find only ten.”

The Lord answered that He would not destroy the city if there were ten righteous people in it.

When Abraham looked up, he was alone. He found himself on his knees on the sandy hillside. The Lord was gone, but he could still see the two angels walking through the sunny fields on their way to Sodom.

The old man rose and walked slowly back to his tent. He trembled at the thought of the Judge of all the earth watching the wicked people of Sodom and Gomorrah.



When he rejoined Sarah and saw that her eyes were filled with joy because of her newly strengthened faith, he was happy too. He was happy because his wife had taken her place by his side in clinging to God's promise. From then on they would wait *together* for that promise to be fulfilled.

25: Sodom's wickedness

It was evening when the two angels entered Sodom. The searing sun that had burned down on the city all day was now large and red. Slowly it sank out of sight beyond the distant hills. Thirsty animals drank greedily at the wells as darkness fell.

Seated at Sodom's gate were a number of men engaged in conversation. One of them stood up and stepped forward to greet the two travelers. It was Lot. He did not know the two figures standing before him in the twilight. He knew only that they were foreigners apparently unaware that Sodom was a wicked, dangerous place.

Lot was a good man and wanted to be hospitable, just as Abraham had been. He thought: "I'll take care of these two men and make sure that no harm comes to them."

He bowed deeply before them and said: "My lords, come with me to my house to spend the night. I'll give you everything you need. Tomorrow morning you can get up early and continue your journey." He urged the two strangers to accept his invitation, and finally they did. The men at Sodom's gate and in the streets watched closely. There were envious of Lot.

Lot did just as he had promised: he took good care of his guests. He washed their

dusty feet. He baked cakes and prepared a meal for them. While they ate, he stood by them feeling satisfied. He knew that he had done the right thing.

Outside, on the street, it was much busier than usual. People were converging on Lot's house. In their excitement, their wicked talk became louder and louder. The men of Sodom, from the oldest to the youngest, had gathered around Lot's house. The evil in their hearts was so great that no foreigner in the city was safe from them.

They surrounded the house so that no one could get away. Then they hammered on the door with their fists and shouted: "Lot, where are the men you took home with you? We saw them with our own eyes. Bring those two strangers out at once!"

Lot was not a coward. He thought to himself: "The strangers are my guests. I brought them to my house to protect them, and that's just what I'll do."

He stepped outside and closed the door behind him. In the darkness he stood before the howling mob of evildoers and murderers and said: "Don't harm these men. They are guests in our city and my house." He added: "I'll send my daughters out to you instead."

But there was no holding the men back. Their hearts were so corrupt that they refused to consider Lot's plea. They pressed ahead toward him. "Lot himself is a stranger in Sodom!" they shouted. "Who does he think he is? How does he dare tell us what to do? We'll give him the treatment we had in mind for the two strangers. Grab him!"

Just when Lot feared that all was lost, strong hands seized him from behind and *They* dragged him into the house right through the band of wicked men. The angels had come outside to save him. They locked the

door when Lot was back in the house, and they struck the men of Sodom with blindness so that they could not find the door of Lot's house.

The wicked men gave up their plans. Crying and cursing, they stumbled home. God's power had saved Lot and his family from death.

Inside the house, the two strangers told Lot that they were angels, and they explained their mission. "Flee from the city quickly," they said. "Don't wait for morning, for the Lord has sent us here to destroy the city. Your life will be spared. All who belong to your household must flee with you."

Did Lot understand what the angels were saying? Was he willing to leave that very night? What about his flocks, which were outside the city in the fields? What about his house and his other possessions, the wealth he had worked for all his life? Was he supposed to leave all that behind?

Lot looked at his guests in dismay, stunned by the message they had given him. He knew that the two men really were angels sent by God to save him.

Then he thought of the two men of Sodom who were married to his other daughters. He decided to ask them to come along with their families. Soon he was moving through the dark streets on his way to the homes of the two men. He walked bent over like an old man. He woke the men up and told them about the angels. "Come with me and leave Sodom," he said, "for the Lord is about to destroy the city."

The two men didn't believe Lot. They thought he was joking. Confused and upset, Lot returned to his home.

26: Lot's flight

Lot didn't sleep that night. He sat there thinking, with his head in his hands. He was a broken man. He had sweated and toiled so long to become rich, but now he would lose his possessions and become a beggar.

"Don't just sit there," said the two angels. "Flee with your wife and your daughters so that you will not be destroyed along with this unrighteous city!" But it seemed that he didn't hear them.

Even when the first rays of morning light appeared on the horizon, Lot continued to delay. Finally the angels took Lot and his wife and daughters by the hand and led them out of the city. The Lord wanted to spare them.

There lay the fields in the stillness of the early morning. In the distance were some hills. They looked like a black wall. Closer to Sodom lay the city of Zoar — a dark spot on the plain.

"Run for your life!" shouted the angels. "Don't look back, and don't stand still! Run to the hills so that you won't be destroyed."

Even then Lot hesitated. "The hills are so far away!" he complained. "Let us take refuge in that small city instead."

"All right," said the angels. "But be quick about it — or you'll surely die!"

The family of four hurried across the plain. Behind them the sky was turning red as morning dawned. The people of Sodom were waking up. They were getting ready for their usual round of eating, drinking and sinning.

The earth began to rumble and shake. Dark clouds blocked the morning light. A new night was settling on Sodom — an eternal night.

The Lord sent fire and brimstone from

heaven. He tore open the ground beneath the godless cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. The two cities with all their filthy sins sank deep into the dark earth. Water in the depths of the earth rose to the surface. Great reserves of salt in the earth mixed with the water. Soon salt water surged across the trembling plain, advancing on the fleeing survivors like a moving wall. Where there had been a green valley only a day before there was now a great salt sea.

Lot and his daughters had been saved. They made it to Zoar in time. But the two girls had lost their mother.

Lot's wife was even more enchanted with wealth than Lot was. She felt so bad about all they were losing in Sodom's destruction that she disobeyed the orders of God's angels: she paused and turned around to see what was happening.

The rain of fire struck her dead. The roaring waves came and covered her body with salt.

Lot's wife turned into a pillar of salt. In her heart she had not made room for God. Now God had no place for her in His mercy. The poor woman was almost saved — almost!

Early in the morning Abraham rose from his bed. With his heart pounding, he returned to the place where he had discussed Sodom's fate with God the day before.

He saw heavy, black smoke rising from the area where Sodom and Gomorrah had stood. It was like the smoke of an oven used for refining metal.

Then Abraham knew that there were not even ten righteous people in Sodom. Sadly he returned to his tent, where Sarah was waiting anxiously.

Lot didn't stay in the little city of Zoar for long. Zoar was almost as godless as Sodom. Lot had learned to fear the com-

pany of sinners.

With his daughters he moved to the hills mentioned by the angels. In a cave, a hole in the rocks, he lived the life of a hermit, a forgotten man. He had lost almost everything that was dear to him — his wife, his house, his money.

But God, whom Lot still loved, remained the same. God watched over Lot and was patient with him. Perhaps the love of God would now fill Lot's heart. Then he could say: "I was poor, but I have become rich."

The great sea that covered the land on which Sodom and Gomorrah once stood still exists. It is called the Dead Sea.

The salt water still shimmers in the sun. On the banks of that sea there are barren rocks and blocks of salt. The area supports no wildlife, no birds, no flowers — not even a blade of grass. No fish live in the waters of that sea.

Death rules this domain. The calm of that sea is his kingdom. The area belongs to him because sin went so far there.

27: Sarah and Hagar

In the year after the Lord appeared to Abraham and Sarah, things were different. They waited patiently for the great miracle the Lord had promised. Abraham no longer had to comfort his wife and encourage her. In faith Sarah waited, and in faith she received her child from God.

Once that year had passed, the miracle occurred just as the Lord had said it would. Again Sarah cradled a small baby in her aged arms. This time it was *her own baby*, the baby God had given her, the baby born to her and to Abraham. For decades she had waited for this moment.



Everyone who heard about it said: "What a miraculous birth! Such a thing has never happened before."

Sarah could not help laughing. She laughed in gratitude and happiness. At God's command the baby was named Isaac, which means *laughter*.

Now there was some life in the stillness of Sarah's tent. When the baby was hungry, he cried. Then he would drink from Sarah's breast. And when little Isaac was satisfied, he would make small sounds to show that he was content. Abraham and Sarah would listen to him in delight.

Little Isaac grew and thrived. He learned how to laugh and began to say little words. He crawled through the tent and took his first steps. His aged parents felt young again in their joy.

Isaac was the *promised* child, the child

whose descendants would later become a nation made up of as many people as there are stars in the heavens. That great nation to be born of Isaac would live in the land of Canaan.

One day the Redeemer would be born as one of Isaac's descendants. His birth would be an even greater miracle than Isaac's birth. People would wait much longer for His birth than Abraham and Sarah had waited for Isaac. But all who waited for the Redeemer in faith could be sure that He would come one day. When Abraham looked at his little son Isaac, he often thought of that other Child who was to come. In his mind he would see the great day.

One day a feast was celebrated in Abraham's household. Bread was baked and meat was roasted, for many guests joined in the festivities. Little Isaac was there too.

In fact, the whole feast was arranged in honor of Isaac. Isaac was now a boy of two or three. He had been weaned; he was no longer a baby drinking milk from his mother. He was getting to be a big boy, and he could eat bread and meat with the grownups.

When the celebration was in full swing, something happened to spoil the fun. Ishmael, who was a big, strong boy of seventeen, was also present at the celebration, along with Hagar, his mother. Ishmael was not happy to see Isaac growing up, just as he had not been happy when Isaac was born. Before Isaac was born, the servants had said: "When Abraham dies, Ishmael will be our master. He will inherit everything." But now they all said: "No, not Ishmael but *Isaac* will be our master." Little Isaac would receive a greater blessing than Ishmael, who was so much bigger.

Isaac was the promised child.

Ishmael could not understand that. He thought: "I'm Abraham's son too! And I was born before Isaac." Ishmael could not bear to be friendly to his younger brother.

The same pride and jealousy that had flared up in Hagar years before now rose in him. He despised the little boy. In the middle of the celebration, while Isaac was walking around among the guests, Ishmael made fun of him. The big boy ridiculed the little boy and taunted him.

Sarah saw what was going on. Ishmael's behavior spoiled the feast for her. Angrily she said to Abraham that evening: "Send that slave and her son away."

Abraham did not want to. He loved that big, strong, unruly boy who could shoot an arrow so well. "How does Sarah dare suggest it?" he thought. "Am I supposed to send my own son away and never see him again?"

"I'll never do it," Abraham said to Sarah. Then they went to sleep, both of them angry and upset. It turned out to be a dismal evening after such a happy day.

Abraham woke up in the middle of the night and couldn't get back to sleep. The Lord then spoke to him and told him to do what Sarah requested. Ishmael and Isaac were not to remain together. "I will take care of Ishmael," the Lord promised. "I will make him a great nation because he is your son. Don't be afraid, Abraham."

Abraham got up early the next morning. He took some bread and a jug of water to Hagar's tent. No one knows just what they said to each other. They both knew that it was God's will for Hagar and Ishmael to leave. Even before the sun was up, Hagar and Ishmael departed, obeying the Lord's command.

Abraham followed them with his eyes as

long as he could. There went his wife, and the son he loved so much. It pained him to see them go. In his heart he surrendered them and entrusted them to God's care, but he never forgot them.

28: Hagar and Ishmael

Hagar and Ishmael walked side by side through the wilderness. They were heading south. Somewhere far down the road was Egypt, the land of Hagar's birth.

They did not talk to each other as they walked. And Hagar did not pay attention to the route they were following. She was going the wrong way, but she didn't realize it. She was so upset that she couldn't concentrate on where she was going.

She had no land of her own, no home, no friends, no one to look after her, no bed to sleep in. Hagar and Ishmael had only each other and their misery.

They walked farther and farther into the Wilderness of Beersheba, a lonely area of sand, rocks, sun, and heat. The sky above the bare hills seemed to quaver. The ground glowed under their feet. The sun burned overhead like a ball of fire in a clear blue sky. But even more painful than the searing heat of the sun was the sorrow in Hagar's heart.

There were no living creatures to be seen. On they tramped through the sand toward the distant horizon. Somewhere out there was Egypt. Behind them were the tents of Abraham, to which they would never return. Here, in the barren wilderness, they were all alone, with no one to look after them.

"Mother, I'm so thirsty!"

Hagar had heard those words many



times. Each time she took the jug from her shoulder and gave Ishmael some water. Sometimes she took a sip herself. She was not as careful with the water supply as she should have been. In her great sorrow she hardly knew what she was doing.

"Mother, I'm so thirsty!"

Hagar, lost in her thoughts, passed the jug to Ishmael again. She seemed to be walking in her sleep.

"Mother, the water is gone!"

Hagar suddenly came to her senses. No water left? She began to look around her. "Then we'll have to find some water, my son."

But they were out in the desert. Back and forth they walked in the burning heat, looking for water, but they didn't find any. They rolled heavy stones aside, stones that were almost too hot to handle. They looked for water in the low places. They climbed

the hills. When they caught sight of a bush in the distance, they hurried over to it. Surely there would be water by the bush!

But there was no water. They couldn't find water anywhere. All they found was rock and burning sand.

"Mother, I can't go any farther!" Ishmael cried. His strength was all but gone as he dragged himself ahead. His knees were knocking. His face was pale. He held on to his mother.

Hagar herself could hardly take another step, but because of her concern for her child, she forgot her thirst and fear and exhaustion. Somehow she kept him on his feet. Panting, she dragged him on a little farther. Her eyes burning, she kept looking around.

Wasn't there a spring somewhere, or perhaps a small stream, or even a trickle of water?

She didn't see water anywhere — not a drop. The burden of Ishmael grew greater and greater as he leaned on her.

Finally Ishmael collapsed. He closed his eyes. A moan escaped from his dry lips.

That moan cut Hagar to the quick. She was willing to lay down her life for Ishmael, but there was nothing she could do for him.

She dragged her son's limp body over to a bush. At least he would have a bit of shade.

There he would die, but she could not bear to watch. She couldn't stand the sound of his moaning.

She walked away and collapsed some distance from where Ishmael lay. She felt helpless in her grief. She cried, but her tears soaked into the hot sand. No one would hear her voice in that great silent expanse.

No one? A voice cried to her from heaven: "Fear not, Hagar, for God has heard the voice of the boy. Arise, pick the boy up, and lead him by the hand, for I will make a great nation of him."

Hagar recognized that voice! She had heard it once before. It was the voice of God, a voice speaking of deliverance and life!

In great joy, Hagar wiped away her tears and hurried over to her child. Then God opened her eyes. Earlier, because of her great sorrow, she couldn't see properly. Now she saw a well, an old, neglected well half hidden under some rocks.

She ran to the well. The gurgling sound of water entering her jug was music to her ears.

When she got Ishmael to sit up to take a sip of water, his eyes opened at once. His strength revived with the first trickle of water down his throat. Because he was young, he tired quickly, but he also recovered quickly.

That same day, after they had a good rest and filled their jug with water, they continued their journey south. They were happy and thankful. In Abraham they had lost a father, but their Father in heaven would never forget them.

Eventually they wound up in a bare, faraway land — the Wilderness of Paran, which lay between Egypt and Canaan. There they settled down by an oasis, a fruitful area of tall palm trees near a spring.

Ishmael grew up to be a strong man, a Bowman stalking animals in the wilderness. In time he became a great hunter.

His mother found an Egyptian wife for him. Everything that the Lord had promised came true. Ishmael became the father of twelve sons. His descendants were a large, brave nation — the Ishmaelites.

Today, many centuries later, large bands of Ishmael's descendants still travel through the desert. They are called Arabians. They are a wild people — strong and quick, like their forefather Ishmael.

The Lord does not forget His promises.

29: Abraham's struggle

The years slipped by. Abraham was wandering through the land again with his flocks, his tents, his wife Sarah, and his son Isaac.

When Abraham reviewed his life, starting with the moment when God called him, he knew that he could not live without God. And when he watched Isaac, he knew that he loved his son more than anything and everything he possessed.

Was it possible that Abraham might love Isaac too much? Could it be that his love for Isaac would overshadow his love for

God?

Abraham regularly offered sacrifices to the Lord. In gratitude he would give the Lord one of the finest animals in his flock. But what if the Lord asked for Abraham's most prized possession?

One day Abraham was tested. Did he really love God above all else? Was his faith so great that he would obey even if God asked him to do something that he could not understand, something so dark and horrible that no one could possibly understand it?

One night God called Abraham from heaven. And Abraham answered: "Here I am."

The Lord gave him a chilling command: "Take your son Isaac, your only son, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah. Offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I will point out to you."

That was all the Lord said.

"Lord," Abraham complained, "Isaac is the promised child, the child we waited for so long. You have promised that he would become a great people, a people as numerous as the stars in the heavens."

There was no answer, but the echo of God's command resounded in Abraham's heart. It was not a mistake; it was not a dream. "Take your son and offer him as a burnt offering."

That night the aged hero of faith endured the most difficult struggle of his entire life. Questions rained down upon him, but he had no answers. Why would the Lord issue such a horrible command? If the Lord was a God of love, how could He ask Abraham to offer his own child as a burnt offering? What would come of all the promises when Abraham was childless again?

Abraham would have to choose between

God and his son. If he obeyed, he would no longer have a son. And if he disobeyed, he would be letting go of God. Then he would no longer have a God.

As he tossed and turned that night, Abraham discovered that he simply could not let go of God. He could not live without God. His faith spoke up loud and clear through the many questions and the intense pain: "What God does is always good, *always*, even if you don't understand it, Abraham! Only God knows what is good for His children. God loves you, Abraham. Don't forget that."

Abraham surrendered to the will of God in simple obedience. He stopped asking questions. He told his heart to be still. To the Lord he said: "Lord, You have told me what to do, and I will obey. Give me strength."

Yet, even as he prayed, his heart was filled with a deadly despair. Bobbing on the sea of his pain was a single hope: God had the power to raise Isaac from the dead.

30: The sacrifice

Early in the morning Abraham got up and left his tent. He saddled a donkey and split some wood for a burnt offering. He woke up two of his servants. Then he went to his son's tent.

"Wake up, my son. We're going on a trip."

Soon they were on their way, traveling through the quiet fields and over the hills. When Sarah got up, she would be told that Abraham and Isaac had gone away to offer a sacrifice. Because that happened often, she would have no reason to feel uneasy.

Isaac was happy because he was allowed



to go with his father. His joyful chatter hurt Abraham. Isaac's laughter cut him to the quick.

"Poor boy!" he thought. "If he knew . . ."

For three days they traveled. For three days Abraham had to look into the joyful, animated eyes of his son while keeping silent about his horrible secret. He could not bring himself to tell Isaac. For three long days he was tempted to turn back.

But he did not turn back. His faith gave him strength. It was the most difficult journey that any father has ever made.

On the third day, he saw the place of which God had spoken. There it was in the distance. He said to his servants: "Stay here with the donkey while the boy and I go over there and worship. When we are finished, we will come back."

"We will come back," Abraham had said. That's how firmly he believed in God's faithfulness. He was ready to sacrifice his son, but he believed that God would give Isaac back to him from the dead.

Abraham took the wood for a burnt of-

fering and laid it on Isaac's shoulders. He took fire and a knife with him. Then they proceeded to climb the mountain together.

The aged father's heart was breaking, but his eyes were dry and his lips pressed together.

As they climbed the narrow path leading up the mountain, Isaac stopped suddenly. "My father!" he said.

Abraham answered: "Here I am, my son."

"My father," Isaac asked. "You have the fire and I have the wood, but where is the lamb we are to use for a burnt offering?"

Abraham replied: "God will provide a lamb for the offering, my son."

On they went, together.

Finally they reached the top of the mountain. Abraham built an altar of stones. He arranged the wood on the altar.

The horrible moment had come. He could no longer postpone telling his son that he would have to die because of that amazing command of the Lord, the command no one could understand.

No one can ever fathom the depths of Abraham's suffering at that moment. And we can never appreciate just how upset and frightened Isaac must have been. Yet, a great miracle happened: Isaac did not resist. He did not struggle to free himself when Abraham picked him up and put him on the altar on top of the wood. Isaac even let Abraham tie his hands — that's how strong his faith was.

Then Abraham and Isaac said goodbye to each other.

Isaac had let himself be bound. He was as meek and submissive as a lamb. And Abraham, who was willing to die with his son, raised his knife high in the air . . .

Abraham had gone far enough. At that moment the angel of the Lord cried out from heaven: "Abraham! Abraham!"

Four eyes opened wide. Full of hope, Abraham and Isaac looked up. Their hearts were pounding in joyful anticipation. The strong hand holding the knife began to tremble. Slowly it descended to Abraham's side.

"Here I am," Abraham cried out.

The voice of the Lord, which had taken away all his fear and sorrow, was heard again: "Do not harm the boy. Now I know that you fear God, seeing that you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me."

Trembling, Abraham cut the ropes binding Isaac and threw his arms around his son. He was so happy that he didn't know what to say. His son had been restored to him from the arms of death. Abraham's hope had not been in vain.

Then Abraham heard something rustling behind him. A ram was caught by its horns in the bushes. God Himself had provided a lamb for the burnt offering!

Abraham bound the ram and laid it on

the altar. The ram's blood flowed instead of Isaac's blood. Never was a sacrifice offered in greater gratitude.

Centuries later, Solomon built the temple in the land of Moriah. Every day sacrifices were offered there to God's honor.

On a bare hill not far away, a father later sacrificed his son, his only son. But that sacrifice was not interrupted by a voice from heaven. That son suffered death.

That father was God, who did not spare His own Son but offered Him up for us all. The Son was Jesus, who let Himself be led as a lamb to the slaughter. And the hill was Golgotha.

31: Eliezer's mission

Ten camels moved across the plain. They went down one hill and up another, under the heat of the burning sun. The first camel took the lead, and the others followed. They went through cities and villages and crossed rivers. They were traveling north, and they still had a long way to go. Far away, beyond the horizon, lay the city to which the old, gray man on the first camel was leading them.

That man was the oldest and most important of Abraham's servants. He was in charge of everything Abraham possessed. His name was Eliezer.

All his life Eliezer had worked for Abraham. He had always been faithful; he had always done his work well.

Now, in his old age, his master Abraham had given him the most difficult assignment of his life. He was to go to a faraway land and bring back a *wife* for Isaac. He was to choose a young woman from the many

young women that probably lived there — a young woman who feared the Lord. How would the old servant know if the woman he chose really did fear the Lord? How can anyone, no matter how old and gray he is, ever tell what lives in someone else's heart?

Why did Abraham decide that Isaac needed a wife? Something very sad had happened in Abraham's household: Sarah had died.

She had become very old — 127 years. She had lived long enough to see Isaac become a man. She had enjoyed many happy years with her husband and her son.

Then the Lord called her. She died in peace, believing that God's love would watch over her.

Abraham and Isaac buried her in the cave of Machpelah, near the oaks of Mamre, where Sarah had lived for so long. Abraham bought that grave from Ephron the Hittite, paying a great deal of money for it. That grave was his only piece of property in the land of promise.

Abraham and Isaac would never forget Sarah. There was an empty place in their household and in their hearts after she died.

Who would look after things in the tents? What woman would give leadership in Abraham's household?

Abraham had called his oldest servant and said to him: "Go and find a wife for Isaac, my son. But swear to me by the Lord that you will not take a wife for him from among the women of this land, where the people are so godless. Go to the land where my family lives and find a wife for Isaac there."

The servant nodded obediently, even though it was a very difficult assignment.

But Abraham wasn't finished yet. There was something else he wanted to say: "God Himself will go with you. He will send His

angel before you."

32: Rebekah

The journey took weeks to complete. Finally the old servant arrived in the faraway land where Abraham's family lived — Paddan-aram. He came to the city of Nahor. Outside the city was a well.

It was evening, and the sun was sinking in the west. The thirsty camels kneeled by the well, eager for water.

The weary old servant sat down to rest. Some young women were approaching from the city with jugs to draw water for the night.

Eliezer looked at the young women and felt discouraged. Perhaps one of them was the wife he was supposed to bring back for Isaac. But which one? How would he know which one to choose?

"It's not an easy job," the old man thought. But he remembered what his master had told him. There was someone who could help him, someone who knew the hearts of men.

The old servant looked up at the evening sky and started praying to God in a very simple and trusting way. He said: "Lord God of my master Abraham, I stand here by the well as the young women are approaching to fetch water. I do not know which one to choose for my lord Isaac, but You know. Will You help me? I will ask them: 'Let me drink some water from your jug.' If one of them says: 'Drink, and I will also give your camels some water,' let that one be the wife You have chosen for Your servant Isaac."

That was Eliezer's prayer. When he looked up, he saw a young woman



walking down the stone steps to the well. She filled her jug and lifted it to her shoulder. When she got to the top of the steps, the old servant rose to meet her. He said: "Let me drink a little water from your jug."

In a friendly manner the young woman replied: "Drink, my lord." With her strong, young hands, she offered him the jug. When he had drunk his fill, she poured the rest of the water into the stone trough next to the well. "I'll get some more water," she said eagerly, "so your camels can drink too."

"This is the one!" Eliezer thought. "This beautiful young woman, this friendly girl — she's the one who will become Isaac's wife."

He was amazed that God had answered his prayer and helped him so quickly. When he heard that her name was Rebekah and that she was a granddaughter of Nahor, he was even more delighted. Nahor was a brother of Abraham!

Eliezer pulled two golden bracelets from his baggage and put them around

Rebekah's arms. He also gave her a beautiful golden ring, the kind that young women in those days often wore in their noses.

Then he could wait no longer. He *had* to give thanks to God for the amazing help he had received. He *had* to tell God how happy he was. He kneeled down to pray.

33: A wife for Isaac

When Eliezer looked up from his prayer, the young woman was gone. She had run home quickly, both happy and fearful. She was amazed at the exquisite gifts Eliezer had given her. She didn't understand what was going on.

At home she told what had happened. Her father and mother couldn't understand it either. Not even her brother Laban, who was seldom at a loss for words, could figure it out.

When Laban saw the ring and the bracelets, he quickly went to the well and

bowed deeply before Eliezer, as though the old servant were a king. He insisted that Eliezer and the other servants spend the night at their home. There was plenty of food — and room for the camels. Laban led the caravan to his father's house. He brought them water to wash their feet and placed food before them.

Eliezer didn't want to eat. First he wanted to do his duty. He told Bethuel, Rebekah's father, and the others that he was Abraham's servant. He told them why he had come and explained how the Lord had helped him at the well. Rebekah, he declared, was to be Isaac's wife.

They were all amazed. They didn't know what to say — except for Laban, who declared: "This is the Lord's doing. We cannot say anything in favor of it or against it. Take Rebekah and go your way, so that she can become the wife of your young master."

Bethuel felt the same way. And Rebekah was willing to go.

Eliezer thanked God that everything had gone so well. He called for his baggage and showered costly gifts on Rebekah and her mother. Laban also received more than he had dared to hope for.

Eliezer wanted to leave the very next morning, for he knew that Abraham was waiting anxiously. But Rebekah's mother and brother wanted to keep her with them at least ten more days.

"We'll ask Rebekah what she wants to do," they said.

Rebekah didn't think about it for long. In her heart she longed to see the man whom God had chosen for her. She regretted leaving her family behind, but she said: "I'd like to leave right now."

Bethuel blessed his daughter. That day a double caravan left the city — Eliezer with

his servants and Rebekah with the women who waited on her. Quickly they moved south and disappeared over the horizon.

Evening was falling. Isaac went out in the field to be alone, to think things over.

He sensed that someone was approaching. He looked up and saw a string of camels.

Rebekah had already spotted the lonely man. "Who's that?" she asked.

Joyfully the old servant said: "That's my lord Isaac!"

Rebekah climbed down from her camel and went to meet Isaac. Isaac took her home with him and gave her Sarah's tent to live in. She had come to fill the empty place left by Sarah.

The servant told what had happened to him, and how the Lord had blessed him in an amazing way.

It was not Eliezer but God Himself who had brought Isaac and Rebekah together. Soon the two fell in love. Isaac found comfort in Rebekah after the death of his mother.

34: Isaac's family

Isaac and Rebekah were very happy, for they loved each other. Only one thing was missing in their marriage — children. They had waited and hoped for years, but still they had no children.

When Isaac brought this matter to the Lord in prayer, he received even more than he asked for. The Lord gave Rebekah two children on one day — two boys.

Isaac and Rebekah named their children Esau and Jacob.

The two boys were twins, but they didn't look alike. Jacob, the younger of the two,

was slender, and pale. Esau's body was covered with reddish hair as if he were wearing a coat made of hair. That's why he was called Esau. His name means the hairy one. And when the two boys became men, they looked even less like each other.

Esau was a large, robust man with adventure in his blood. He did not like to spend his time in the pastures with quiet cattle. He preferred to wander across the fields and go into dark bushes in pursuit of bears and deer. Esau loved excitement and danger. Often he stayed away from home for days at a time. He became a strong, fierce hunter. He was a courageous man, but also a crude man.

While Esau made his adventurous journeys, Jacob cared for the flocks. He liked to sit in the tent and occupy himself with peaceful, everyday tasks. He was a quiet, obedient boy — a thinker and dreamer. He was not as frank and plainspoken as Esau. He was cunning, and sometimes he tried to get his way by trickery.

Jacob also thought about God a great deal. In his heart lived a quiet desire to serve God. He wanted to be a pious, God-fearing man.

Rebekah loved Jacob more than Esau. Jacob spent a lot of time with her. He helped her in her tent. He was friendly toward her and dependent on her.

Isaac loved Esau more than Jacob. He loved his powerful, joyful, first-born son whose clothes bore the odor of the open fields. And Isaac loved the meat Esau brought him from the wild animals he killed.

Jacob was his mother's boy, and Esau was his father's boy.

Gradually that family of four, that family that should have been so happy, began to drift apart. It was as though a

wall ran right through the family. Isaac and Esau lived on one side of the wall, Jacob and Rebekah on the other. Slowly their happiness evaporated.

Abraham was dead by then. He had lived to the age of 175 years. Jacob and Esau were fifteen years old when he died. He had even remarried and had more sons, but he sent the sons of his last wife, Keturah, to a faraway country in the east. He did not want them near Isaac, who was the heir to the promise.

Abraham died in peace. He had always been a stranger in the land, but he knew that his descendants would possess it someday.

He had had a difficult life, but his faith was strong and he never let go of the Lord. God was his friend. Even in death God did not forsake Abraham. What did Abraham have to fear? He died as a hero of faith.

Ishmael came back from the wilderness at the head of a strong band of men. He joined Isaac in burying the body of Abraham in the cave of Machpelah, where Sarah had earlier been buried. There Abraham would await the fulfillment of God's promises.

35: The birthright

There was one matter that Jacob worried about a great deal. He sometimes discussed it with his mother, but never with his father.

Esau was older; he was the first-born. And the first-born had certain privileges. He would eventually succeed his father as the master. His portion of the inheritance would be twice as big as any other son's portion. The first-born received the

greatest blessing — the birthright.

Yet, before the two boys were born, the Lord had given Rebekah a message. He told her that the younger of her two children would be the more important of the two.

Jacob knew this. His mother had told him. Isaac also knew it. But it didn't seem to bother him. He loved Esau with his whole heart and treated him as the first-born, the one holding the birthright.

Isaac was weak. His health was poor. It appeared that he would die before long.

Would God see to it that Jacob received a greater blessing than Esau? Would Jacob inherit the rich promise given to Abraham and Isaac? Or had God forgotten what He said to Rebekah?

Jacob was uneasy about this matter. Waiting patiently in faith was difficult for him. If only he could do something himself to provide for his future . . .

One day Jacob saw his chance — and he seized it. He was with his flocks, cooking some food above an open fire — a broth with lentils in it, something like pea soup. It was reddish in color and smelled good.

Esau came stumbling toward him. He had been hunting. He was exhausted — and very, very hungry.

He had walked a long, long way, but he had not killed any game. Hence he had not eaten for a long time.

He sat down by Jacob's fire. The aroma of the food Jacob was cooking made him even hungrier. His tired eyes began to shine. Eagerly he extended his arms.

"Give me some of that," he cried hoarsely. "Let me have some of that red stuff you've got there."

Jacob was in no hurry to help his brother. "On one condition," he said slowly. "Let me be the first-born. I'll give you some of my broth in exchange for your

birthright."

Esau laughed. In that laughter he showed his contempt for his brother's cunning tricks — and also his contempt for God's promises.

"What do I care?" he cried without thinking. "I'll have to die someday anyway. What good will that birthright do me then?"

Jacob was not satisfied yet. "Swear that the birthright is mine," he insisted.

Esau swore it. He promised God that Jacob could receive the greater blessing reserved for the first-born.

Then he got his lentil broth. Jacob even gave him some bread. Now Jacob couldn't do enough for his brother!

Esau ate and drank. Soon he stood up and went his way. He didn't care about his birthright. Jacob, his cunning brother, had gotten his way. The wall between the two brothers was even higher than before.

36: Deception

"Esau, my son!"

Isaac lay on his bed. His weak, trembling voice did not carry far. Esau was in Isaac's tent. He stood before his father's bed.

"Here I am, my father."

Old Isaac raised his head. He heard Esau and he smelled him. He smelled the fresh, outdoor scent of his clothes. But he did not see him, even though it was a bright day, with sunshine streaming through the tent door. Isaac was blind. The old man could not take care of himself anymore.

He heard the sounds of his cattle and herds, but he couldn't look after them. There was no more work for him to do. He used to go outside once in a while and grope



around, but he had even stopped doing that. He was simply too weak. Now he would lay in his tent all day long and think about his life and the prospect of death.

Isaac didn't seem to have much time left. He had to get ready to die. He realized that he would have to divide his possessions and bless his sons. That's why he called Esau.

Isaac said to him: "I have become old. I don't know how long I will live. Now then, take your bow and arrow and go out into the field and kill some game for me. Prepare it for me the way I like it and bring it to me, so that I can eat. Then I will bless you before I die."

When Esau was gone and Isaac was alone with his thoughts, he began to feel uneasy. What had he done? He remembered what God had said to Rebekah before the two boys were born. The old man knew perfectly well that it was Jacob — not Esau — who was supposed to receive the greater blessing. Esau was a godless man who had caused his parents great sorrow. Against their wishes he had married two heathen

women, which brought even more unhappiness into Isaac's family. Esau went his own way without God.

Yet, Isaac loved Esau more than anyone else in the world. He did not want to give the greater blessing to Jacob.

Isaac realized how ungrateful he was toward God, who had blessed him wherever he went in this land. He knew better. But he would give Esau the greater blessing anyway. He did not see that it was foolish to struggle against God. He was also blind to God's power.

Rebekah had been standing outside the tent listening when Isaac talked to Esau. When she heard what Isaac had in mind, she became angry and afraid. Quickly she went away to find Jacob.

She discussed the situation with him anxiously. "If we don't act quickly," she whispered, "all will be lost. God's promise will not be fulfilled. Go to the flock and bring me two of the best young goats. I'll prepare them just the way your father likes his meat. You bring him the meat and pretend that you're Esau. That way you'll receive the blessing of the first-born! Your father is blind; he won't know the difference."

She spoke out of love for her child. Jacob hesitated. "Esau is hairy," he said, "and I am not. Perhaps my father will touch me and find out that I am deceiving him. Then I will bring a curse upon myself instead of a blessing."

His mother urged him on. "I will take the curse upon myself," she said. "Just do as I say! Leave the rest to me."

Jacob fetched two young goats and killed them. Quickly Rebekah roasted them. She took some of Esau's clothes and put them on Jacob. She put the skins of the young goats on his hands and neck. The hair on those

goatskins was as smooth as human hair. She shoved a bowl of bread and roasted meat into Jacob's hands. "Go now, my son! Go! Otherwise all will be lost!"

Trembling, Jacob advanced. He was out to gain God's blessing by deceiving his father.

37: A promise for Jacob

"My father!"

Isaac was startled. He had been lost in his thoughts.

"Who are you, my son?"

Jacob did his best to imitate Esau's coarse voice. His heart was pounding. "I am Esau, your first-born. I have done what you told me to do. Sit up, Father. Eat some of the wild game I have prepared for you, and bless me."

But Isaac sensed that something strange was happening. Suspiciously he asked: "How did you manage to kill an animal so quickly, my son?"

In his anxiety Jacob misused the name of God in his reply. "The Lord your God gave me success," he replied. "The Lord *your* God" — that was how Esau always spoke.

The worst was yet to come. Isaac was still suspicious; he wanted to make sure before blessing his son. "Come to me," he said, "so that I can feel you. I want to see if you are really Esau."

Trembling with fear, Jacob kneeled before Isaac's bed. Isaac ran his aged hands over Jacob's hands and over his head. What he felt was hairy skin just like Esau's skin. But the old man was still not satisfied.

"The voice is Jacob's, but the hands are Esau's," he complained. Again he asked: "Are you really my son Esau?"



"Yes," Jacob replied, lying.

The meat was next to Isaac's bed. Its aroma wafted through the tent. Isaac loved to eat well-prepared food. He ate some bread and meat, and he drank some of the wine Jacob had brought him. He tried to forget his suspicions, but he couldn't banish them completely.

When he was finished eating, he said: "Kiss me, my son."

Jacob bent over his blind father and kissed him. That kiss was the lowest lie of all.

Isaac smelled the scent of the open field on the clothes Jacob was wearing. That scent finally laid his doubts to rest. He placed his trembling hands on his son's head and blessed him.

At that moment something very special happened. Isaac didn't expect it, nor did Rebekah or Jacob or Esau. If they had

known it in advance, they would have realized that God's will would be done regardless of their desires.

It was no longer Isaac who spoke. He was the one who uttered the words, but they were not his own words. It was God who put the words on his tongue. If Esau had been the one kneeling under Isaac's outstretched hands, the old man would have spoken entirely different words. God was making sure that His promises were kept.

"Peoples shall serve you, and nations shall bow down before you. Cursed be everyone who curses you, and blessed be everyone who blesses you."

Jacob's descendants would inherit the land of Canaan, the land that God had promised to Abraham. His people would be God's people.

In his heart Jacob screamed accusations at himself: "Deceiver! Liar!" But the glorious words of God kept ringing in his ears. Even though Jacob did not deserve that blessing, God remained faithful to His promises.

Jacob had just returned to Rebekah's tent and was taking off his disguise when Esau returned from the hunt and prepared meat for his father. Long ago he had sold his birthright to his brother, but that didn't bother him now. Why should carefree Esau worry about a promise he had made?

He walked into his father's tent. "My father," he said boldly, "eat some of the meat I have prepared and bless me. I am Esau, your first-born."

Isaac got the shock of his life. This time there was no doubt in his mind. It was Esau! Then the other one must have been Jacob. The blessing he had given Jacob could not be taken back.

When Esau found out what had happened, he was angry and bitterly disap-

pointed. "Bless me too, my father," he begged. "Don't you have a blessing left for me?" He started to cry.

Isaac also had a divine blessing for Esau. Esau would become a great people — but not as great as Jacob. Only Jacob's people would be God's people. Esau's people would serve Jacob's people for a long time.

After that Esau hated his brother. "My father will die soon," he said to himself. "Then I will take revenge. Jacob will die — that deceiver!"

Rebekah found out what Esau had in mind. She knew he meant it. Therefore she called Jacob and told him to go to her own land, the land where she used to live and where her brother Laban still lived.

"Stay there for a while," she said, "until Esau has forgotten what you did to him. Then I'll send word to you."

Soon Jacob left, all alone, without a send-off. But he talked with his father once more before he left. There was not much to say. They were both guilty, and they were both sorry. Isaac renewed his blessing and said goodbye to his son in love.

All four had sinned, and all four were punished.

Isaac was left alone with his thoughts and his shame. He was even more lonesome than before.

Rebekah had lost the son she loved so dearly. "For a little while," she said, but she never saw him again.

Jacob, who loved to be near his home and family, had to flee as a fugitive.

And Esau? Those who hate others do themselves the greatest harm.

38: Jacob's journey

It was almost too much for Jacob. He hated to leave, but he had to. He had to leave behind everything he loved.

Behind him lay some tents — his father's camp. Thousands of cattle grazed around the camp. To Jacob that camp meant wealth, security and love.

Ahead of him lay an unknown expanse of land. Jacob had no idea what dangers might await him.

Still, he *had* to leave. If he stayed where he was, he would die. What had Jacob really achieved, then, with his cunning?

It was a difficult journey. Jacob had a heavy heart; He was filled with remorse.

The fugitive headed north. He passed by the cave of Machpelah, where the bodies of his grandparents Abraham and Sarah lay in the family grave. Would he be buried peacefully in that grave someday? Or would he be buried in a faraway land?

He kept going. Soon he was in the land called Moriah. On one of the mountains there, his father had lain on the altar as a boy. He had been patient as a lamb — obedient unto death. That's what Isaac was like in his youth.

And what about Jacob? Jacob was no longer a boy; he was more than 70 years old. And he still had not learned obedience.

That was what made the journey so horribly difficult for Jacob. He had to travel all alone — without a human companion and without God. Did God still love him? Or did Jacob's sin make it impossible for God to love him?

Suddenly his mournful train of thought was halted. It was getting dark. The sun was setting. He would have to spend the night somewhere under the stars. He looked for a flat stone on which to lay his head.



The dry earth was his bed. There he lay, all alone, forsaken in a lonely, desolate territory, worn out by traveling and thinking. He was deeply disappointed because of his sin. How could God love him after such a sin?

High above his head shone the stars. But heaven was so far away!

That night Jacob had a glorious dream. He saw a ladder, a wide staircase. It was so high that it reached all the way to heaven. He was lying at the foot of the ladder. He saw shining angels climbing up and down the ladder. At the top of the ladder, surrounded by radiant light, stood the Lord. The Lord, who heals broken hearts, wanted to comfort a lonely traveler.

The Lord was friendly to Jacob. He said: "I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your descendants. Your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth. In your descendants all the families of the earth shall be blessed. Behold, I will be with you and will watch over you wherever you go. One day I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have fulfilled My promises to you."

Then Jacob woke up. It was morning. The mountaintops glimmered in the light of the rising sun. The stars were fading away. The earth looked just as it had the day before, and the day before that.

It was all a dream. Yet, it was real. The Lord had spoken to Jacob in his sleep and He had said: "Jacob, I still love you. I shall



take care of you!”

Jacob was full of awe and gratitude. In his amazement he said: “This is the house of God! This is the gate of heaven!”

He took the stone he had used for a pillow and set it upright, so that he would be able to find the place again when he returned. He wanted to show the Lord how thankful he was, but all he had with him was a flask of oil. He had planned to use the oil on his feet when they developed blisters from walking.

He poured the oil over the stone and knelt down in adoration before God. He promised that he would build an altar there when the Lord granted him a safe return.

Refreshed and encouraged, he continued his journey to a land he had never seen. From then on, that place was called *Bethel*, which means *house of God*.

39: Jacob and Laban

After several weeks, Jacob arrived in Haran, where his uncle Laban lived. He

met Laban’s daughter Rachel in the field. She arrived with a flock of sheep just as he was asking some shepherds about Laban. Jacob helped her water her sheep and told her who he was. Soon Laban himself appeared to greet Jacob and invite him into his home.

Jacob was thankful that he had reached his destination safely. It felt good to be with a family again, to be able to tell everything to friendly people.

Whenever he looked at Rachel, he forgot how much he missed his parents and his home. Never had he seen such a beautiful and charming girl.

Jacob stayed in his uncle’s house for a month. In the daytime he helped take care of the sheep, and at night he had a roof over his head and a bed to sleep in.

In Laban’s house there was something that Jacob wasn’t used to — a small statue in the form of a man. Laban bowed down before it; it was an idol he worshiped. Sometimes he prayed to God, and sometimes to the idol. And there were other idols in the house as well.

At Bethel Jacob had come to see how sin-

ful this was. He knew that the Lord alone is God and would look after him.

Laban was eager to keep Jacob in his household as long as possible. Why? Not because he wanted to show the young man his generosity or be a father to him. No, Laban hadn't changed at all; he was still as greedy and selfish as ever. He still tried to turn every situation to his own advantage.

Jacob did not arrive with wealth and presents, as Abraham's aged servant had done so long ago when he came to Paddanaram in search of a wife for Isaac. Yet, Jacob was a healthy young man with an extensive knowledge of sheep. If Laban was clever about it, he could get a lot of work and expert advice from Jacob without paying for it.

Laban was aware that Jacob had fallen in love with Rachel. He made an agreement with Jacob: if Jacob served him for seven years without wages, he could marry Rachel. In effect, Laban *sold* his daughter to Jacob.

Because Jacob loved Rachel, he was happy to work for the right to marry her. The seven years flew by. When they were over, he was amazed. "Seven years? It seemed like just a few days!"

When the time for the wedding came, Laban wasn't happy. How could he be sure that Jacob would be willing to work for him once he had Rachel? And if Jacob did continue to work for him, it would cost Laban plenty. How could Laban arrange things so that Jacob would work without demanding high wages?

Jacob's wedding day was a festive occasion in Haran. All the men of the town had been invited to help celebrate the marriage.

When it was dark, the bride, dressed in her beautiful bridal garments, was brought

to Jacob. No one could see her face, for it was covered with a heavy veil in accordance with the customs in that area.

Jacob had waited seven years for this moment! Joyfully he took his young wife with him to his tent, where they would live as man and wife.

Seven years earlier Jacob had used clothing to fool his aged father. Now he would find out himself how awful it is to be deceived.

In the tent the bride removed her veil. In the morning, when it was light, Jacob saw that he had been tricked. The woman he had married was not Rachel, whom he loved, but Leah, her older sister. Leah was a fine woman, but she was not as beautiful as Rachel, and Jacob was not in love with her.

Jacob was upset. He quickly confronted Laban. His uncle acted surprised. "In this area, it's customary not to marry off the younger daughter before the older one," he explained patiently. "But if you promise to serve me another seven years on the same terms, I'll let you marry Rachel as well next week."

Jacob agreed and served Laban seven more years. Finally he had Rachel, the woman he loved.

40: The stolen idols

Fourteen years had passed, but Jacob still had not received word from Rebekah that it was safe to return. Therefore he decided to stay with Laban a little longer.

It wasn't all peace and harmony in Jacob's tent. The two sisters Jacob had married were jealous of each other. Jacob loved Rachel much more than Leah, but

the Lord gave Leah baby after baby while Rachel failed to conceive. Leah had six sons before the Lord gave Rachel her first-born — Joseph.

By this time Laban knew that he could not get by without paying Jacob. All the same, he continued to scheme, trying to keep as much for himself as he could. But his scheming did him no good.

First he made an agreement with Jacob that all the speckled and spotted lambs would be Jacob's. Laban assumed that most of the newborn lambs would be white, but it turned out that almost all of them were speckled or spotted.

Then he changed his mind and said that Jacob could have all the white lambs. After that, very few speckled or spotted lambs were born.

It was God who determined whether the lambs born were white or speckled. God was punishing Laban for his deceit. As a result, Jacob became a rich and powerful man during the six years he served Laban for wages. He acquired many sheep, cattle and donkeys.

Laban and his sons could no longer be friendly to Jacob. The looks on their greedy faces made it clear how they felt about him. Jacob could see that it was not wise to stay with Laban much longer.

The Lord said to him: "Go back to the land of your fathers. I will be with you."

After 20 years in Paddan-aram, Jacob packed up his household goods, gathered his animals, and made final preparations for departure. Laban was away at the time; he was in the field shearing the sheep and holding a feast with his shepherds.

Quietly Jacob stole away with his wives and children, his servants and livestock. They formed a great caravan as they traveled south.

Before they left, Rachel snuck into her father's home and stole his idols, which she hid among her possessions. She believed his idols would protect her during the long journey to Canaan.

Three days later, Laban heard that Jacob was gone. He was furious. He called his family together, saddled some camels, and went after Jacob. The trail of Jacob's caravan was not hard to follow.

After one week, he caught up with Jacob and his household in the mountainous territory of Gilead. He pitched his camp close to Jacob's caravan, planning to confront him in the morning.

That night God intervened on Jacob's behalf. He spoke to Laban in a dream and warned him not to harm Jacob.

Laban was calm instead of angry when his band of men entered Jacob's camp the next morning. He wanted to hurt Jacob, but he didn't dare.

"Why did you leave without telling me?" he asked. "I didn't even have a chance to say goodbye to my children and grandchildren. That wasn't very nice of you, Jacob."

Jacob didn't know what to say. He had feared that Laban wouldn't let him go. Again he had not trusted in God. Instead he had relied on his own cleverness to save him.

Laban also asked why Jacob had stolen his household idols. This question made Jacob furious. Sparks of fire seemed to leap from his eyes. Proudly he replied: "Everything you see here I have earned through honest work. I suffered the heat of the day and the cold of the night working for you. For 20 years I have served you faithfully. Why, then, have you chased me and wrongly accused me of theft? Search the camp. If someone in my household has

stolen your idols, he shall be put to death!”

No one said a word. The people in Jacob's household who watched this scene were pleased with Jacob's response. That was language after their own hearts!

But there was one person missing. Rachel had remained in her tent, where she heard what Jacob and Laban were saying. Now she saw the prospect of death before her. With trembling hands she hid the stolen idols under a camel's saddle and sat on the saddle.

Laban searched the whole camp, but he did not find his idols. Rachel was sitting on them!

Before he returned to Haran, Laban made a covenant with Jacob. The two men promised never to harm each other, and they set up a pile of stones as a sign of their covenant.

After the encounter with Laban, Jacob's caravan continued slowly toward the south. With them were the stolen idols hidden among Rachel's clothes.

41: Jacob's struggle

Jacob was near the end of his journey. Within a few days he and his heavily laden caravan would enter the land he had left 20 years earlier as a poor fugitive.

The thought of meeting his brother again took away all his joy and peace. Esau had sworn to kill Jacob. Since then Esau had become a powerful man with many servants. What would Jacob do if Esau came along with his band of men, just as angry and rough as he had always been? What would happen to his household, his wives, his poor, helpless children?

Jacob sent messengers ahead to Esau. He



instructed them to tell Esau very respectfully that Jacob was returning from a faraway land and that he was eager to be on friendly terms with his brother.

Jacob's messengers came back with news that Esau was approaching with 400 armed men. Then Jacob became frightened and prayed to God: "O God, save me! Deliver me from the power of Esau. You Yourself said that I should return to this land. You promised to be with me!"

A weak voice within Jacob sought to comfort him: "Be quiet, Jacob! The Lord will protect you!" That was the voice of his wavering faith.

But there was another voice within him — a much louder voice: "Esau will kill you and wipe out your household. That's exactly what you deserve, you deceiver!" It was the voice of Jacob's conscience, which was still bothering him after all these years.

Jacob saw only one way open to him: he would have to rely on his own cleverness. Perhaps he could save himself.

He divided his party into two groups. "If Esau attacks the one group," he thought, "the other may be able to get away."

Then he sent Esau some extravagant presents: first a flock of goats, then a flock of sheep, and then three more flocks, made up of camels, cattle, and donkeys. Esau would receive five extravagant gifts before meeting Jacob. Perhaps his hatred would subside a bit with each gift.

When the last flock was on its way to Esau, Jacob sensed that this trick would not help him. Only God could make Esau's heart tender toward him.

That night Jacob and his caravan crossed

the stream known as the Jabbok. Jacob found a shallow spot where the full-grown animals could wade across. The shepherds carried the lambs. Leah, Rachel and their servants carried the small children. They crossed in the quiet of night and set up their camp on the other side. Jacob stayed behind, just as a leader should, to make sure that everyone got across safely.

Before him lay the land of his youth, the land he had been forced to flee because of his sin. That land shone like silver in the light of the moon. His conscience, which had tormented him so often, now spoke to him again.

"Deceiver!" it said. "Do you suppose you'll be permitted to settle down there? Tomorrow Esau will come! Tomorrow God will finally punish you for your wickedness."

In his deadly fear, Jacob reviewed the events of his life, almost as though he was reliving them. Once more he refused to let hungry Esau eat without giving up the birthright. He stood at the bed of his blind father and lied: "I am Esau, your first-born." He relived the many tricks he had used to get ahead, and he realized that he was not worthy of God's help.

Would he be allowed to enter the promised land again? "No," said his conscience.

42: Peniel

That night Jacob had another opponent; it wasn't only his conscience that stood in his way. There was someone else who said no, someone standing on the path which led to the stream. He took hold of Jacob and

started to push him back, demonstrating great strength.

Jacob resisted, for there was also a voice of faith within him, a voice that said yes, a voice that urged him to enter the promised land. After all, God had given Jacob a promise at Bethel.

The voice of Jacob's faith had grown very weak. Still, Jacob had to listen to that voice. Where else could he go? Back to his uncle? Could he cast in his lot with pagans? Never! Jacob wanted to serve God. He couldn't live without God.

Therefore he mustered all his strength in an effort to defeat that mysterious stranger, but it didn't help. Jacob was filled with amazement and awe, for his opponent was stronger than anyone he had ever met.

The stars began to fade, but the wrestling match on the bank of the Jabbok continued. Jacob struggled on, for God had said that he would be allowed to return to the promised land!

The tops of the mountains were bathed in light. A singing bird soared high overhead. Day was dawning. Jacob didn't even realize it, for the face of his opponent was brighter and purer than the early morning light.

"Let me go," said the stranger. "Day is dawning."

Jacob refused. He finally realized who his opponent was — the angel of the Lord. He trembled in fear and awe.

Determined but respectful, Jacob said: "I will not let you go until you bless me."

"What is your name?" the angel asked.

"Jacob." That name meant *deceiver*.

Now Jacob heard words that were music to his ears. "You shall not be called Jacob anymore but *Israel*, which means *prince of God*, for you have struggled with God and man and have triumphed."



Then the angel disappeared. Before he went, he touched Jacob's hip and put it out of joint. From then on Jacob walked with a limp. For the rest of his life, his hip reminded him of that special night. That way he would remember to trust in God.

Jacob called that place *Peniel*, which means *face of God*, for he had seen God face to face.

The sun was above the mountains when he got back to the camp. He was exhausted, but he felt happy, for the sun was also

rising in his heart.

No longer did his conscience torment him. Now the voice of his faith sang a song. "God's love is greater than all my guilt."

43: Jacob enters the promised land

That morning the earth began to tremble as a large party approached. In the distance Jacob and his family could see weapons flashing in a cloud of dust. There came Esau and his band of men.

Jacob took some carefully planned measures. He put the women and children in the middle of his camp, where they were surrounded by armed men. As respectfully as he could, he went out to meet his brother. He bowed deeply, but he was no longer afraid. Now he trusted in God.

Something miraculous happened: Esau threw his powerful arms around Jacob and kissed him just as a loving brother would do. They both cried tears of joy.

Jacob brought Leah and Rachel forward. The children were also presented to Esau. The two brothers sat down together in the camp. They had a great deal to tell each other and many questions to ask. It was a wonderful day for them.

Esau didn't want to accept the gifts Jacob had sent him. He didn't need more flocks, for he was already a rich man. But Jacob insisted and talked long enough to persuade Esau to accept the gifts.

Esau offered Jacob some of his men as an escort. His caravan would surely be safe under Esau's protection.

Jacob said no. He did not need Esau's protection. He knew that God would watch over him. Esau's men would probably drive the flocks ahead too fast. That wouldn't be

good for the lambs and the young animals that were still nursing.

Jacob and Esau were good friends again when they said goodbye. Esau went back to the land of Edom, where he lived, and Jacob entered the promised land.

First Jacob and his family lived near Shechem for a while. Trouble arose when they became too involved with the people of Shechem. Jacob's sons brought dishonor on his household.

The Lord then reminded Jacob of his vow to return to Bethel. But first a purification was necessary in Jacob's own household. The idols Rachel had stolen from Laban were finally buried under a tree. Jacob saw that he could permit no trace of idol worship in his family.

The family then traveled on to Bethel. Jacob offered a sacrifice at the place where he had seen the gate of heaven so long before in a dream.

From Bethel Jacob's family went to Mamre, where Isaac still lived. On that journey Rachel died at Hebron, while giving birth to Benjamin, her second son. Jacob buried her in a field in Ephath, near Bethlehem.

Although Rebekah was dead by this time, Isaac was still alive. He was weak and blind, but he recognized Jacob from his voice and the feel of his hands. Not long afterward he died — at the age of 180. His sons Esau and Jacob buried him in the cave of Machpelah.

44: Joseph and his brothers

Jacob now lived in the land of his fathers. His sons were grown men and looked after the flocks.



Jacob had twelve sons in all. Reuben was the oldest. Then came Simeon, Levi and Judah — all sons of Leah. Joseph and Benjamin, the two sons of Rachel, were the youngest. Joseph was seventeen years old.

When Jacob was a boy, he had been his *mother's* favorite, while Esau was the apple of his *father's* eye. Rebekah spoiled one of the boys, and her husband spoiled the other. Apparently Jacob did not learn a lesson from their mistake, which eventually caused them much pain and sorrow, for he loved Joseph more than any of his other children — and showed it.

Joseph was Rachel's son. Rachel was dead, but Jacob could not get her out of his mind. Whenever he watched Joseph, he thought of the boy's mother, the wife who had been so dear to him. This softened his heart toward Joseph. By favoring Joseph, Jacob was trying to give his dead wife a bit

more of his love.

The other sons, especially the older ones, had already caused their father much disappointment. They were rough, godless men guilty of many evil deeds. But Joseph did his best to be obedient. When he heard about some of the wicked things his brothers had done, he was upset and told his father.

Joseph loved the Lord. That was one of the reasons why his father loved him so intensely.

One day Jacob decided to honor his favorite son. He gave him a special robe — the sort of robe a young prince might wear. He did not give special robes to his other sons. This made it look as though Joseph was the most important of the brothers.

Joseph didn't mind being his father's favorite. He reveled in the thought that he was the most important of the twelve

brothers. His heart was not free of pride. He even began dreaming about being the most important member of the family.

The brothers hated Joseph. They envied him because of his special robe, and they were furious at him for telling their father about their wicked deeds. Deep in their hearts they knew that Joseph was more obedient than they were. They resented him so much that they could not bring themselves to speak to him in a friendly way.

One night Joseph dreamed that he was in the field with his brothers tying grain into sheaves. Benjamin was with them. When each brother had tied a single sheaf, Joseph's sheaf stood straight up. His brothers' sheaves formed a circle around his and bowed down respectfully before it, as if Joseph's sheaf were their master.

When Joseph awoke, he remembered his dream clearly. In his excitement, he told his brothers about it. It didn't occur to him that he should have remained silent. Joseph was not one to expect evil of others.

The dream made the brothers angry. They said to Joseph: "Now that's a fine dream! You want to be the boss and tell us what to do? Do you expect to be king over us someday?" They made fun of him and laughed at him.

To each other they whispered: "Do you know what he really wants? He wants the birth right which belongs to the first-born. He wants a double share of the inheritance! But we'll make sure he doesn't get it. We can look after ourselves!"

Later Joseph had another dream, which was very much like the first. Again he told his brothers about the dream, but this time his father was there to hear about it as well. Joseph said: "What a strange dream I had! The sun, moon and eleven stars came down

from heaven and bowed before me."

His father did not let this dream go unchallenged. "My son," he asked, "what kind of dream is that? Do you want all of us to come to you and bow before you — your mother, your brothers, and I?" Joseph didn't know what to say in response, but he didn't forget about his dream.

Jacob had also dreamed a dramatic dream long ago. It was the Lord Himself who had sent him that dream. Could Joseph's dream also be a message from the Lord?

Jacob took the dream seriously and often thought about it. But the brothers laughed at Joseph and made fun of him.

45: Joseph in the pit

Not long after Joseph's peculiar dreams, his brothers wandered far from home with their flocks. They were looking for green pastures. Joseph stayed home with his father.

At one point Jacob received word that his sons were at Shechem. Then he heard nothing for a long time.

He became uneasy, for his sons had enemies at Shechem. Finally he called Joseph and sent him to look for his brothers and find out if they were all right. Soon Joseph was on his way to Shechem.

The trip took him two days. He walked through fields and valleys, climbing hills and scanning the horizon. But he couldn't find his brothers.

As the sun shone on the rolling hills, Joseph saw a solitary figure moving through the dry fields. The man got closer and closer to Joseph. "Are you looking for someone?" he asked.

"Yes, I am," Joseph replied. "I'm trying to find my brothers and the flocks they are tending. Do you know where they are?"

"Yes, I do," said the man. "I talked with them myself not long ago. I heard them say they were going to move on to Dothan."

Dothan was even farther to the north. It was an area through which caravans passed on their way to Egypt. When Joseph got there, he climbed a hill to look around. He saw spacious green pastures and his father's flocks grazing in them.

The brothers had seen him coming. "Look," they said scornfully. "Here comes that crazy dreamer in his special robe. No doubt he's here to find out what we've been up to so he can tell our father about it. Then he'll get even more special treatment."

Who was the one to suggest that dreadful plan? Surely it wasn't Reuben. Could it have been Simeon or Levi, who had already committed murder at Shechem?

One of the brothers said: "Let's kill him, that dreamer! Then we'll be rid of him. No one will know. We can tell our father that he was killed by a wild animal."

The others shouted; "Great idea! Let's do it! Then we'll see what comes of his dreams."

Reuben was the only one against it. As the oldest of the brothers, he was responsible for protecting Joseph. But he didn't dare oppose his brothers openly. Instead he said: "Don't do it, brothers! Let's not shed blood! Let's throw him in a pit in the wilderness instead. But let's not harm him ourselves."

"Reuben is right," cried some others. "Then no one can say that we killed him."

Reuben felt relieved. "When it's dark," he thought to himself, "I'll help Joseph out of the pit." He thought he was being very

clever. Joseph would be saved, and he, Reuben, would stay on good terms with his brothers.

Joseph approached, unafraid, as the brothers made their plans. He could tell from their faces that they weren't happy to see him, but they were usually surly characters anyway. And they were never friendly to him. Still, he feared no evil.

Once Joseph was among them, they seized him and ripped his special robe from his shoulders. They dragged him to a pit and threw him in, sealing the opening with a heavy stone.

"So there!" they shouted, taunting him. "You can lay there and dream until you're dead about how you'll be our boss someday!"

Then they returned to their campsite and calmly ate their bread. Their merciless conduct hadn't spoiled their appetite. As they chewed their bread, their brother lay at the bottom of the pit, where he would soon die of hunger and thirst.

Reuben wandered into the field to be alone. He couldn't eat with his brothers, for his conscience tormented him: "Reuben, aren't you the oldest? Surely you could have stopped them!"

"Just wait," Reuben thought. "As soon as it's dark, I'll rescue Joseph."

Because it was the dry season, there was no water in the pit where Joseph lay. The rock did not cover the opening of the pit completely. A ray of light pierced the darkness. The walls of the pit were high and steep. Escape was impossible.

Joseph knew better than to count on mercy from his brothers. And there was no way his father could help, for he did not know what was happening. Yet his Father in heaven knew. This thought gave Joseph a ray of hope in the midst of the darkness and



fear. Earnestly he prayed: "O Lord, God of my father, help me."

46: Joseph on the way to Egypt

Above his head Joseph heard footsteps. Someone was coming to the pit! The stone at the mouth of the pit was removed.

"Joseph, hang on to the rope."

It was Judah's voice! A thick rope was lowered into the pit. Strong brown arms above held on to the rope and pulled Joseph up.

"They were only trying to scare me," Joseph thought to himself, sighing with relief.

But while he stood there blinking in the bright sunshine, he was seized from behind by a stranger — a man who looked like a merchant. The stranger looked Joseph over from all sides and felt the muscles in his arms.

"Twenty pieces of silver," he said. The brothers agreed, and the money was quickly counted out.

Then Joseph understood what was going on. His own brothers were selling him as

though he were an animal. But why?

At once he was tied to the saddle of a camel. Then it dawned on him: he was being sent to a faraway land as a slave. He would never see his father again!

He whined and begged for mercy, but only the sheep were upset by his wails. The brothers laughed and went their way.

Hours later, when it was dark, Reuben came to the pit with a rope. He lowered it into the pit and called out: "Joseph, it's Reuben. Grab the rope and I'll pull you out."

There was no answer from the pit. Joseph was gone.

Reuben hurried away to find his brothers. "Where's Joseph?" he shouted. "What have you done with the boy?"

They told him that they had sold Joseph to a group of Midianite merchants passing by. "He's on his way to Egypt," they said. "That's just as good as having him dead. No one ever comes back from that far country."

Reuben was in despair. *He* was the oldest, the one who would have to bear most of the blame. As he thought of the sorrow this would cause his aged father, he cried: "What can I do now?"

The brothers laughed at his anguish and remorse. "Too late!" said one.

In the camp of the Midianite traders that night, Joseph lay near the fire tightly bound. The camels were resting, and the men were asleep. One of them had been assigned to stay awake as a watchman.

Joseph couldn't sleep that night. The ropes gnawed at his wrists and ankles. But he was pained even more by the questions that swirled around in his troubled mind.

Why did this happen to him? Didn't he love the Lord and do his best to serve Him? Why, then, was he torn away from the father he loved so much? Why?

There seemed to be no answer to the questions tormenting him. In the sky Joseph could see thousands of stars. They had no answer for him either.

Beyond the stars was God. A voice within Joseph seemed to be saying: "Don't be troubled, Joseph. The Lord is keeping an eye on you. There is a reason for all of this." It was the voice of Joseph's faith coming to comfort him. ✓

The next day, walking down the hot, dusty road to Egypt, Joseph passed the hills of Hebron where his father lived. Jacob didn't know that the son he loved so dearly was traveling through the area as a slave.

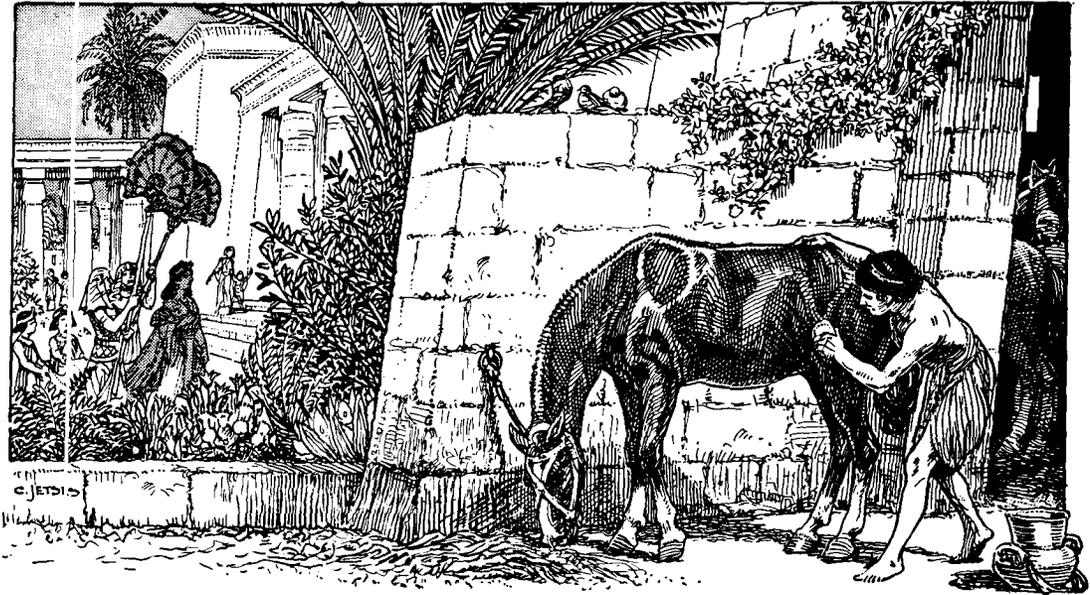
No one appeared to rescue Joseph. In his anguish Joseph had but one consolation: the Lord knew what was happening.

A day later, the wails of an old man could be heard in the hills of Hebron. There sat Jacob with Joseph's blood-smeared robe in his trembling hands. The robe was in shreds.

A messenger had said to him: "Your sons told me to deliver this to you. They found it in the wilderness."

Jacob tore his clothes in grief and cried out: "Joseph, my son, my son! Some fierce animal has torn him apart."





When the brothers finally returned with the flocks, Jacob was still mourning. Those hypocrites pretended to sympathize with their father and share his grief. In vain they tried to comfort him.

“I will mourn Joseph until the day I die,” the old man said.

He did not know, of course, that the blood on Joseph’s robe was only goat’s blood. Yet, wasn’t he guilty of something similar? What had he used to deceive his father years before? Goat meat and his brother’s clothes!

47: Joseph as a slave

The scorching sun stood high in the sky above Egypt. Heat radiated from the white houses. It was another hot day in Egypt.

The wealthy Egyptians were resting in the coolest rooms indoors. But the slaves wouldn’t be able to rest until evening.

In the city, near the palace, stood the houses of the king’s leading officials. In one of those houses lived Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh’s guard.

Exotic flowers and shrubs grew in Potiphar’s beautiful garden with its ornamental ponds. There were fountains spreading little drops of water over the grass. Palm trees swayed gently in the breeze.

Around that garden stood buildings. On one side were the stalls for the horses and the sheds for the slaves. On the opposite side were the storerooms and the bakery. On the two remaining sides were the rooms occupied by Potiphar and his family. Potiphar’s house was a palace.

In the garden and in the stalls, Joseph worked as a slave. Potiphar had bought him from some Midianite merchants. Joseph had made quite an impression on Potiphar as he stood there in his chains. Perhaps it was his handsome bearing, or his youth, or his sad, dreamy eyes that attracted

Potiphar.

Joseph was the newest slave in Potiphar's household. There he wound up doing the dirty work that no one else wanted. He was not allowed to grumble. If he did not do his work well, the overseer, who was the highest ranking slave in Potiphar's household, would teach him a lesson with the whip.

But he never had to use his whip on Joseph. The young slave sweated and toiled all day long, and he was more obedient and cooperative than any other slave. There was something special about that young man: he didn't *look* like a slave. In fact, he claimed to be the son of a shepherd prince who lived far to the north.

Joseph never complained. But at night, when he lay exhausted on the straw, he cried as he thought of his father's home. How he yearned to be home again!

His only comfort was his faith in God. He thought: "God is taking care of me in this foreign land. God loves me. Therefore I will also love Him and show how much I love him in my work."

Joseph was rewarded for taking this attitude. As time passed, he was given better jobs and more responsibility. And he did well in everything he undertook. When he was in charge of the garden, the flowers blossomed as never before. In the year he was responsible for the horses, they shone with good health. The Lord blessed Joseph and saw to it that his work went well every day.

48: Potiphar's wife

Joseph was lonely as a slave in Egypt. He yearned to see his father again. Yet he

threw himself into his daily work and always gave a good account of himself.

Potiphar was pleased; in fact, he had never been more satisfied with the work of a slave. When he discovered one day that Joseph also knew how to write, he put him in charge of all the slaves. Now Joseph would be the overseer, the steward in Potiphar's house.

Joseph no longer did ordinary slave's work. He made the rounds in the household, supervising the work of the other slaves and keeping track of what was being done. He was also in charge of buying food and supplies for the household.

Joseph walked around freely in the beautiful rooms in Potiphar's house. His master trusted him completely.

The hard work had done him some good. The spoiled boy who used to let his brothers do the work while he stayed with his father had become a humble worker.

The Lord blessed the household of Potiphar while Joseph was there. Joseph had brought the blessing of the Lord with him.

Potiphar's wife liked Joseph very much and was always very friendly to him. She was a beautiful woman, but she had an ugly heart full of falsehood. One day she came to Joseph with a suggestion that was so wicked and shocking that Joseph trembled with fear and turned red with shame.

She asked Joseph to come to her bed. Potiphar was often away from home. He would never find out.

Joseph refused. He said: "My master has entrusted everything to me. How could I do this great evil and sin against God?"

Potiphar's wife was used to getting her own way. She wouldn't take no for an answer.

Joseph continued to refuse. He did not

want to listen to her pleas, and he avoided her as much as possible.

One day, when the two of them were alone in the house, she took hold of Joseph by his robe. "You listen to me!" she hissed. "You do as I tell you!"

Joseph tore himself away from that sinful woman, leaving his robe in her hand. Then she showed just how wicked she was. She began to scream as though she had been attacked. When slaves rushed in to see what was wrong, she told them that Joseph had come to her to take her to bed while Potiphar was away.

"When I screamed," she said, "he ran away. But he left his robe behind. Look, there it lies."

When Potiphar came home and heard the story, he became terribly angry. He wanted Joseph out of his sight. He didn't even bother asking him his side of the story.

"Arrest him," he told his men, "and throw him in prison."

49: Joseph in prison

Joseph was in prison. He had done his best to serve God from morning to evening. And when temptation confronted him in the form of Potiphar's wife, he had bravely said no. Where was his reward?

He sat in a dark cell, chained to the wall. He couldn't even move his feet, for they were clamped in fetters of iron.

Yet there was peace in Joseph's heart. He believed that God would watch over him even in prison. Surely God would make some good come of Joseph's sorrow. The peace in Joseph's heart was his reward for serving God faithfully.

Every day a prison guard would come

and bring Joseph some food. Sometimes the chief jailer himself came. He would look at Joseph sitting in his cell quietly and patiently, and he would read the sorrow in Joseph's eyes. Those eyes also told him that Joseph was an honest person and a gentle person. He thought to himself: "What a fine young man! Surely this prisoner is not a troublemaker. I'll see to it that he is unchained."

He continued to keep an eye on Joseph. One day he thought to himself: "Joseph is a man who can be trusted. I'll give him some work to do in the prison."

The pattern in Potiphar's house was now repeated in jail. Joseph did his work faithfully, and he was given more and more responsibility and variety in his work. Everything he undertook went well, for the Lord blessed all that he did. In time Joseph became the chief jailer's most important assistant. He took care of everything for him.

Whenever the chief jailer left the prison and walked around in the world outside where the sun shone and the flowers blossomed, *he* was free while *Joseph* remained behind those thick walls. However much good work Joseph did, the heavy doors of the jail did not swing open for him.

The days, weeks and months went by in quiet monotony. But one day something special happened in Joseph's jail. Two special prisoners arrived — men who had served at the king's court. One was the king's butler. He had been responsible for making wine for the king. The other was the palace baker. Together they had been in charge of preparing the king's meals. When the king ate, they stood behind him awaiting his commands.

But now they were in prison. Something

upsetting had happened in the palace: poison had been put in the king's food. Apparently one of the two was the guilty party.

The baker declared that he was innocent. The butler also claimed to be innocent. Because the king did not know what to do, he had both of them put in prison.

One of Joseph's jobs was to bring them their food. Joseph did not know which of the two was guilty, but he did know how upsetting it was to be imprisoned. Therefore he made a point of being kind and friendly to both of them.

50: The butler and the baker

Joseph saw the butler and the baker regularly, for he brought them their food. One morning when he went into their cell, they seemed more discouraged than usual.

Joseph asked them what was the matter. "We both had such strange dreams," they replied, "and we believe that the dreams mean something. But there is no one here to tell us what they mean."

"Only God knows what dreams mean," Joseph responded. "Tell me your dreams."

The butler spoke first. "I dreamed that I was free again!" he said, with shining eyes. "It was marvelous! I saw a vine in a garden, just a small one. I watched it grow. It grew three branches, with leaves and blossoms and then some small grapes. I saw the grapes ripen in the sun. Then suddenly I found a cup in my hand — the king's golden cup. I picked the grapes and pressed them together in the king's cup and gave the king a cup of wine, just as I always used to do."

The butler sighed. "It was only a dream."

Joseph's face lit up with happiness. Suddenly he knew what the dream meant. How amazing! He also realized that he had not figured out the meaning of the dream by himself. It was God who had revealed its meaning to him.

The three branches were three days. In three days the king would release the butler from prison and let him serve in the palace again.

Joseph told the butler this. He also asked him a favor: "When you are free again, please remember me. I have been in prison for so long, and I have done nothing to deserve this punishment. Will you ask the king if I could also be released?"

The butler promised Joseph that he would. He was ready to promise anything — as long as Joseph's interpretation of his dream proved correct.

"I dreamed that I was free too!" the baker said eagerly. "I was walking down the street with three baskets on my head, just as I used to do before I was thrown in jail. In the top basket were all sorts of cakes I had baked for the king's table. But when I got to the palace, I saw that the birds had picked the basket clean."

Joseph knew what this dream meant too. He had a very hard time telling the baker.

"The three baskets are three days," he said. "In three days the king will have you taken out of prison — but not to give you your freedom. You will be condemned to death. The king will hang your body on a tree, and the birds will come and eat your flesh."

Three days later there was a great feast in the land. It was the king's birthday. There was a special banquet in the palace, while the people rejoiced in the streets.

That day heavy knocking was heard at the prison door.

Soldiers stood waiting outside. They had come for the baker. The baker was guilty, and he would now be punished.

A second delegation arrived at the prison. The butler was brought back to the palace with shouts of joy. His innocence had been proven.

Everything had happened just as Joseph said it would.

The butler joined the feast in the king's banquet hall. He was almost drunk with joy. Again he was the respected, prominent man he used to be, a man before whom people bowed. What did he care about some poor wretch in prison?

He didn't think about Joseph the next day either, or the day after that. He couldn't bear to think about those dismal days in prison.

Joseph waited and hoped. Whenever someone knocked on the prison door, his heart pounded. Perhaps it would be his turn to go free!

Each time he was disappointed. Gradually hope began to die in Joseph's heart. When he no longer fixed his hopes on the butler, he had to look to God alone. Then he became even more humble than before.

Two long years went by. Then, finally, Joseph had waited long enough.

51: The king dreams

It was nighttime. God had brought darkness over Egypt. People tired from their day's work were sleeping soundly.

The Pharaoh, Egypt's powerful king, was sleeping too. He was dreaming. In his dream he was walking through his kingdom.

Egypt is a gift of the Nile. Each year the river overflows its banks and covers the fields. The silt it leaves behind makes the land fertile.

In Pharaoh's dream the water streamed on peacefully between the two banks of the Nile. The king watched the river as it glittered in the sun.

He heard a splashing sound. Seven cows came out of the river. They had let the cool water of the river flow over them to get some relief from the heat and the flies. They started munching on the lush grass in a field alongside the river.

They were exceptionally beautiful cows — sleek and fat. In fact, they were the most beautiful cows the king had ever seen. The king watched respectfully with joy in his heart, for cows were holy animals in Egypt.

Suddenly seven more cows emerged from the river. They were ugly cows, lean cows shrunken with hunger. They were a horrible sight. When they reached the pasture where the seven beautiful cattle were feeding, they attacked them and devoured them. Even so, they remained as thin and ugly as before.

The startled king awoke and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. It was still and dark all around him, for it was nighttime. What a relief! It was only a dream! The king sighed and stretched out on his bed again.

When he fell asleep, he had another dream. As he stood by a field, he saw something move near his feet. A green, tender stalk of grain sprouted from the earth. The plant grew quickly. Seven ears of grain sprouted on the one stalk — beautiful, full ears. The ears hung heavy on the plant as it swayed back and forth. The plant seemed the color of gold on that glorious summer day. Pharaoh laughed in delight; he rejoiced in the rich harvest.



The blue sky then turned to the color of copper. The sun beat down hotter and hotter. A searing east wind swept across the field.

Before the feet of the king another plant started to grow — a wiry, thin little plant withered and shriveled by the wind from the desert. Seven dry, empty ears of grain grew on that stalk. They bent over to the seven beautiful full ears and devoured them. The earth was hard; it split open because of the drought. The land was turning into a wilderness.

Again the king woke up frightened because of a dream. The first morning light was already penetrating the palace.

"It was only a dream," thought the king. But he was uneasy. He had a gnawing feeling that the dream was a warning about an impending disaster.

He couldn't sleep. Troubled and agitated, he got up and called his servants. He didn't want to eat. He got dressed and went to the throne room, where his wise men and soothsayers had been called together.

Crowding around the throne in that early morning hour, they listened respectfully to the king. There were many of them — learned old men in priestly garments. They had just been roused from bed themselves. They thought and pondered and

stuck their shaven heads together and whispered words of encouragement to each other. Hastily they searched the papyrus scrolls, which were books containing the wisdom of the ages. One after another they approached the throne, bowed deeply, and addressed the king in beautiful language. But the king kept shaking his head and growing more impatient as he dismissed their interpretations.

"That's not it," he would say. "I know that can't be it."

The wise men became more and more anxious as the king kept shaking his head, for the expression on his face grew darker and darker. The king had all the power in Egypt. If the wise men could not help the king, he might punish them severely.

Finally someone stepped forward to cut this scene short — the butler. While watching the wise men, he was reminded of his own dream two years earlier, and he thought of the young slave who had divined its meaning in a seemingly miraculous way. Should he now tell the king about that slave? Or would the king be angry with him for forgetting about his promise for so long and being so ungrateful?

He decided to speak up. He fell down before the throne and told the king about Joseph, who had figured out the meaning of his dream and also the meaning of the chief

baker's dream. All the wise men sighed with relief when they saw how the king's face brightened at this new hope.

A few minutes later, some important servants of the king left the palace. They were on their way to the prison.

52: Joseph interprets Pharaoh's dreams

Joseph heard someone knocking on the prison door, but he paid no attention. He continued with his work in the dark cells, calmly and obediently. He no longer asked questions or hoped for release. He had become as docile as a lamb.

The visitors mentioned his name. The chief jailer called him. "Joseph, the king wants to see you. He wants you to interpret his dreams."

Messengers were waiting — well-dressed men who wanted to take him to the king. They were nervous and in a hurry. When the king gave an order, there was no time to lose! Joseph took off his prison clothes, washed, shaved, and put on clean, white linen. Hurry up! The king is waiting! Out the door!

Was he dreaming? The light in the streets was so bright that Joseph had to close his eyes. He took a deep breath of the clean air outside the prison. How many years had he spent in the darkness of the prison? What a joy to see the blue sky again!

He was taken up some marble stairs and into a palace. His feet moved over soft carpets. He walked along walls inlaid with gold. Heavily armed palace guards stood at attention by a doorway.

It was deathly still in the throne room. Around the throne the king's most impor-

tant counselors waited anxiously. The king gave a sign for Joseph to come closer.

He said to Joseph: "I have had a dream, and there is no one here who can tell me what the dream means. I was told that you can interpret a dream as soon as you hear it."

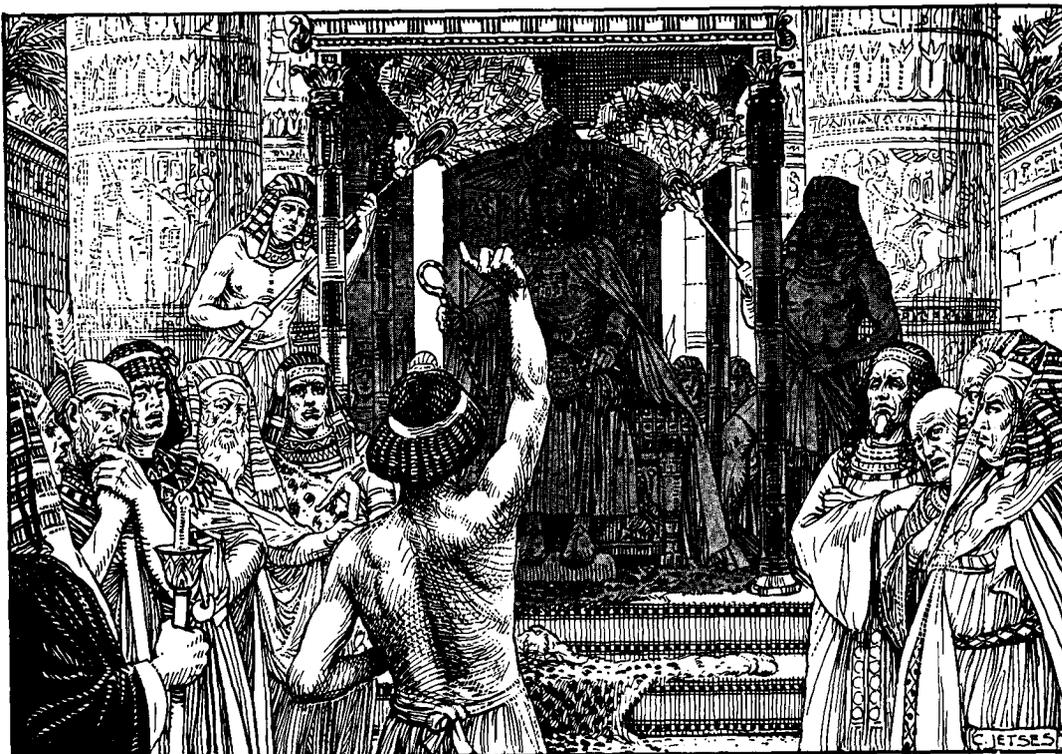
Joseph replied simply: "That I cannot do. Only God knows the meaning of dreams. Perhaps God will give you a favorable answer."

The king told Joseph his dreams about the cows and the ears of grain. Quickly it became apparent that the simple young man was wiser than any of the king's eminent scholars and soothsayers.

Joseph knew what the dreams meant. He told Pharaoh: "The two dreams have the same meaning. God is letting Pharaoh know what He intends to do. The seven beautiful cows and the seven beautiful ears of grain are seven years of prosperity. The seven scrawny cows and the seven poor ears of grain are seven years of famine. The seven good years will come first. During those years there will be great abundance in Egypt. Those good years will be followed by seven bad years, years in which the Nile will not overflow its banks. The drought and hunger will be so severe that people will forget all about the good years. The fact that the king dreamed the same dream twice indicates that God has firmly decided on these events and will soon bring them about."

The anger vanished from the king's face. He sensed at once that this was the right interpretation. But there was silence in the room. Joseph had more to say.

Joseph gave the king some good advice: "You can save your people from the famine, O king! You must find a wise, sensible man and appoint him to gather the grain which is left over in the good years. He will need



many servants to help him. The grain should be stored in large barns. Then we will have food when the years of drought and famine come.”

When Joseph was finished speaking, it was quiet again. No one was allowed to speak if the king did not speak. Finally the king cried out: “Where am I to find a man as wise as this one? The spirit of God is in him!” Then the wise men rejoiced with the king.

The king took the signet ring from his finger and gave it to Joseph. He hung a golden chain around his neck. He had special clothes given to Joseph. Then he said: “I am placing you over the whole land of Egypt. All the people will obey you. There will only be one person in the land more powerful than you — the king. And I

will give you a new name — *Zaphenath-paneah*, which means *savior of the land*.”

To his servants the king said: “Hitch the horses to the royal coach, the second nicest one, and take my new first minister through the city, so that all the people will know that they are to obey him.”

Soon the royal coach rolled through the streets of the king’s capital. The fiery horses were beautifully adorned with clothes and bells. A driver held the reins in his hand. Army leaders and chiefs walked ahead of the chariots. “Respect! Respect!” they cried. All the people bowed down and rejoiced in the man being honored, the man standing in the wagon with the king’s scepter in his hand.

Joseph was given a palace which was even bigger and more beautiful than

Potiphar's house. He had slaves to carry out his every wish. Governors and nobles bowed before him. He married Asenath, the daughter of the most important priest in Egypt. She bore him two sons — Manasseh and Ephraim.

Joseph made great journeys through the entire country. He saw to it that storage barns were built in every city. Soon the barns were filling up with grain, and he had more barns built. Never before had Egypt enjoyed such rich harvests.

It was difficult work that Joseph did. But he had been in charge of Potiphar's house, and later the prison. Hence he was well prepared to run the country.

Now he understood why he had been torn from his father and sent out into the world on his own. God had determined the course of his life. And what God did was good. A few years later, this would be even clearer to Joseph.

53: Famine

The sheep were bleating anxiously in the dry pastures. They were weak and thin, just like the other animals. They wandered around on the scorched earth under the burning sun — panting, their nostrils barely open, fear in their eyes. There was almost no grass left for them. And there was no water. The ground was dry and hard.

There were shepherds nearby — Jacob's sons. They were desperate, but there was nothing they could do. They didn't even have enough food left for their own children. The grain was withering in the field.

In the evenings, when it was cool, they sat silently with their father, Jacob, before

the tents. As they looked at each other, they could see that not one of them knew what to do.

The only one who could help was God. If only He would send rain!

Every day the bright sun climbed high in the heavens. Every day the sky overhead was copper. Every day brought drought, thirst and fear.

They had heard that there was one land where food was abundant. Through some miracle, the king who ruled there found out about the famine in advance.

The brothers had picked up this information from traveling merchants. Jacob was also aware of it. He wanted to know why they didn't go to Egypt for food.

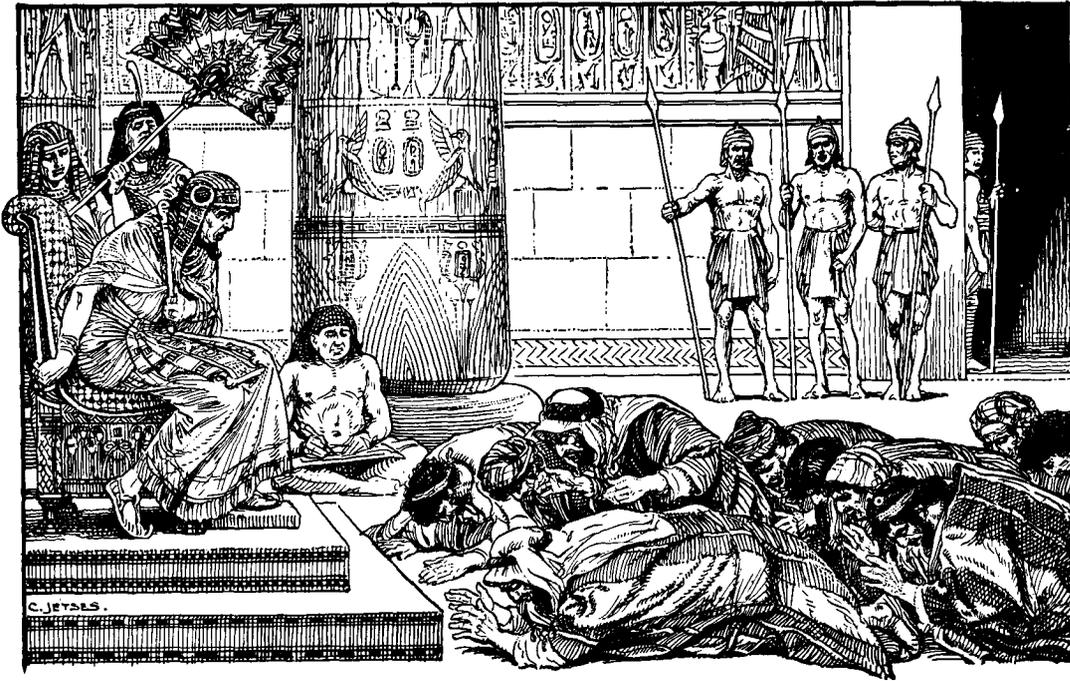
One evening the old man brought up the subject again. "Why do you sit here staring at each other?" he cried out. "Go to Egypt and buy grain there. If you don't, we will all die of hunger."

Egypt? As soon as the brothers heard that word, they felt uneasy. In their minds they saw their younger brother pleading for mercy. They could almost hear his wails again. For 20 years they had been tortured by such memories. Sometimes the memories would not bother them for days. Then, suddenly, in their sleep, they would hear Joseph again.

This time there was no way out. They would simply have to go to Egypt. Their children were crying for bread.

The next day they set out, heading south. Benjamin was not with them. Jacob was afraid that some accident might befall him.

Ten somber men walked next to their donkeys. For six days they trudged on through the burning sand. For six days the withering wilderness wind blew in their faces. Then, stretching along the horizon, they saw a high wall. The Egyptians had



built that wall to defend themselves from enemies to the north.

The brothers walked through a magnificent gate. They were questioned by suspicious border officials. Then they were allowed to go on to the royal capital. Joseph had followed that route before them.

They moved through the streets with other caravans. The people in the city looked healthy and well fed. The children were playing in front of the houses. There was no famine in Egypt.

The brothers were happy they had come. They thought about their children and hurried on. Surely the Egyptians would sell them food! The journey was a success!

54: Ten brothers in Egypt

The brothers were eager to load their donkeys and leave. But first they would have to go into a great palace. They would have to present their request for grain to the regent there, a high-ranking Egyptian official. Foreigners who came to buy grain always had to appear before him.

Hesitantly the brothers walked through the halls of the palace and entered the room in which the Egyptian official was seated. They bowed low before the mighty ruler. Because their faces were to the ground, they did not see how pale the ruler became.

That Egyptian official was Joseph. He recognized the brothers at once. He felt an impulse to cry out in surprise, but he restrained himself. He wanted to run to his brothers and throw his arms around them,

but he stayed on his throne.

There they lay before him — ten brothers. Where had he last seen them? It was at Dothan, when they had money in their hands, blood money, money they were given when they sold their brother. Joseph had wailed as he was dragged away behind a camel, but the brothers had laughed.

Brothers?

There they lay, just like the sheaves in his dream so long before. Now Joseph had them in his power! Now he could kill them if he wanted to. There was no one to stop him. He could take revenge on them if he chose.

But he knew that God wanted him to forgive them for what they had done, just as God had forgiven him for his pride.

Where was Benjamin? Had they sold him too, or killed him? Joseph wanted to find out.

They would not recognize him. He had changed much more than they had.

"Where are you from?"

They looked up. An interpreter repeated the question for them in their own language. One of the brothers replied: "From the land of Canaan, my lord. We have come to buy food."

The high official looked at them sternly. His voice was harsh and determined: "You are spies. You have come to find out where to attack the land."

The brothers trembled. Spies? If the high official really believed that, they were lost!

"No, my lord," they assured him. "We are not spies. We are all sons of one father. We are honest men."

It didn't help. "You are spies!" The high official's voice was as harsh as before.

The official asked them many questions. He seemed to be able to read what was in

their hearts. They did not dare hide things from him; in their terror they let their innermost thoughts tumble out.

They admitted that there were twelve brothers in all. The youngest brother had stayed behind with their father. Ten had come to Egypt. And the twelfth brother? He was no more.

They told the high official all sorts of things to defend themselves, but it didn't help. It turned out that they had good reason to be so afraid of Egypt. That official was so harsh and suspicious!

"I'm going to find out whether you're telling the truth," he said. "I want to see that youngest brother of yours. Then I'll believe you."

Joseph signaled, and soldiers appeared to take the brothers away. They were bound and put in prison.

As they sat in their cell, they had only their fear and their guilty consciences to keep them company. Why did this happen to them? What would become of their wives and children if they did not return with food?

They should never have gone to Egypt! What else could they expect from a cruel, highhanded Egyptian?

55: Nine brothers return to Canaan

While the brothers languished in jail with fear eating away at them, the high official who had caused their fear could not sleep. Now he needed all his wisdom. He understood even better why God had allowed him to be sent to Egypt: he was to save his own family as well as Egypt from the famine. But he would have to be careful how he went about it.

If the brothers found out that he was Joseph, they would be afraid of him and of his power. Then they might never return to Egypt. Joseph wanted to make it painfully obvious to the brothers how wicked and godless they had been when they sold him into slavery. He wanted to test them, to find out if they were still as rough and uncaring as they used to be.

After thinking it over for a long time, he made a plan. He hoped he could remain strong enough to carry out that plan without breaking down and telling his brothers who he was.

On the third day, the ten shepherds were brought before the high official again. "Listen," he said. "You can trust me, for I am a God-fearing man. I will let nine of you go home with grain, but you *must* come back with your youngest brother. Then I'll know for sure that you have spoken the truth, and no one will do you any harm. One of you must stay here in prison as a hostage. If you don't come back, he will die."

The brothers were stunned. They looked at each other anxiously. Who would be the hostage?

While they were in prison, they all thought back to the events at Dothan. Again they heard Joseph's haunting cries.

As they discussed the situation, one of them finally brought up Joseph's name. "Now we're paying for what we did to Joseph. We saw how frightened he was when he begged for mercy, but we turned our backs on him."

"Didn't I tell you to leave the boy alone?" Reuben said. He was reproaching his brothers. "But you didn't want to listen. Now we'll pay for what we did." Yet Reuben was aware that he was not innocent either.

The brothers assumed that the high official could not understand what they were saying, for they were talking in their own language. But Joseph followed every word. It was too much for him when he heard his brothers say how sorry they were for what they had done.

Tears rushed to his eyes, and he quickly turned around. He *had* to remain strong. He *had* to carry out his plan if everything was to be set right. He gained control of himself and dried his tears.

When he turned around and faced the brothers again, his tears were gone. He showed them the same stern face.

He pointed to Simeon and had him bound while the brothers stood and watched. There was nothing they could do to save Simeon.

Nine brothers were free to go home. With heavy hearts they left the room. Their donkeys were waiting for them outside the building, each one burdened with sacks of grain.

The brothers left Egypt in deep sorrow. Their heads were bowed as they walked down the long road back to Canaan.

Each brother led one donkey. That evening they found a place to sleep, but they had to provide their own food.

Then they were in for a new shock. One of the brothers opened his sack to take out some grain for supper and found money inside! It was his own money, the money he had given the Egyptians for his grain. Somehow it had found its way back into his sack. The other brothers also found their money in their sacks; each one's money was on top of the grain. The brothers were bewildered. Was there some evil power out to make trouble for them?

If they went back to Egypt, the high official would surely accuse them of stealing

the money. They did not dare bring the money back right away. They had to go straight home. Their families were starving and needed the grain.

The brothers returned to Jacob with long faces. The whole clan gathered and heard what had happened.

Now there was food to eat, but no one was happy. Jacob complained: "You rob me of my children! Joseph is gone. Simeon is gone. And now you propose to take Benjamin away too? Never! Benjamin stays here!"

"Then we don't dare go back," the brothers replied. "What will happen to Simeon?"

They did not discuss the subject for long. Jacob wouldn't hear of it. Reuben promised that Benjamin would return safe and sound, but it didn't help. Jacob shook his old, gray head sadly. "He's not going to Egypt! His brother Joseph is dead. Benjamin is the only child of Rachel that I have left. If anything happened to him, it would be the death of me."

Far away, in his palace in Egypt's capital, sat Joseph. He was thinking. "I wonder if they're home yet. I wonder if they've found the money that I put back in their sacks."

He called a servant. "Go to the prison and make sure that they're taking good care of Simeon, the shepherd."



"I wonder what Benjamin will look like after all these years," he thought to himself. "I wonder if they'll come back with him soon."

56: Judah's pledge

Many weeks had passed since the day when Jacob's sons returned from Egypt. Every day the women took grain from the sacks and ground it into flour so that they could bake bread for their families. They were careful not to waste any or to take more than they needed. All the same, their food supply dwindled away bit by bit. They baked smaller and thinner loaves of bread. Soon there would be nothing left to eat. The famine showed no sign of ending.

With pale faces and tight lips, the adults went about their work. The children shuffled around listlessly and kept asking for bread.

Simeon's wife and children had an additional burden to bear: their father was a prisoner in a strange, faraway land.

In the middle of all the tents sat aged Jacob. All eyes were focused on him: "Father Jacob, give us bread! Why do you delay?" In the eyes of Simeon's children, Jacob could read a reproach: "Grandfather, we want our father back!"

At times Jacob wanted to send the brothers back to Egypt to buy more grain, but then he would look at Benjamin, his youngest son, the apple of his eye. Out of fear for his son's safety, he kept silent. He would wait a little longer. Perhaps the Lord would send rain soon.

The earth was so hot and dry that it cracked open. The animals died in the fields. Everything was parched.

Finally the old man spoke: "My sons, go to Egypt and buy more food."

The brothers looked at each other. "Only if Benjamin comes along," they said. "If we appear in Egypt without him, the high Egyptian official will think that we were lying to him. Benjamin *must* come along."

Jacob shook his head. "Why did you tell him that you had one brother left at home?" he complained.

"We couldn't hide it," they said. "That Egyptian asked us all sorts of detailed questions. 'Is your father still alive? Do you have any other brothers?' We *had* to tell him."

Judah stepped forward. "Father," he said firmly, "let Benjamin come with us. I will look after him. And I promise that he will return safely. If we had not waited so long, we could have been to Egypt and back already."

Jacob could see that Judah was sincere. Perhaps he could entrust Benjamin to Judah.

Finally Jacob yielded. "Take him with you," he said, trembling. "And may God Almighty protect you. May He incline the Egyptian's heart to let both Simeon and Benjamin come back with you."

The old man bowed his head. He could not hold back his tears. It was the most difficult day of his life.

The brothers left the very next morning — ten men heading south with their donkeys, Benjamin walking next to Judah. As they disappeared over the horizon, the sun beat down on the hilltops. It was another day of scorching heat.

Jacob stayed behind without one son to keep him company. But his prayers kept ascending to heaven. His loving heart went with the ten brothers on their way to Egypt.

57: A banquet in Egypt

There stood ten brothers before the high Egyptian official. Along with many other foreigners, they were being presented to the powerful official who ruled Egypt under the Pharaoh.

One of the official's servants approached them — a polite well-dressed man. "Come with me," he said. They followed him out of the building and down the street to a large, beautiful house. Except for the Pharaoh's palace, it was the most beautiful house in the entire country. It was the home of the high Egyptian ruler.

The brothers trembled. Why were they being brought to the official's house? Why did the Egyptian want to be friendly to them and pay them this great honor? He must be trying to set them at ease so he could trap them and make slaves of them. Was it because of the money they had found in their sacks? Did the Egyptian perhaps think that they were thieves?

They did not dare go inside. The Egyptian servant wanted to take them into the house, but they told him of their misgivings.

"With your permission, my lord," they said. "The first time we came to Egypt, it was only to buy grain. When we stopped overnight on the way back, we found our money in our sacks. We have no idea how it got there. We brought all of it back with us this time."

The servant laughed and tried to set them at ease. "Don't worry," he said. "We received the money you gave us. I know that you aren't thieves. Your God probably put that treasure in your sacks."

Hesitantly, with eyes wide open in amazement, they went inside. They walked very respectfully across the costly carpets

and washed their feet carefully in a beautiful bowl. The servants treated them like important guests. The brothers looked around them suspiciously.

The servant who had brought them to the house was gone. Surely he would have soldiers with him when he returned!

The door opened. Who was that running toward the brothers with his arms outstretched? It was Simeon! He didn't look at all as though he had been mistreated.

Their suspicions vanished. And when they heard that they were to eat a meal at the high official's home that afternoon, there was amazement and joy in their hearts. They were grateful for the honor that the high official chose to pay them, and they got their gifts ready to present to him.

It was a strange and glorious day. The Egyptian came home in the afternoon. The brothers bowed deeply to show their respect. Benjamin bowed too. Fortunately, that Egyptian ruler, who could sometimes be so harsh, spoke to the brothers in a friendly way.

Why did his eyes glaze over when he spoke to Benjamin? Why did he look so moved? He seemed ready to throw his arms around Benjamin.

"May God be gracious to you, my son," he said. That was strange language from a heathen Egyptian!

Why did he turn around suddenly and disappear through a door? What happened behind that door?

If the brothers had seen what went on in the next room, they would have been even more amazed. The man who ruled over all of Egypt was crying tears of joy. How he would have loved to throw his arms around Benjamin! How he would have loved to say: "Brothers, I am Joseph!"

But it was too early for that. He would

wait one more day. He would have to keep a tight rein on his feelings a while longer if he hoped to put the brothers to the test.

Joseph stayed in the other room until he regained control of himself. He washed his face and ordered his servants to set the table.

There were three tables in the room — one for the Egyptian, one for his most important servants, and a large one for the eleven brothers.

A servant showed the brothers to their places. Strange! They wound up seated according to their age! First was Reuben, the oldest of the brothers, then Simeon, then Levi, then Judah, all the way down to Benjamin. The Egyptian seemed to know each one's age. The brothers were amazed, but they did not dare say anything about it.

That was not the only strange thing. Benjamin's portions were five times as big as his brother's portions. That was a great honor in the land of Egypt.

Joseph wondered: "Will it be like the old days? Then they were angry at me because I received more from Father than they did. Will they now be angry at Benjamin?"

The brothers had apparently changed with the passing of the years. They were surprised, but they did not look at Benjamin with disfavor. Instead they were grateful for the honor paid to him. For a long time they had suffered hunger. Now they were allowed to eat and drink at the sumptuous table of this high Egyptian official. Simeon was with them again. And no harm had come to Benjamin. Yes, the Lord had watched over them.

It was a joyful banquet.



58: Benjamin is arrested

The next morning their joy was shattered. Something horrible happened.

The day began pleasantly. Early in the morning the brothers left for home, their donkeys heavily laden with grain. They were in a hurry to get back to Canaan. They were so happy that they felt like singing. Things had gone well for them.

They were not far from the city when they heard hoofbeats behind them. A band of soldiers was approaching at a furious gallop.

The brothers moved to the side of the road and covered their faces as protection against the dust. They would wait until the soldiers galloped by.

But the soldiers reined in their horses and

blocked the way. The leader rode toward them with a drawn sword in his hand. His eyes glowed with wrath. He addressed them harshly: "Why have you repaid good with evil?" he shouted. "You have eaten at the table of my lord, and you have received grain for your families. Then why have you stolen my lord's precious silver cup, the cup he drinks from?"

The brothers were shocked. They looked at each other with mouths wide open. They all shook their heads, including Benjamin. Not one of them would do such a thing. Of course not!

Suddenly they became braver. They stood up straight and tall and walked toward the leader of the soldiers. "Why does my lord ask this?" they demanded, offended. "We have shown that we are

honest men. We brought back the money that we found in our sacks the last time. What makes you think that we would steal silver or gold from your master's house? We are not thieves! Search our baggage and our sacks of grain. If one of us has the silver cup, you can kill him. The rest of us will then be your slaves."

They put their sacks on the ground and opened them. Calmly they waited while the soldiers jumped from their horses.

The leader of the soldiers started by searching Reuben. He found money at the top of his sack, just as on the first journey, but he did not find the silver cup. It was the same way with Simeon, and all the way down the line until he came to Benjamin.

Imagine how panic-stricken the brothers were when the Egyptian's brown arm emerged from Benjamin's sack. In his hand was something shiny — the silver cup! Was Benjamin a thief?

"No, I didn't steal it!" Benjamin protested.

The soldiers grabbed him. He would have to go back with them.

"The rest of you are free to go," said the leader. "I'll only take the thief as my slave."

The brothers wouldn't leave without Benjamin. They loaded their sacks on the donkeys and followed Benjamin and the soldiers back to the city. Their hearts were filled with sorrow and fear as they trudged along. Yet, they were determined *not* to abandon their brother to the wrath of the Egyptians.

Joseph waited impatiently as the brothers approached. He kept looking down the road.

He was the one who had given orders to put the silver cup in Benjamin's sack. *He* was the one who had sent the soldiers in pursuit of the brothers soon after their

departure from the city.

Joseph was not seeking revenge. He had forgiven the brothers long ago for the cruel treatment they had given him. He was testing them. He wanted to find out for sure whether they had changed their ways.

Once the brothers had let foreigners drag him away to a life of slavery. They were thinking only of themselves at the time. They had had no compassion on him or their aged father. What would they do this time? Again a brother of theirs was being dragged away by foreigners to begin a life of slavery. Would they have compassion on Benjamin? Would they consider how their aged father would feel if Benjamin did not return?

Joseph waited anxiously, with many questions running through his mind.

59: Joseph reveals himself

A band of soldiers approached Joseph's house. He saw a prisoner with them — Benjamin! Who were those men following the soldiers? His brothers? One, two, three — yes, all ten of them! With heads bowed they walked alongside their donkeys. All ten had come back!

Joseph gritted his teeth to stay calm and in control of himself. When the brothers came in and fell on their faces at his feet, his heart burned with compassion. Yet he showed them a face full of anger and spoke harsh words to them: "Why did you steal my special silver cup? Surely you must have known that I would miss it immediately!"

The brothers were so shaken up that they didn't even try to defend themselves. "Make all of us your slaves," they said.

Joseph replied sternly: "No, not all of

you. Only the one who took the silver cup will be my slave. The rest of you are free to leave."

But they did not leave! They were not putting themselves first! Judah stepped forward courageously and began to speak. He talked about his father, who was so concerned about Benjamin and was afraid to let him go to Egypt with his brothers. If Benjamin did not return, Judah assured the stern official, Jacob would die of a broken heart. "O my lord, let Benjamin go free!" he begged. "I *can't* go back home without him. I couldn't bear to see my father's sorrow. Here I am. Take *me*, my lord. Make *me* your slave instead. Do whatever you want to me, but please let Benjamin go home!"

Judah held out his hands to be bound. Judah! The one who had sold his own brother years before. Now Judah was ready to sacrifice his own life for his brother!

Joseph could no longer restrain himself. Tears rushed to his eyes. His heart overflowed with joy and pity. "Let all the servants leave the room at once!" he cried.

When the door closed behind the last Egyptian and Joseph was alone with his brothers, he jumped up with a great cry and rushed toward them with his arms outstretched. "I am Joseph," he sobbed. "Is my father still alive?"

The brothers shrank back in horror. Trembling, pale as death, they stared at him. Was that really Joseph, the brother they had sold into slavery, the brother they had wanted to kill? Could the powerful official really be Joseph? That was the greatest catastrophe they could image!

It took a long time for Joseph to calm their fears. They simply couldn't believe that he would forgive them everything and refrain from punishing them.

Joseph told the brothers that it was *God*

who had guided events in this direction. He explained why he had to become a slave and a prisoner.

"God sent me to Egypt," he said, "to save all of you from death. There are five more years of famine coming. Now all of you must go home and tell these things to my father. You must return with him and your families and everything you have. You must come to live here, close to me, in Egypt. I will take care of you."

Joseph embraced Benjamin, and then the other brothers. Finally they began to trust him.

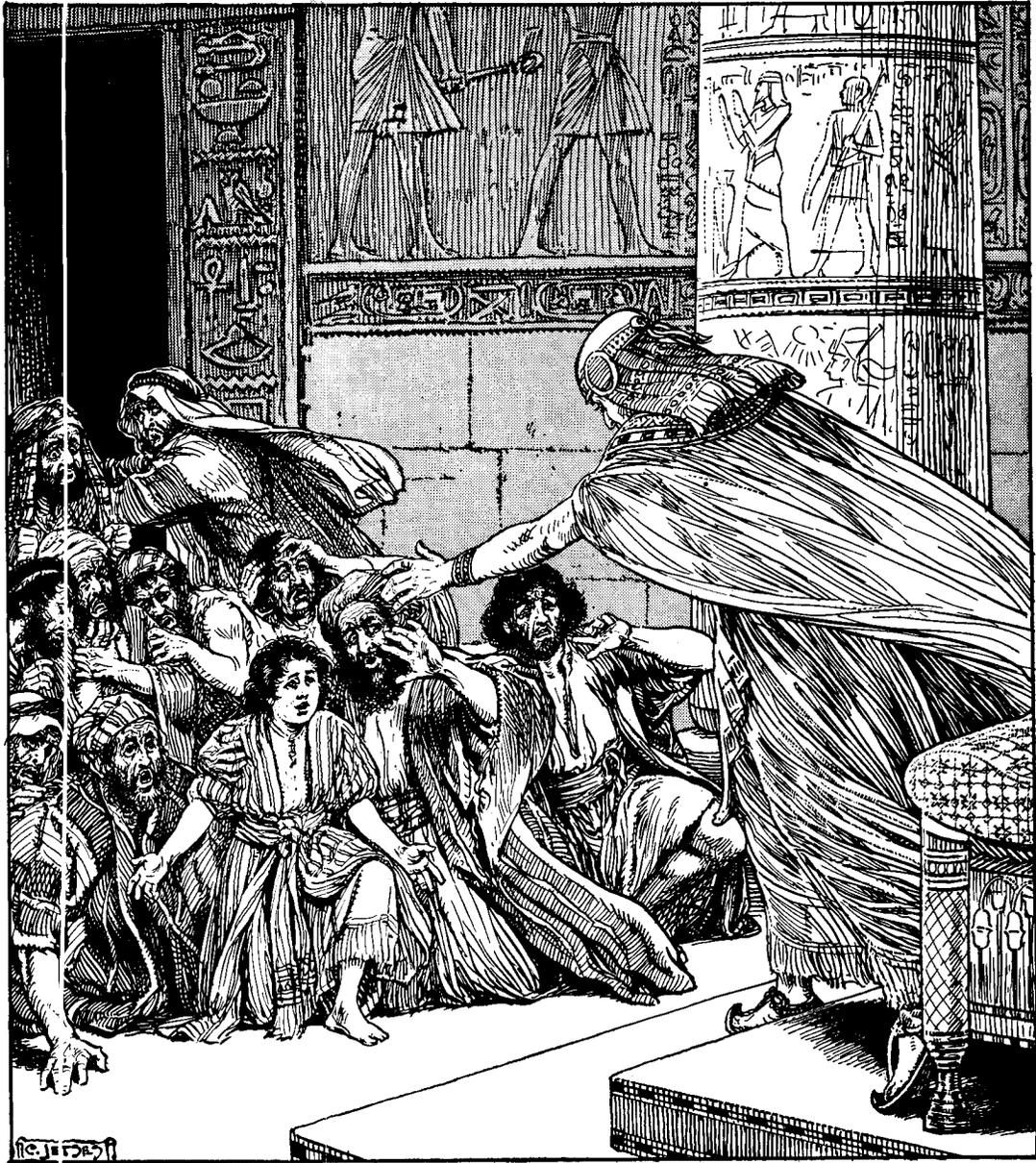
They were still embarrassed and ashamed. Yet, it was the most glorious day of their lives. For twenty years they had lived with a quiet unrest and anxiety in their hearts. Even in their dreams they had been haunted by Joseph's cries for mercy. Now it was all behind them. Now their hearts could be filled with light and joy again.

The king was told that Joseph's brothers had come to Egypt. Pharaoh was happy because his faithful servant Joseph was happy. He said to Joseph: "Let all the members of your family come to live in Egypt. They may take the best part of the land and live there."

The next morning the brothers set out for home again. They took with them a great cargo of grain and many luxurious presents for themselves and their father.

Joseph sent wagons along to bring Jacob and the brothers' wives and children back to Egypt. This time there was no band of soldiers pursuing them to bring them back. Joyfully they moved through the wilderness under the burning sun.

When they got close to home, they grew fearful again. How would they ever explain it to their father? They would have to con-



How they had deceived him long ago.

Jacob was standing at a lookout point in front of his tent, leaning on his staff. He was an old, broken man. When he saw Benjamin approaching, and Simeon, and the

other brothers, joyful and unharmed, he was delighted. He gave thanks to God for this answer to prayer.

But what was that he heard? What were his sons shouting? Joseph? Were they

talking about Joseph?

"Father, Joseph is still alive! Joseph, your son, is ruler over all of Egypt!"

Jacob couldn't believe it. It left him cold. Why did his sons play such cruel tricks on him?

They showed Jacob the presents Joseph had given them. The brothers pointed south, across the shining fields. "Look, Father, there come the wagons Joseph sent for you."

Then Jacob *had* to believe it. Suddenly he stood up straight. His eyes were shining through his tears. His joy made him young and strong again.

"It is enough!" he shouted in delight. "My son Joseph is still alive. I will go and see him before I die!"

60: Jacob's journey to Egypt

Long ago, Jacob had been forced to make a great journey. He went far to the north.

Now that he was old, he faced another great journey. This time he was going south.

On his first journey he was a fugitive, a wanderer without possessions, a lonely and disappointed man. At night he slept under the stars.

This time he rode in a beautiful Egyptian wagon, with a large escort of soldiers to protect him. Traveling with him were his children and grandchildren — about 70 people in all. He also took along his sheep and camels and other possessions. He traveled in style — as a mighty shepherd prince.

The God who had earlier spoken to Jacob in a dream now appeared to him again. Jacob was given the same promise as

before. "Don't be afraid to make this journey. I will be with you."

Was there anything for Jacob to fear on that long journey? Would anything happen to his children or his cattle? *God* had promised to protect them. Therefore they were secure.

Slowly they moved farther and farther south. They could not cover much ground in one day, for the animals were weak and tired from hunger and the heat. All the same, they would reach their destination eventually.

Jacob's heart was filled with anticipation. "I'm coming, my son! I'm coming, Joseph!"

When they were fairly close to their destination, Judah went ahead on a camel to tell Joseph that his father was approaching.

The father and son who had been separated for so long finally met again. From the one side Jacob's caravan approached slowly. From the other side came a small group of chariots kicking up dust as they raced along. Joseph, of course, was in command of the chariots.

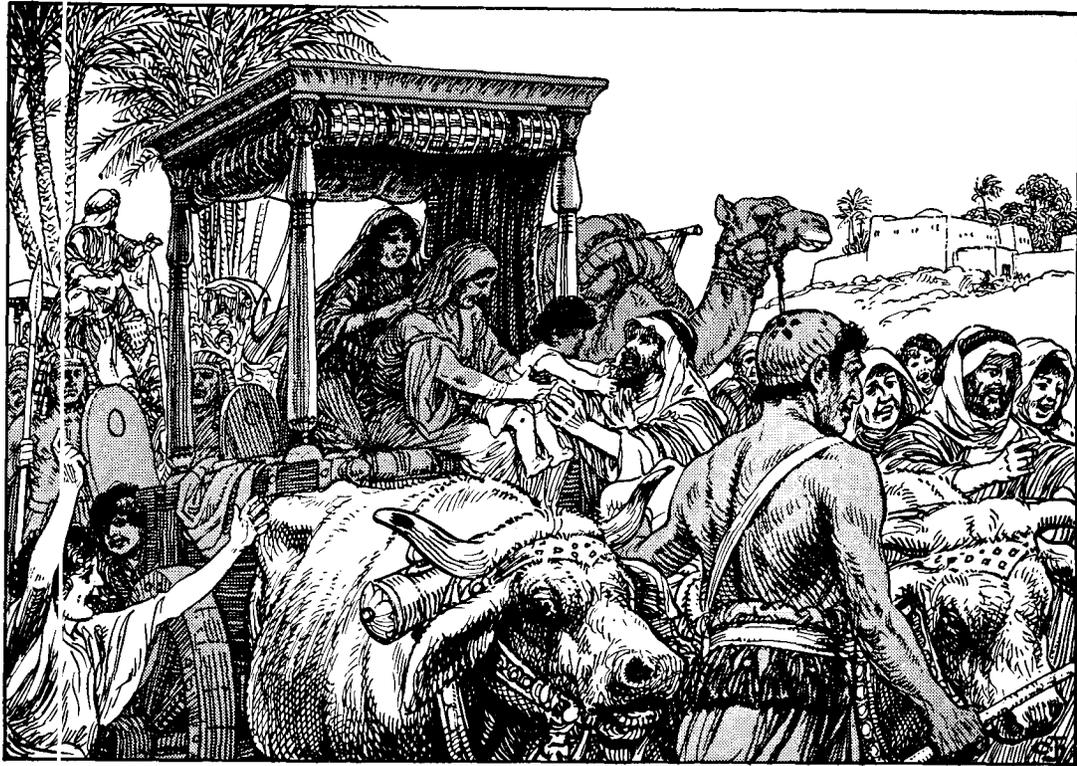
Jacob saw the chariots coming and kept silent. He trembled as he climbed down from the wagon and extended his arms. "Joseph, my son!"

"My father!" They threw their arms around each other and cried in their joy at seeing each other again.

No one around them said a word. The Egyptian soldiers stood at attention. Joseph's brothers and their families were deeply moved. Even the animals seemed to show respect for this special moment.

Jacob sobbed: "Now that I have seen you again, my son, I can die in peace."

Jacob and his sons set up their tents in the land of Goshen. Pharaoh told them to settle



there when he heard that they were shepherds. It was a fruitful area of lowlands and beautiful pastures, and it was on the road to Canaan. That would make it easier for Jacob's descendants to leave Egypt when the time came to return to Canaan.

In the land of Goshen, Jacob lived on for seventeen peaceful years in the midst of his children. There was no longer any reason for him to mourn. The Lord had given him everything he had asked for.

A royal wagon stood waiting outside his tent whenever Joseph visited his father and family. Joseph still felt more at home with these simple shepherds than in his beautiful palace.

One day Joseph took his father to the capital city and presented him to the Pharaoh. When the two men met,

something happened to amaze all the people at the court: the Pharaoh, the mightiest king in the world, came down from his throne to greet Jacob. Respectfully he bowed before the old, gray shepherd. Jacob then raised his arms and blessed the king.

61: The death of Jacob and Joseph

The time had finally come for Jacob to die. He was getting weaker and weaker — like a candle slowly going out. By now he was 147 years old.

Joseph was the first to come to his father's bedside. Jacob did not want to be buried in Egypt. He wanted to be buried in Canaan, the land where Jacob's children would live again one day. Canaan was the



land in which Abraham and Isaac were buried. Joseph promised to see to it.

Joseph's two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, knelt before Jacob's bed to receive a blessing. Jacob himself showed them where to kneel. Manasseh, the older of the two, was at Jacob's right hand, and Ephraim was at his left.

To the surprise of Joseph and his sons, the dying old man crossed his arms and laid his right hand on Ephraim's head and his left hand on Manasseh's head. Jacob did this under God's guidance. Ephraim's descendants would be mightier than Manasseh's.

When Jacob was finished blessing the two sons of Joseph, his own sons came to his

bedside. A circle of large, powerful men knelt in sorrow and respect before their father's deathbed. Silently they waited for his last words, his patriarchal blessing.

At this point Jacob became a prophet, just as Isaac and Abraham became prophets before they died. His old, weak eyes looked far into the future. He saw his descendants living in the land of Canaan as a great and mighty people. And he saw the kings who ruled them. Those kings were descendants of Judah.

Judah was to be the greatest of the brothers. Jubilantly the old man cried out: "Judah, your brothers shall praise you and bow before you! Judah will hold the royal

scepter, and his descendants will always rule. Nations will bring him tribute and bow in obedience before him."

When Jacob pointed ahead to the Ruler who would be born of Judah's tribe, his face radiated a heavenly joy. Now he could die in peace. In the Kingdom of that Ruler there would be a place for him.

"I waited for Your deliverance, Lord," he cried, striking a note of triumph. What more could he ask than a place in that great Kingdom?

When Joseph's aged father died, all of Egypt grieved for him. His body was embalmed with sweet-smelling spices. For 70 days the whole country mourned, just as though Jacob had been a king.

He was also buried like a king. Joseph made the trip back to Canaan himself, accompanied by his brothers and many leading Egyptians. There was a huge procession of horses, wagons and people — all in all, a very impressive display. The procession returned after Jacob's body was laid to rest in the cave of Machpelah, in accordance with his last wish.

The brothers continued to live in the land of Goshen, but they were not completely at ease. They thought: "Perhaps Joseph will pay us back for what we did to him now that our father is dead. It may be that he will punish us for our wickedness after all."

They sent a message to Joseph: "Before his death, our father said to us: 'Go to Joseph and ask him to forgive the great sin you committed against him. Tell him that you, too, are servants of the God of your father.'"

Joseph was disappointed that his brothers still didn't trust him. He could not hold back his tears.

The brothers themselves went to see him, fell down before him, and said: "We are

your slaves."

Joseph replied: "Don't be afraid. You plotted evil against me, but God made everything turn out well. It was part of His plan to keep a great people alive."

In this way Joseph comforted his brothers. As long as he lived, he was good to them and their children.

When he reached the age of 110, his time came to die. He then made it clear that he had *not* become an Egyptian but remained a son of Jacob: he declared that he wanted to be buried in the land of Jacob.

The brothers promised him that when all their descendants returned to Canaan, his body would be taken along. With that promise he died in peace.

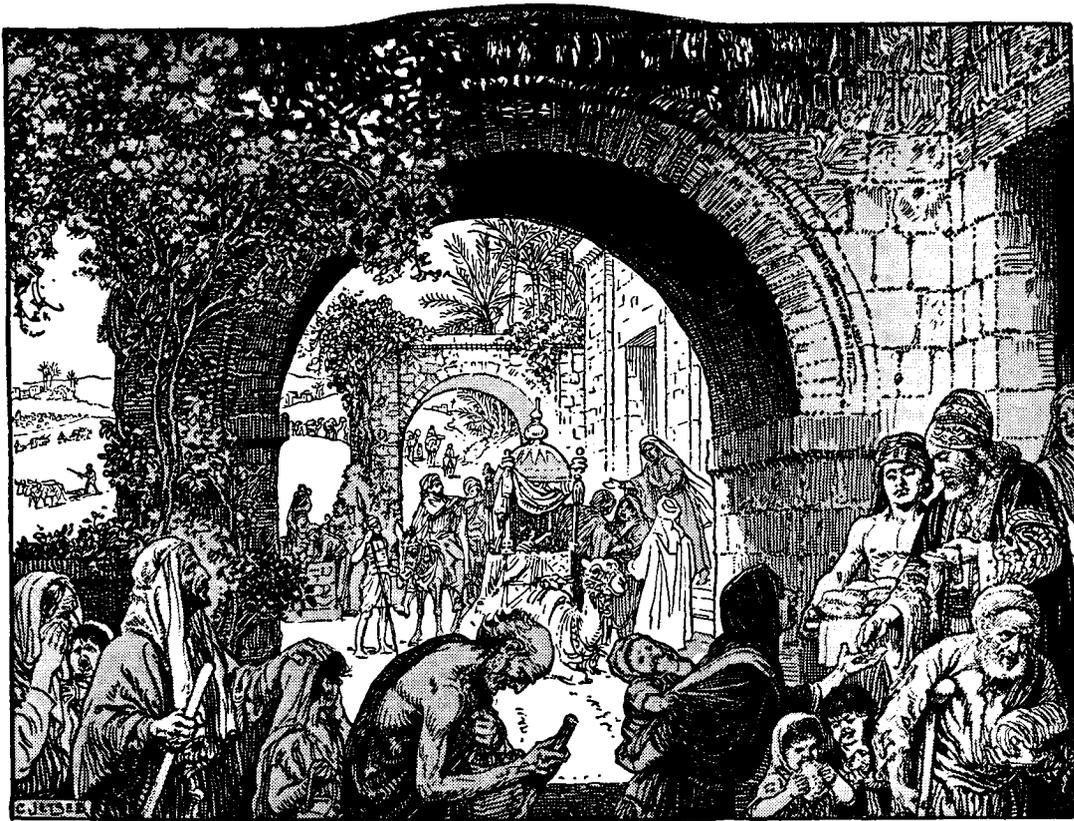
Many centuries later, another Father sent His beloved Son to seek His brothers, just as Jacob had done. That Son got the same treatment Joseph received. He was tormented and laughed at; He was sold and delivered into the hands of wicked men. Like Joseph, He became a prisoner.

But He was also like Joseph in another way: through His obedience He came to power. His suffering led to glory.

That Son is our King, our Redeemer. All who turn to Him are saved from death and receive eternal joy in His Kingdom. On his deathbed, Jacob caught a glimpse of that Kingdom.

62: Satan's challenge

Once there was a man named Job who lived in the land of Uz, far to the east. Job was a very wealthy man. The green hills were white with his sheep. In his vast fields, which extended as far as the eye could see, hundreds of servants were busy



plowing with oxen. His caravans traveled to faraway lands offering goods for sale, and they returned laden with other goods. Job owned 7000 sheep, 3000 camels, 500 yoke of oxen, and 500 donkeys.

Job and his wife lived in a large, beautiful house. Scattered around were the homes of his children — seven sons and three daughters. He was the richest and most important man in the entire country. He was as powerful as a king.

Job was an honest and humble man. He gave bread to the poor. He took care of blind people and crippled people and comforted them. Job reached out in love to all who were poor and miserable. He wanted

to help them as much as he could, and they loved him for it. He was a good and happy man, enjoying both wealth and health.

But his great happiness was not a result of his wealth or his health, nor did it come from his goodness or his humility. Job loved God. That's why he lived a life of joy. He knew that he had received everything from God and that God would continue to watch over him. He knew that God would protect him just as a father protects his children. That knowledge made Job thankful and happy.

Job served the Lord. When his children got together to celebrate a feast, he would get up early in the morning and offer a

burn: offering for each one, thinking to himself: "It may be that one of my children has sinned and renounced God in his heart." Job never forgot to do that when his children held a feast.

One day the Lord called all the angels before His throne. They came by the thousands and bowed down. When they were all kneeling before the Lord, He summoned satan and asked him: "Where have you been?"

"I was moving around on the earth," satan answered.

The Lord said to him: "Did you notice My servant Job? There is no one on earth like him — so pious and upright, fearing God and staying away from evil."

Satan answered: "No wonder Job loves You! You have already given him so much, and every day You make him still richer. If he were poor, he wouldn't love You. If You took away everything he has, he would turn his back on You."

Then the Lord thought: "I will show satan that Job does not love Me because I have made him rich. I will teach the whole world that there is nothing that can separate My children from Me."

Job was sitting in front of his house one day. His children were celebrating a feast in the house of his oldest son. Soon Job would offer sacrifices for them again.

The flocks and herds were grazing in the field, and the servants were busy with their work. It was a day like any other day.

Suddenly a man came running across the hills toward Job. He was sweating and covered with dust. His clothes were in shreds, and his eyes were full of fear.

"My lord," he cried out, "I have bad news for you! We were plowing with the oxen and the donkeys were grazing nearby when the Sabeans attacked us and took away the

animals and killed the servants! I was the only one who escaped to tell you about it."

Job was shaken by this news. He wanted to ask for more details, but there was already a second messenger standing before him — a shepherd. This messenger, who had also come running, wailed: "O my lord, horrible news! We drove the sheep together because there was a bad storm coming up. Then lightning struck the flock, and all the sheep and servants were killed. I was the only one who escaped to tell you about it."

While he was talking, a third messenger came running toward Job, moaning and groaning. He was out of breath, but he gave Job his bad news anyway between gasps: "O my lord, the Chaldeans have stolen all the camels and killed your servants. I was the only one who escaped to tell you about it."

A fourth messenger could already be seen running across the sunny fields. He was crying out in anguish and beating his breast. Wringing his hands, he threw himself to the ground before Job and cried out: "My lord, your children! They were eating and drinking in the house of your oldest son. Suddenly a horrible storm came up, and the house collapsed, killing all of them. I was the only one who escaped to tell you about it."

After that there were no more messengers. There could be no more such messages, for Job had lost everything; he had nothing more to lose.

Job stood up, bruised and broken in his anguish. But in his sorrowful eyes there was no despair and no hatred. He fell on his knees and prayed for strength.

Then he felt God's love in his sorrowful heart. What he said that day still rings in our ears as a shout of triumph: "The Lord has *given*, and the Lord has *taken away*. Blessed be the name of the Lord."

63: Job's misery

Again the Lord called the holy angels before His throne. He also summoned satan and asked him: "Where have you been?"

"I was moving around on the earth," satan answered.

Then the Lord said: "Did you notice My servant Job? There is no one on earth like him — so pious and upright, fearing God and staying away from evil. And he continued in his piety even though you have set Me against him to harm him without cause."

But satan answered: "Skin for skin! A man will surrender everything he has to save his life. Job still has his health. If he were to lose his health, he would deny You openly and turn his back on You."

The Lord said to satan: "Behold, he is in your power. Only, spare his life."

Not long afterward Job was struck by a horrible illness. His entire body, from head to foot, was covered with ugly, festering sores. Job, the man who had once been so strong and healthy, became a weak, sick wretch.

Job was afflicted with leprosy. This was such a dreaded disease that he was not allowed to stay in his own house any longer. He lived all by himself in a little hut far away from other people. His food was thrown to him because no one wanted to come near him. People passing by pulled faces when they saw Job and made sure to keep their distance. No one came to comfort him.

Sometimes children dared to come a little closer, but they offered Job no words of comfort. They only saw what a filthy, ugly, gruesome sight the poor man was. They did not realize that he was suffering. They called him names and spit at him, using the

poor, sick man to have some malicious fun.

Job could not sit down or lie down or stand up without pain. All night long he would lie awake and cry out — alone with his pain. Sometimes he dragged himself outside to a rubbish heap near his hut. He would get a piece of broken pottery to scratch himself and get some relief from the itching and pain.

In his suffering Job did not even receive support from his wife. All the catastrophes were too much for her to bear. She became bitter and rebellious. "Do you still love God?" she asked scornfully. "Some help He is! You served Him all your life, and where did it get you? Turn your back on God and die! Even death is better than this suffering."

But Job refused, for he was certain of one thing. It was always his comfort, even now: "God loves me. He still loves me!"

He said to his wife: "You're talking like a fool. Shall we receive good from God's hand but not evil? God knows best; He knows what is good for us."

One day three old men came to see Job, three prominent men who were friends of his — Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar. They came because they had heard about his misery.

They knew before they came that Job was in a bad way. But he was much worse off than they suspected. They didn't even recognize Job — that's how much he had changed because of his sickness and pain.

The three friends were so shocked that they couldn't speak. All they could do was cry. For a long time they sat by Job without speaking. They saw that he was suffering intensely.

Then, one by one, they addressed Job. What had happened to Job was horrible — that they admitted. But they were too wise

and learned to offer him words of comfort. Instead they told Job *why* he was suffering so much.

"Job," they said, "now we finally see what kind of man you are. Now we see that you have been deceiving us all this time. You always pretended to be good and pious, but in secret you must have been a great sinner. That's why God is punishing you. You must repent, Job! Tell us what you have done. Have you oppressed widows and orphans? Have you withheld wages from your workers? Did you get rich by stealing, Job? Whatever you did, it must be something horrible. Otherwise you would not be punished so severely."

Job cried out that he was innocent, that he had always done his best to serve God, but they didn't believe him. Again they talked to him at great length about the cause of his suffering. They did not sense how much they were tormenting Job with their cruel, detached explanations of his suffering.

There was another man who joined in the discussion — a younger man named Elihu. Elihu spoke last. But his words were no comfort to Job either. Job felt completely forsaken by his friends.

64: Job's vindication

Job had hoped that his friends would comfort him, but they had let him down. His suffering was almost too much to bear.

He no longer thought about what he was saying. In his frightful sorrow, in his deep disappointment at being forsaken by his friends, he cried out and cursed the day he was born. All he wanted was to die. He even said: "It is unjust of God to let me suf-

fer this way."

Yet, he did not turn his back on God and deny Him. Even in his pain, he continued to hope in God, who had always been his strength and comfort. He cried out: "I *know* that my Redeemer lives."

Finally Job had suffered enough. The Redeemer on whom Job had fixed his hopes entered the picture.

The sky became black with clouds. A storm was brewing. The lengthy, learned addresses of Job's friends were interrupted by thunder. Lightning flashed. A whirlwind swirled above the heads of the five men.

In fear they fell silent, but Job looked up. His eyes were shining with a glorious joy. In the thunder he heard the voice of God speaking to him.

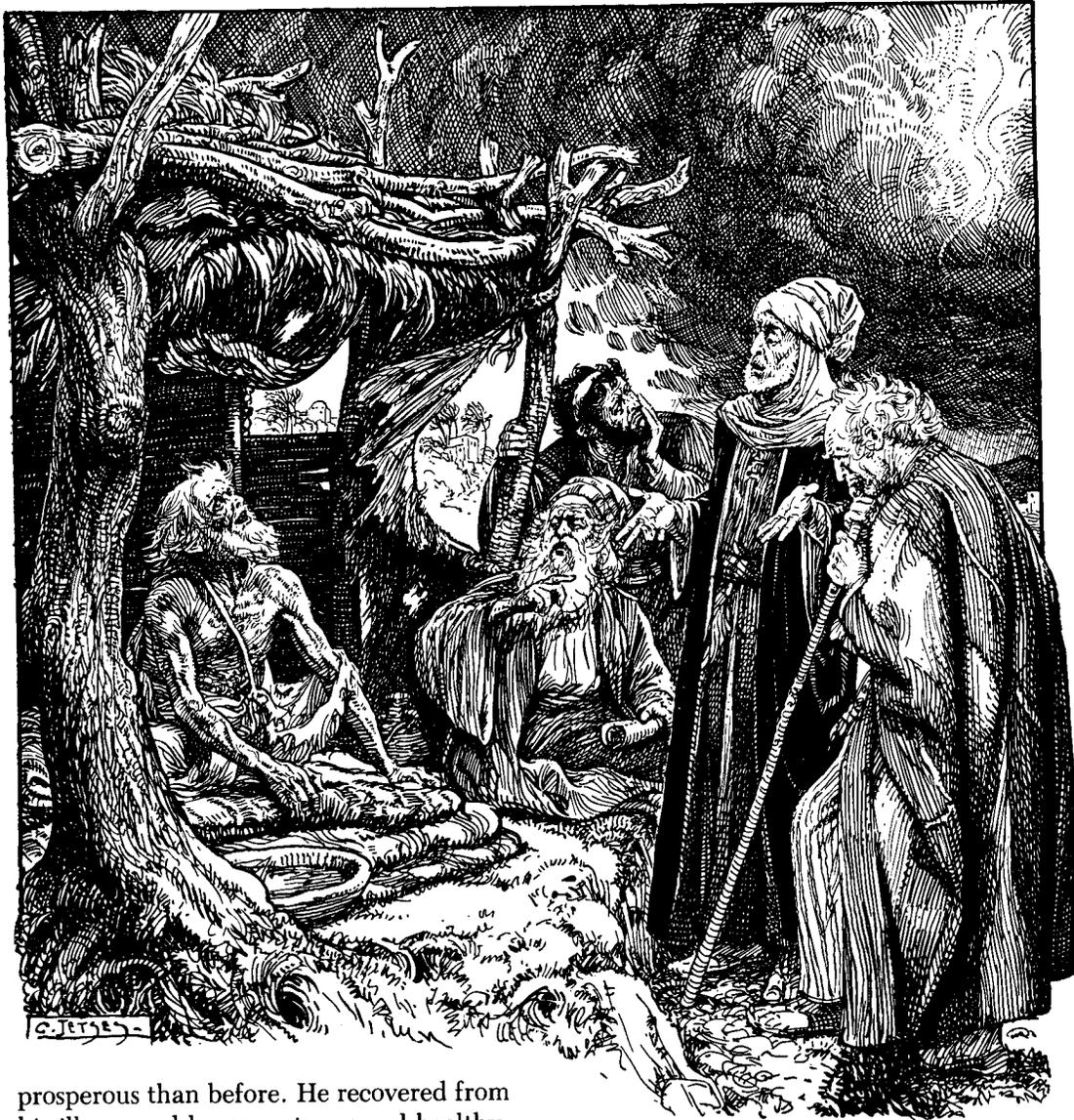
God showed the five men how wise, how good, how powerful He is. He also taught them how small and weak and foolish people are. And He punished Job because he, as a small, impatient human being, had dared to speak evil of God.

Job was ashamed of himself and prayed for forgiveness. He did *not* say that his friends were to blame for his sins.

The Lord knew whose fault it was. To Job's friends He said: "My anger is kindled against you, for you have not spoken truly as My servant Job has. Go to My servant Job, and offer a burnt offering. My servant Job will pray for you. For his sake I will hear the prayer."

Then Job prayed for forgiveness for his friends. Because it was Job who asked this, God forgave those learned men for what they had said. They all came to see that it was not good to pass judgment on God's deeds.

After this vindication everything went well for Job again. He became even more



prosperous than before. He recovered from his illness and became strong and healthy. His family and friends joined him in a great feast and comforted him after all the evil the Lord had allowed in his life. They each gave him a coin and a ring of gold.

The Lord blessed Job, and he built up huge flocks again. He became twice as rich as before. He now had 14,000 sheep, 6000

camels, 1000 yoke of oxen, and 1000 donkeys.

He also received children from God again — seven sons and three daughters, just as before. In the entire land there were no women as beautiful as Job's daughters.

Now Job had *twenty* children — ten on earth and ten with the Lord.

Job lived 140 more years. He lived to see his children grow up and his children's children — four generations in all. He was very old and satisfied with his life when he died.

Sometimes a smith takes a lump of raw gold and puts it into the oven to melt. For a long time the gold lies there in the intense heat of the fire. The smith knows what he is doing. When he takes the gold out, it is glowing in its purity.

A gardener uses a sharp knife to cut away the useless branches on a strong, young tree. Then the tree stands bare and wounded. The gardener knows what he is doing. Only after it is pruned will the tree bear a lot of fruit.

Job had suffered a great deal; he was tested severely. God knew what He was doing. The suffering made Job better and purer. Now he was even happier than before. In his heart he sang a song: "Nothing can separate me from the love of God!"

65: The Israelites in Egypt

A baby was born in a small house. It made little noises and turned its head to the light as it squirmed in its mother's arms. It was a healthy, joyful, handsome little boy.

Jochebed, the mother, cried as the baby drank from her breast. Amram, the father, stood by looking gloomy.

It was nighttime. The two other children, Miriam and Aaron, were asleep. There was just one small lamp burning in the room.

Suddenly the parents of the baby looked up in fear. They listened carefully. Outside



they heard footsteps. Someone was walking past the house.

Jochebed pressed the baby close to her heart. The footsteps slowly faded away. It was still again.

The mother cared for her baby with trembling hands. She put him down to sleep in a hidden place where no one would look.

The parents went to bed, but they couldn't sleep. They lay there staring into the darkness. They were thinking about their baby.

Jochebed folded her hands. "Lord," she prayed quietly, "help me so that I may keep my baby."

Very early the next morning, the door of Amram's house creaked open. Amram stepped outside and headed for the field. Out of other houses came other men — hundreds and thousands of them. Still and somber, they walked through the fields of Goshen down to the river.

That was where they worked. They dug clay, gathered straw, and carried water. They kneaded the clay and chopped straw together to make a tough mixture. They baked that mixture to make bricks for use in building. Other slaves dried the bricks in the sun. Still other slaves carried them away across the fields, to the cities of Pithom and Rameses. There the bricks and blocks were used to build strong walls.

The sun rose high in the sky, but the work continued. Scattered among those thousands of men were their overseers — fat, lazy Egyptians who drove them on with harsh words. Sometimes a whip would cut a burning red welt across a bare back. Hatred would flicker in the eyes of the slaves, but there was no one who dared to resist. The slaves toiled and sweated in the burning heat of the sun, silently dragging blocks around from morning to evening.

Those slaves were the Israelites, the children of Reuben and Simeon, of Joseph and Benjamin and all the other brothers. They were the descendants of the clan that had come to Goshen in such high spirits. They had become a nation of slaves.

Many, many years had gone by since aged Jacob arrived in Egypt. At first things went well, and his descendants were happy. The small clan living in Goshen pastured its flocks and increased rapidly. The children grew up and had children of their own, who then became fathers and mothers in turn. The clan in Goshen grew into a larger and larger nation — the Israelites.

Eventually a strange king occupied Egypt's throne. That king had never heard of Joseph and did not know that he had saved the Egyptian people from death.

The new king became afraid of the large nation of shepherds living in Goshen. "That nation may become greater than our own Egyptian nation," he said, "for it's growing very rapidly. We must subject those Israelites to our power. Otherwise they will pose a threat. Someday they may overrun our country."

The king worked out his plan in a cunning way. First he imposed small burdens on the people of Israel, but every year he added to the burdens. Anyone who resisted

was punished severely. Finally he had the Israelites completely in his power. Gradually they lost hope and courage. They turned into an obedient slave people.

Still, the Israelites continued to grow in number. However much the king oppressed them, those amazing people continued to multiply. They became even more strong and dangerous.

Therefore the king made another plan, an even more cunning and cruel plan than the first one: he issued a command that all the baby boys born to the Israelites were to be thrown into the Nile. Then the Israelites would no longer grow as a people, and the Egyptians would remain their masters. The king spared the baby girls. He was not afraid of women and girls.

What would become of the Israelites now?

66: Drawn from the water

The king had decreed that all the baby boys born to the Israelites were to be drowned. Amram and Jochebed did not obey that command. They believed in God. Their faith gave them the courage to disobey the cruel king.

For weeks Amram and Jochebed kept their fearful secret. As Amram worked alongside the other slaves, his fear for the baby caused him more pain than the overseers' whips.

Jochebed went about her work at home and silently cared for her baby. She waited and prayed with fear in her heart.

At night Amram and Jochebed sat by the baby together. Every sound they heard in their neighborhood scared them.

Hiding the baby became more and more



difficult as time went on. Soldiers were constantly prowling around looking for newborn baby boys. Brutally they broke into the houses of the Israelites. No mother could defend her baby against the sharp swords of the soldiers.

The baby grew bigger. When he was three months old, his screams could be heard out in the street, despite all that Jochebed did to silence him. One of the neighbors might give away their secret. Aaron, their little boy, was only three years old. He might well choose to tell someone about his baby brother.

Jochebed lived through a thousand terrors. Any day could be the last one for her baby.

Finally, in her despair, she devised a clever plan. She plucked some papyrus reeds from the banks of the Nile and used them to weave a basket. She smeared pitch and bitumen on the basket to make it watertight. Now it was just like a *coffin*. Jochebed was making a coffin for her child — because she was so eager to keep him alive!

One morning, as the light began to dawn in the east, Jochebed left home with her coffin. Miriam, her daughter, went with her. Anyone who saw them pass would think that they were going out to bury a baby.

Jochebed went to the riverbank and placed the basket down in the water among the reeds. From then on, God would have to look after the baby. Jochebed had done all she could. She went home again, her heart pounding.

The basket floated among the reeds. Gently it rocked to and fro. The wind whispered softly, and a bird sang a lullaby. What would God do with that child?

Two eyes watched from the nearby bushes. Miriam had stayed behind at the river. She had hidden herself to see what would happen to her little brother.

Miriam waited for a long time. It got warmer and warmer. Yet, it was quiet on the banks of the Nile.

Then, across the flat plain came the sound of women's voices. Egyptian ladies were coming to bathe in the river. Miriam watched anxiously from her hiding place. One of the women was the princess, the daughter of the king. The others were servants who helped the princess dress and undress. They were standing close to the water's edge.

Wouldn't they catch sight of the basket now? The princess herself spotted it and sent one of the servants to get it.

Miriam could hardly stay in her hiding place. She saw that one of the women was carrying the basket over to the princess. She heard her little brother crying. But she also heard what the princess said. The princess felt sorry for the screaming baby. She was not as cruel as her father.

"This must be one of the Israelite babies," she said. "What a beautiful baby! What a little darling! We musn't let this baby drown. I want this baby for my own. I'll look after it and raise it."

"But who will nurse the baby?" Good question. They talked about it for a long time.

The princess couldn't nurse the baby; she was not a mother. None of the servants could nurse the baby either.

Suddenly the women heard a shy voice behind them. "Shall I go and get a woman who can nurse the baby for you?" There was a slave girl in their midst. Where did she come from so quickly?

"Yes," said the princess. "Go get someone quickly."

That was quick thinking on Miriam's part. She hurried off at once and returned with her mother. But she did not tell the princess that Jochebed was the baby's mother.

"Take this baby and feed it for me," said

the princess. "I'll pay you for taking care of it."

Jochebed bowed. She felt like falling on her knees because of her joy. She had her baby back! Her son would live! And she would even get paid for taking care of him!

Joyfully she carried the baby back home in her arms. "Go away," she said when soldiers questioned her. "This baby belongs to the princess. Go to the palace and ask there."

That day there was a celebration in Amram's house. God had given them reason to be joyful. They were not put to shame in their faith.

Jochebed was allowed to keep her baby for several years. When he no longer needed her, she had to bring him to the palace, where his upbringing would be completed. Her baby was to be an Egyptian prince.

Giving up the baby was very hard on Jochebed, but she had to do it. Her faith gave her strength. She thought to herself: "God will take care of him."

The princess, however, didn't think about God. She did not know that God had given her this child because He wanted to make a great man of him. She only thought about how *she* had found him in the water. Therefore she named him Moses, which means *drawn from the water*.

Sal.

67: Moses the prince

There was a small prince playing in the king's beautiful garden. He was nicely dressed, and he was playing with exquisite toys. His playmates came from prominent families. The little boy could have anything he wanted. Nothing was too good or too ex-



pensive for him.

Sometimes the little boy would stop in the middle of his play. He would stand still and think. All the wealth and luxury around him would look strange to him. It was just as though he didn't belong there, as though he was looking for something else.

At times a princess would come walking through the garden and put her slender brown hand on his head and say: "My boy." But the little boy knew perfectly well that the princess was not his mother! His mother was a different woman, and she lived in a very small house. Long ago she used to take him on her lap and tell him wonderful stories about God and Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.

Her hands were calloused from hard work, and she did not wear beautiful clothes. She was just a poor woman, a slave.

Yet, she was *his* mother. That little boy was not the child of Pharaoh's daughter. He knew that. Often he would cry during the night because he missed his real mother.

Moses, the son of a slave, had become the son of a king. All the same, he could not forget his real mother.

The little prince was growing up. He was given the best teachers. They taught him reading, writing and many other things.

When Moses became a man, he had horses and wagons and a palace of his own.

There were slaves to obey his every command. The people in the street bowed before him. He had become a leading Egyptian prince.

Moses joined in the great feasts in the king's palace. But even at a joyful feast, he could sometimes stand still with a strange look on his face, just as he had done long before when he was a little boy.

Moses didn't belong at the palace. When he looked at those important people and surveyed the beauty of the palace and the tables laden with rich food, he saw something else. He saw a people being severely oppressed — the people of Israel.

Those people were his own people. His father and his brother were among them. They toiled and sweated all day in the burning sun while he, Moses, took part in the feasts in the palace. *They* were treated like animals, while *he* lived a life of ease and luxury.

These thoughts allowed Moses no peace of mind. The oppression of his people caused *him* pain. *He* felt their blows. In the middle of the night he would wake up in a cold sweat, with their cries of anguish ringing in his ears. Moses the prince could not forget his own people.

If Moses was careful not to show that he still loved his people, he would always be able to lead an idle life of luxury as one of Egypt's leading princes.

But Israel was the people of *God*. One day Israel would be freed from bondage in Egypt. Then the Israelites would live in a glorious land. God Himself had promised that — and much more besides. Israel had rich promises to live by. Moses believed those promises.

The faith in his heart told him which people he belonged to. Moses could never forget *God*. Therefore he would simply

have to leave the court someday.

That day finally arrived when he was 40 years old.

68: Moses flees

One day Moses was walking around in the land of Goshen. His heart often pulled him to Goshen, where his own people lived. He wandered through the fields. He was bitter when he saw his brothers subjected to forced labor.

He spotted a slave at work far away from the others. An overseer was watching him. Perhaps the slave was not working hard enough, or perhaps he was too tired to go on. In any case, the Egyptian overseer used his whip on the slave just as Moses was approaching. Soon there were ugly red lines running across the slave's bare back. The slave wailed and tried to creep away, but the whip followed him. There was no pity in the Egyptian overseer.

As Moses watched, the cries and moans of his brother Israelite cut him to the quick. He clenched his fists and trembled with anger. Soon he didn't know what he was doing. He drew his sword and killed the Egyptian.

Only when the Egyptian lay pale and still on the ground did Moses realize what he had done. The terrified slave was nowhere to be seen. Moses stood alone by the body of his victim.

What had he done? What would happen when the king found out that Moses had killed someone?

But no one had seen it! The slave he had saved wouldn't say anything.

But what if someone found the Egyptian's body? Moses fell to his knees and

quickly dug a hollow in the loose, warm sand. He buried the Egyptian in the sand.

An hour later Moses was walking through the streets again just as if nothing had happened. The people bowed before him. But in his heart he carried a fearful secret. Under his beautiful prince's robe his heart was pounding anxiously. A voice within him kept saying: "Murderer!"

No one had seen him kill the Egyptian. Moses kept telling himself this in an effort to calm himself.

The next day he was walking through Goshen again when he saw two slaves, both Israelites, fighting. This made Moses sad. "They are brothers," he thought. "They shouldn't be fighting. They should love each other and help each other. That's the only way the Israelites will ever become strong."

He could easily tell which of the two was the troublemaker. He went up to him and said: "Why are you hitting your neighbor?"

Two brutal eyes glared at him. "Stay out of this!" the slave snarled. "It's none of your



business.” Then he added, with a false laugh: “Are you going to kill me the way you killed that Egyptian yesterday?”

Moses turned and walked away without a word. He was frightened, and his knees were knocking. “Someone saw me after all,” he thought.

He was even more disappointed than frightened. He had killed the Egyptian to save one of his brothers, but now his own people reproached him. One of them must have betrayed him!

When he got back to the palace, people were talking behind his back. They singled him out with their strange looks.

Pharaoh had already heard what Moses had done. He sent his servants to put Moses to death.

Moses had to flee immediately. He went out of the city and beyond the land of Goshen. He traveled far to the east.

Once he had left Egypt’s borders behind and he was alone in the wilderness, a strange joy filled his heart. Even though the king’s soldiers might catch him at any moment, he was happy. Now, for the first time in his life, he felt free.

He knew that he had been a slave, just like the other Israelites. He had been forced to live a life of pretense, acting like an Egyptian when he really wasn’t one. He had celebrated feasts while his own people were oppressed.

Now he was finally free. And one day his people would be freed by God.

Moses saw how foolish and impatient he had been in thinking he could set his people free by striking down the Egyptian. Now he would wait on God.

Or Moses went into the world. He did not know what awaited him, but he did know that God would take care of him.

69: Moses in the wilderness

Moses kept moving. After a long journey he reached a mountainous area known as Midian. There was a well in the field. Moses sat down by the well to rest.

Seven girls came along to draw water — daughters of the priest of Midian. They filled the troughs to water their father’s flocks. Along came some shepherds with other flocks — rough, mean men. They chased the seven girls away.

“First our animals,” they said. “You’ll just have to wait. Get away from here.”

Moses stood up. He clenched his fists, and his eyes burned with anger. He could not stand the sight of injustice. He was such a frightening sight in his anger that the shepherds became afraid and were driven off.

The girls were grateful. They watered their flocks and went home much earlier than on other evenings. They told their father, the old priest Jethro, what had happened, explaining that the man who had helped them was an Egyptian.

“Where is he now?” Jethro asked.

The girls were embarrassed. “He’s probably still sitting at the well.”

“You should be ashamed of yourselves!” said Jethro. “Go and call him. He is a good man, and he should spend the night as our guest.”

Moses wound up at the old priest’s house. He ate there and slept there. In the daytime he went into the fields with Jethro’s flocks.

The wanderer had found a home. He married Zipporah, one of the seven daughters, and they had two sons, Gershom and Eliezer. Yet Moses remained a stranger in that faraway land. He waited day after day, year after year for God to redeem His people.

It was a new way of life for Moses. He was used to walking through Egypt's busy capital in his fine clothes, but now he had to lead the flocks around in the stillness of the wilderness. He was alone with God and his sheep. Instead of his fancy clothes he wore a rough mantle. Instead of a palace a tent was his home.

Once he had lived a life of luxury. Now he endured heat in the daytime and cold at night as he kept watch over his flocks in the barren, lonely fields between the mountains of Midian. Through that new way of life, the tempestuous Moses learned to be patient and obedient. He became a gentle and humble man.

Sometimes he stood on a mountaintop for a long time staring into the distance. He was looking west. That's where his heart was. That's where his people lived, groaning under the burden of slavery.

"How long?" Moses would murmur, and he would look up to heaven.

Heaven was silent. Days and weeks and years went by. For 40 years Moses waited — until he was 80 years old. Then God's time finally came.

70: The burning bush

It was a day just like any other. Moses was walking along, with his flock following him. He was moving across a dry plain looking for grass. Finally he came to the mountain called Horeb.

The wind rustled through the dry bushes. The blazing sun beat down on the rocks. The sheep were bleating.

Suddenly all the animals stood still and raised their heads. Moses stood still too, his eyes wide open in amazement.

On the slope of a mountain stood a bush enveloped in the brilliance of a white light. Was the bush burning? The dry leaves quivered in the fire, but they did not crumple. And the dead branches were not consumed.

Moses was curious. Slowly, cautiously he approached. Suddenly a voice called him: "Moses! Moses!"

Moses looked around. The sheep were deathly still behind him. Moses felt fear welling up within his heart. Even though there was no one near him, he heard a voice.

"Here am I," he answered.

This time the voice spoke from the burning bush and the white light. "Come no closer. And remove the shoes from your feet, for you are standing on holy ground. I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob."

Quickly Moses took off his sandals and hid his face in his robe. He listened, awe-struck.

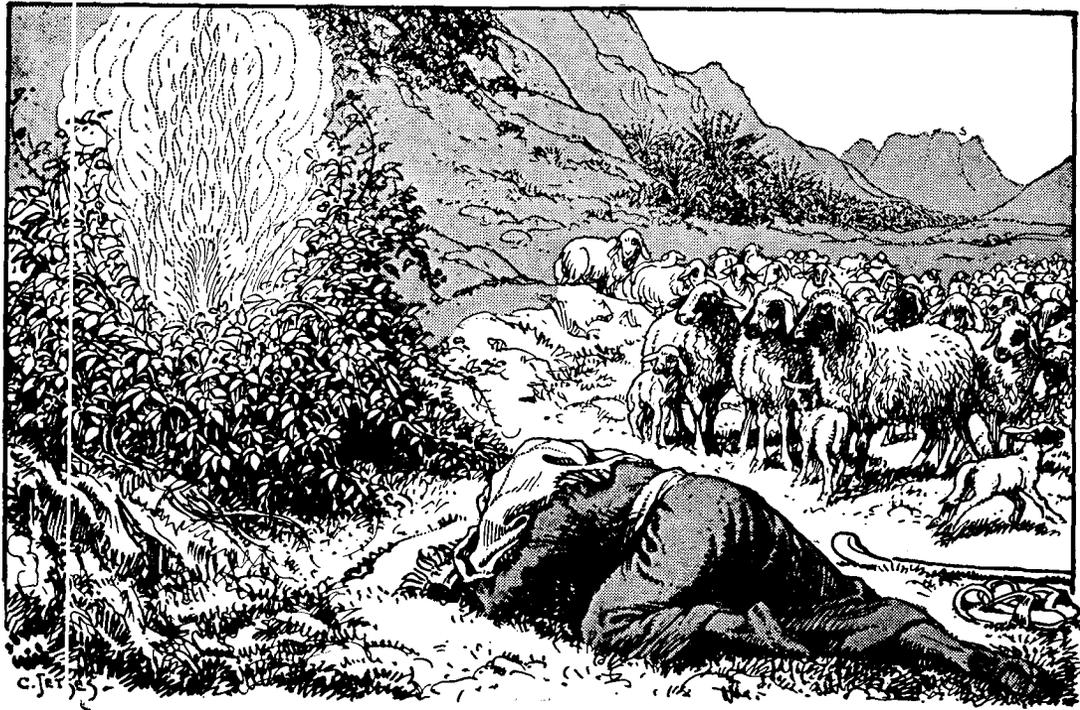
God said: "I have heard the cries of My people. I have come to save them and to bring them to a glorious land."

Moses' heart was full of joy when he heard those words. Would he live to see the day when his people were saved from slavery in Egypt?

The Lord was not finished speaking: "You, Moses, will be My messenger. You are to go to Pharaoh and tell him that he must let My people go."

When Moses heard these words, his joy turned to fear. He had not just lost his youthful passion through his 40 years in the wilderness, he had all but lost his courage and his faith as well.

Was *he* supposed to go to Pharaoh? Out of the question! He wanted peace and quiet



in his old age!

"Lord," he said, trembling, "I can't do it. Who am I? Just a foolish old man, an aged shepherd."

The Lord comforted Moses. "Don't forget that *I* will be with you. *I* will help you, Moses."

If only God had said that 40 years sooner! Then Moses would have returned to Egypt full of fire. Now he looked for a way out instead. "They will ask who sent me," he protested. "What am I to answer then?"

The Lord responded by giving Himself a glorious new name: "I am who I am. I am Yah-veh, the faithful one." Moses was to say that "I am" had sent him.

Moses was still looking for a way out. "What if they don't believe me?" he asked fearfully.

Full of patience and love, the Lord

helped Moses again. His voice was still as kind and gentle as if He were addressing a child. "What do you have in your hand, Moses?"

"A staff," Moses answered.

"Throw it on the ground," the Lord commanded.

Moses obeyed, and then quickly jumped back. Writhing on the ground before him was a poisonous snake. God told him to grab the snake by the tail. He did so, and it became a staff in his hand again.

Before he had a chance to recover from his frightening experience, the Lord showed him another wonder. He told Moses to put his hand inside his robe over his chest. When he pulled it out, it was covered with white sores. Moses had been stricken with leprosy!

The Lord said: "Put your hand in your

robe once more." Moses obeyed. When he took his hand out again, it was normal.

"Go now," said the Lord, "and do these wonders before My people. Then they will believe you."

Poor, frightened Moses! He had certainly fallen a long way. His faith had almost died in Midian.

"But — but — I'm such a poor talker," he stammered. "All my life I've had trouble talking."

God's voice still remained gentle and patient. "Who gave you a mouth?" He asked. "Was it not I? Well then, go ahead. I will be with your mouth, and I will teach you what you are to say."

Moses could not think of any more excuses. In his fear and unbelief, he now said openly what he was really thinking: "O Lord, please send someone else."

There was only one way left for God to change Moses. His voice became like thunder as He commanded Moses to obey. But even in His wrath there was love. Aaron would meet Moses in the wilderness. Aaron would go with Moses and would speak for him.

The old shepherd started for home with his flock, trembling in awe and fear. He was absorbed in his thoughts when he arrived at Jethro's tents.

The next day there was another shepherd leading the sheep.

Moses set out for Egypt, following the same route he had taken to Midian 40 years before. Behind him the sun rose above Mount Horeb. One day he would return leading the people of Israel. On that mountain the people would thank God for their deliverance. God Himself had promised that.

By this point Moses was ashamed of his doubt and hesitation. How happy he was

that he was allowed to go to his people and help them in their time of deliverance. He was already old and gray, but there was a youthful gleam in his eye and a spring in his step.

For Moses life was just beginning, for he was now God's servant! To prepare to serve God, he had first become a prince, and then a shepherd.

71: Pharaoh's refusal

Two men walked through the streets of the royal capital, both wearing simple, rough clothes, both old and gray. They were brothers.

One was a slave. His back was bent from years of hard work. The other was a shepherd, but he had once been a prince. Years before he had ridden in the king's own chariot. People had bowed before him and moved aside in respect.

No one bowed before him now. People looked at him and his brother in contempt. Two Israelites? Two slaves? What were they doing in the city?

The two brothers were Moses and Aaron. They had met in the wilderness. Together they had brought the people the joyful message that deliverance was at hand. Now



they were on their way to see the king.

The Israelites were still slaves in Goshen. Never before had the work seemed so trivial to them. They knew that the end of their slavery was near.

Moses and Aaron arrived at the palace and walked up the marble steps. Proud Pharaoh was seated on his throne, surrounded by beauty, wealth and scores of servants. The Egyptians, great and small, knelt before him and honored him as though he were a god. "The king is a son of the sun," they said to each other.

The two simple Israelites did not kneel before the sun-king. They bowed politely, and then the older one addressed a request to the king. God knew the hard, proud heart of the king. He wanted to make it easy for the king to obey.

Moses and Aaron said: "We have a message for you, O king. Thus says Yahweh, the God of Israel: 'Let My people go so that they may honor Me in the wilderness and hold a feast and offer Me sacrifices.'"

The king asked: "Who is Yahweh, that I must listen to him?" He laughed in scorn. "I don't know who Yahweh is," he added. "But I know who you two are. You are troublemakers. You are keeping your people from their work with all your talk. Your god can't give me orders."

Once the two men were gone, feeling deeply disappointed, Pharaoh called his overseers. "The Israelites don't have enough work to do," he said. "Because the slaves have free time, they dream up useless ideas and listen to lies. Do they want to celebrate a *feast*? I'll make them *work*. And that's all I'll let them do. They have been baking bricks made of clay and chopped straw. We have always supplied them with the straw. Now let them go into the fields and look for straw themselves. But they must produce

just as many bricks as they did before!"

When the Israelites heard about Pharaoh's new decree, they quickly lost hope. Their work was made even harder. It was torture for them. Early in the morning, when the first red rays crept across the horizon, they plodded across the fields looking for straw. All day they sweated in the heat, with the overseers urging them on.

When the bosses counted the bricks in the evening, there were never enough, no matter how hard they had worked. Again they would feel the whip on their aching, sweaty backs.

Some Israelite leaders went to the king to complain — a sorry procession of worn-out, old men. The king just laughed at them. "I solved your problem for you," he said. "Now you don't have any time to worry about feasts anymore. You people are too lazy. No, I will not reduce the demands on you."

They left the king's presence completely disheartened. Moses and Aaron stood outside waiting.

The Israelite leaders were furious when they saw the two brothers. They crowded around them and shook their fists at them. "You promised us freedom," they shouted, "and what did we get? Now things are even worse than before! It's your fault that the king is so angry at us!"

It took a long time before the Israelite leaders calmed down. Grumbling, they moved on. Back to the whip and forced labor.

Moses felt sorry for the poor men, but he could do nothing to help them. He didn't know what to do either.

He turned to God for advice, and the Lord gave him new courage. "You will see, Moses, that I am not finished with Pharaoh. I will be faithful to My promises."

72: Snakes and blood and frogs

One day the two old Israelites appeared before Pharaoh's beautiful throne again. They were just as bold as the first time, and they brought Pharaoh the very same message.

This time Aaron threw his staff to the floor at the king's feet. Suddenly there was a snake writhing on the beautiful carpet.

The king was scared for a moment. But there were snake charmers in his palace. Through mysterious methods, these men could make a snake stay as still and straight as a wooden pole, so that it looked like a staff. The king called the snake charmers. Each one threw to the floor something that looked like a staff but turned into a snake.

Aaron's snake devoured the other snakes, but the king's mind was set at ease anyway. "These two Israelites are clever tricksters," he thought to himself, "but they won't get their way with me through their magic."

The king chased Moses and Aaron away. He refused to obey God.

A small, weak man sat on a throne and raised his fist against the almighty God. He wanted to be even more powerful than the Almighty. He thought he could fight against God and win.

God felt sorry for Pharaoh and warned him repeatedly, but it didn't help. Because of Pharaoh's stubbornness, ten plagues broke out over him and his people — ten plagues sent by God. The Lord was punishing Pharaoh. Each time the punishment was more severe than the time before. God kept punishing him until he finally yielded.

Early one morning the king went to the river to bathe. On the riverbank he met those two old men again.

One of them said to him: "Now you will find out who Yahweh is! And you will see

that you must obey Him."

The other raised his staff and struck the water, the river water that lay there so clear and still in the early morning sun.

The king shrank back in fear, for the water suddenly turned red as blood as far as he could see. The river became a stream of blood flowing through the land. Fish came gasping to the service. A filthy smell rose from the frothy river of blood.

The king did not bathe in the river that morning. Proudly and silently he returned to his palace. He looked in on his magicians, who were busy practicing their tricks. They were making water change color. No one knew how they did it.

Pharaoh's unrest vanished. Did Moses think he could tell the king of Egypt what to do? Never!

There was blood in the whole land of Egypt. The people had to dig new wells to find drinking water.

The first plague lasted for seven days. Then Egypt was struck with a fresh catastrophe. At God's command, Aaron stretched his staff out across the land. It was a simple gesture; no one paid any attention to it.

Frogs began to emerge from all the streams and ponds. Rows and legions and armies of frogs spread across the land — more and more of them. There was no end to the frogs. They jumped through the streets and into the houses. No room was safe from them. They hid in people's clothes and hopped on the food. Hundreds of them jumped into the bakers' ovens and put out the fires. People lying in bed felt cold, slippery frogs crawling all over them. Thousands of frogs were trampled to death, but there were millions more to take their places.

The king was desperate. He did not know

where to hide from this plague.

His magicians were also able to produce frogs, but this time the power of the magicians gave the king no comfort.

Finally he called Moses and Aaron. "I will let the people go," he cried out, "if you will call a halt to this plague. Pray to Yahweh to take the frogs away from me and my people."

Moses prayed, and the frogs died. The dead frogs were swept together in great, stinking heaps. But when the king saw that there was relief from the plague, he changed his mind about his promise. "I'll make them stay anyway," he said. "I'm the one with all the power."

The second plague did not get through to Pharaoh any more than the first one.

73: Plagues in the air

Pharaoh thought he could fight against God and win. He was wrong. He would lose the battle in the end. But first there would be more plagues.

Aaron struck the earth with his staff. The dry, loose sand beneath his feet became alive. It heaved and quivered and began to move toward the houses. The dust of the earth had turned into a swarm of gnats. These mosquito-like creatures swarmed all over Egypt and attacked people like glowing sparks carried by the wind. The people were tormented by this insufferable burden.

The magicians ran to the king. "This is not the work of a magician," they cried out in fear. "This is a divine miracle!"

The king gritted his teeth and said nothing. He would bear this burden too. His face was swollen by the bites of the gnats, but he

didn't blink. He would not give up in his struggle against God.

Soon the fourth plague was upon Egypt. Swarms of flies covered Egypt and buzzed everywhere. They penetrated the houses and sucked the blood of people and animals alike. No one was safe. Faces and hands were bitten until they were raw.

The people had no place to hide. But in Goshen, where the Israelites lived, there were no flies.

The king finally gave up hope. Again he promised that the children of Israel could leave if the plague was lifted. But, he broke his promise, just as he had done before.

One day the king saw the two old men he hated so much coming into the palace again. Moses and Aaron were not worried by the fierce anger in his eyes. They simply did as God commanded. In His name they warned the king: "Thus says the Lord: 'If you do not let My people go, a new catastrophe will strike your land. The animals of the Egyptians will die of pestilence.'"

This warning accomplished nothing. The king remained silent.

The next day it started. Horses crumpled before the wagons they were pulling. Cows fell dead in the pastures. Donkeys and camels and sheep lay dying in the fields with no one to help them. The animals had been struck by severe pestilence.

In Goshen, however, the animals grazed calmly in the fields. They were the picture of good health.

When the king heard that, his heart was boiling with wrath and hatred toward God. There was no place in his heart for repentance. The Israelites would stay in Egypt!

Then Moses took handfuls of ashes from Egyptian ovens and spread them through



the air. The ashes drifted away on the wind and settled on people and animals, causing boils and sores. The boils were so painful that the people affected couldn't do their work.

The magicians wailed. The boils were so painful that they couldn't stand still. But Pharaoh sat erect on his throne. Pale and

silent, he continued the battle. There was even more hatred in his heart because of the sixth plague!

Once more the Lord warned Pharaoh. Moses and Aaron said: "Do not resist any longer, O king. The Lord could have wiped you and your people off the face of the earth by now, but He has had compassion on

you. Obey the Lord and let His people go. If you refuse, heavy hail will fall tomorrow and destroy everything that grows on the earth."

It looked like a serious situation, a dark threat. Yet, outside the palace windows there were blooming bushes swaying in the breeze. Butterflies fluttered around. The grain was rising in the fields. The flax was in bloom; fields of flax were turning into sweet-smelling seas of blue. A spring sun shone down on that beautiful world.

Can a man give orders to the sky? The whole countryside seemed to laugh at Moses' words. And the people were inclined to laugh too.

The next day Moses stretched out his staff to heaven and sent up his prayer to God, who commands the winds and clouds and sends them on their way.

Suddenly the birds were still. The sun disappeared behind dark clouds. It became dark — and very quiet.

A rushing sound could be heard in the distance. The frightening sound kept coming closer. Hail!

The hailstorm pushed across the landscape like a wall. Hailstones the size of fists came plunging down on the world in bloom. Lightning flashed. Grainfields were flattened. Branches were ripped from the trees. Entire trees were toppled. Houses collapsed. People and animals out in the fields were killed.

A loud voice could be heard amid the rumble of the thunder and the rushing sound of the hail. It was Pharaoh. "Bring Moses to me at once!"

When Moses arrived, Pharaoh was a broken man. Now he ruled a desolate country. "Yahweh is righteous," he cried. "My people and I have sinned. Pray to your god. The thunder and hail from Yahweh are too

much. Then I will let you go at once."

At last!

But Moses had been deceived too often. He could tell that Pharaoh was only trying to escape the punishment. There was no repentance in his eyes.

"I don't believe you," said Moses. "But I will pray anyway, so that you will see that the earth belongs to the Lord."

Moses walked out of the palace bravely. He walked right through the hail and lightning without being hit. When he spread out his hands to heaven, the clouds pulled back and the sun broke through again.

Moses was right in not trusting Pharaoh. Soon the king was out to inspect the damage to the land. The wheat would rise again, and the trees would bud once more. The grass would grow back too. "We're not lost yet," he thought to himself. Bitterly he looked up to heaven. "God, I hate you!" he thought. "I will not give in."

And Pharaoh did not let the Israelites go.

74: Locusts and darkness

Soon Pharaoh received another shock. The accusing eyes of aged Moses were staring at him again. Moses had come to tell Pharaoh about a new punishment. "Thus says the Lord: 'If you do not let My people go, locusts will come tomorrow.'"

Locusts! Then it would make no difference if the grain rose again in the fields and the trees budded. The land would become a wilderness!

The king would simply have to give in. It would be very difficult for him, but he would have to do it; there was no other way. His servants begged him to surrender.

Finally Pharaoh said to Moses: "All right

then, go — but only the men. The women and children stay here.”

Moses started to answer, but Pharaoh was livid with rage. He seemed to sense that he would lose the battle. Instead of listening to Moses and Aaron, he had his servants chase them out of the palace.

The next day the locusts descended in swarms. Insects as long as a man's little finger covered the sky and blocked off the sun. They descended on all the fields and roads and went to work with their strong jaws.

Millions of locusts blanketed the land. People stepped on them wherever they walked.

The locusts ate and ate. They devoured leaves and grass and grain. They ate the bark of the trees, the wood of the doors, and the leather of the shoes.

The land was barren, devastated. Naked tree branches jutted out at all angles.

People were crying everywhere. Pharaoh, trembling with fear, called Moses and Aaron. “Forgive me once more!” he cried. “Death has struck Egypt. Take this plague away.”

A storm rose in the west and carried the locusts into the Red Sea. The Israelites in Goshen saw the swarms of locusts passing overhead, but the locusts did not land on their fields. During this plague, too, the Israelites were protected.

The plague was gone — and so was the king's fear. Blinded by his proud hatred, he still would not submit.

The ninth plague came. Moses stretched out his hand to the heavens, and suddenly it became dark. It was not evening; the sun was high in the sky. But the sun grew distant and hazy, disappearing like a candle that goes out slowly. In Goshen it remained light, but in Egypt a thick, black

carpet covered the land. The people fled to their houses as quickly as they could, stumbling and groping around in the darkness.

People huddled in their houses, unable to see each other. They waited, deathly afraid. On the third day the sun finally rose above the horizon as if nothing had happened.

The Egyptians worshiped the light and were delirious with joy. Never before had they been so afraid. Never before had they seen such a demonstration of God's power.

The king was frightened too. He summoned Moses. But he wasn't ready yet to give in all the way. “You may go — all of you,” he said. “But leave the cattle behind.”

Moses shook his head. “Our cattle belong to us,” he said. “We will take our property with us.”

That was too much for the proud king. All the plagues sent by God had apparently taught him nothing. In his anger he jumped up and screamed: “Get out of here! And see to it that you never appear before me again. If you do, you will surely die.”

Moses, as God's servant, stood calmly before the raging king. He didn't fear anyone now. Earnestly he replied: “You have spoken rightly. I will never see your face again.”

Slowly he walked away — out of the palace and through the streets. The Egyptians watched him, with hatred written all over their faces. And the king's spies followed him. Moses was alone in the midst of his enemies.

But God was with Moses. God was nowhere to be seen, but He was present all the same. Moses knew that. He walked through the land calmly and full of faith.

Moses knew that Pharaoh's battle was lost, for God had told him: “I will inflict one more plague upon Egypt. Then the



king will let you go.⁷

Deliverance was at hand.

75: The angel of death

The sun was setting on Egypt. The twilight faded away as cool night air covered the earth. In the east the moon climbed above the horizon.

There was hardly a sound to be heard. People were going to sleep.

But in Goshen no one was sleeping. Dark figures were moving mysteriously between the small houses. People were whispering to each other, and cattle were lowing in the fields, where they had been driven together. The people were working by the light of the moon.

Moses had told the people what to do. Every father had picked a lamb from the flock, the best one he could find. The lambs

had been selected four days before. Now, in the twilight, the lambs were being slaughtered. The fathers roasted the lambs on spits above fires, while the mothers baked bread and made a sauce to dip the bread in.

Red flames danced around the meat. The smell of roasted meat and baked bread hung in the air. That quiet evening there would be a great feast.

Standing by the door was a small boy holding a bowl of blood. The blood had drained from the body of a lamb. His father stood next to him with a bundle of hyssop — a small broom made of thin twigs. He dipped the broom carefully in the bowl and smeared the blood on the doorposts and on the lintel above the door.

Every father in Goshen marked his house with blood. The other family members watched in awe, deeply moved.

Then the doors were closed, and it was still in Goshen too. The night wind sighed

in the trees. The moon shone down on the little white houses with dark red blood smeared on the doorposts.

Inside the houses the people were celebrating a feast. Old and young were standing around the tables, casting huge shadows on the wall.

In silence they ate their meat and their bread dipped in bitter sauce. The bread was hard, for there had been no time to leaven the dough with yeast. It was a very simple meal, but it was tastier than any meal they had ever eaten — because it was their last meal in Egypt. Bitter and hard was the slavery that was now coming to an end.

They stood as they ate because they had to be ready to depart immediately. Each one had shoes on his feet, a staff in his hand, and clothes for a long journey. The possessions were packed.

Moses, following God's orders, had told the Israelites to make these preparations. God was angry at Pharaoh and his people, and He would no longer hold back His wrath.

At midnight an angel descended from above and swept through the land — the angel of death. No door remained closed to him; no lock could keep him out. He went into all the houses — the mansions of the nobles, the huts of the peasants, the palace, the prison. He even went into the barns where the animals were kept.

He went through the land in silence, quick as lightning. Everywhere he did his horrible work, bringing divine punishment. In each house he killed the oldest son, and in the barns he killed the male first-born. Wherever he had been, the first-born — person or animal — would not awake.

Egypt knew nothing of this yet. Egypt was sleeping.

The angel of death also went to Goshen. Were the people there any better than the people in Egypt? Weren't the hearts in Goshen full of sin too? Who could hold back that angel sent by God?

A few drops of blood were enough to hold the angel back. He did not enter any house with blood smeared on the doorpost. Death had already come to those houses in Goshen.

Inside the houses, the Israelites celebrated their feast in safety and peace. Outside, the angel of death went about his work. Blood had saved Israel this time. A lamb had died for the people.

76: Exodus

Later that night doors opened all over Egypt. People came running outside — men and women crying out in anguish. The night was filled with their screams.

"My son is dead! My son!" they shouted. They shrank back when they heard others with the same wail of anguish. They could not comfort each other, for in each household the oldest lay dead.

The Egyptians knew why this catastrophe had struck them. Great bands of them started marching east, even though it was the middle of the night. They went to Goshen and threw open the doors of the slaves' houses.

"Get out of here!" they screamed. "Go away! Otherwise we will all die. You're welcome to everything we have, as long as you go away — tonight!"

Then they turned their valuables over to the Israelites — jewels and armbands, vases and pots of silver and gold. All these treasures meant nothing to the Egyptians



now.

The king sent word that the Israelites were free to go and could take with them everything they owned. He did not appear in Goshen himself. He sat alone in the palace by the body of his son.

Deliverance had finally come for the Israelites — 430 years after their arrival in Egypt. Before morning dawned, they set out for the east, rejoicing. Ahead of them lay sunlight and freedom.

Moses walked in front as their leader. The people followed in order — household by household, family by family, tribe by tribe, in a seemingly endless row. There was music and singing. No one found the walking hard; there were no sick people or weak people among the Israelites.

The men drove the cattle along, and the women kept an eye on the children. The donkeys were laden with household possessions and the treasures of Egypt.

Included in the procession was a coffin containing the bones of Joseph. Joseph's command had not been forgotten: his body was taken along to be buried in the land of Canaan where his fathers were buried.

The tribes met at Succoth. From there they traveled together — thousands and thousands of people.

The land they left was desolate. The houses were empty, and there was no one left to look after the fields. The proud

building projects stood uncompleted and unattended.

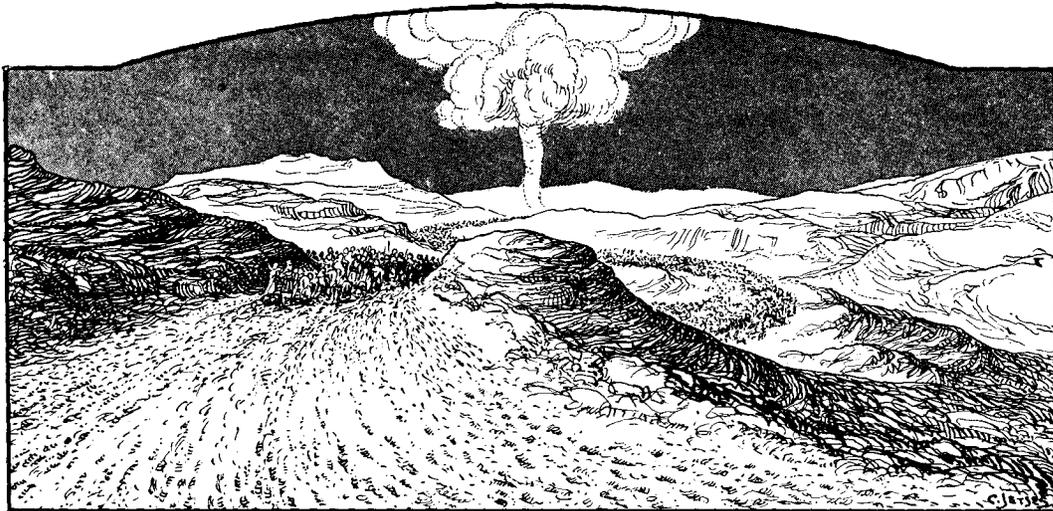
Throughout the land of Egypt, there were funeral processions forming. The Egyptians were burying their sons.

The Israelites never forgot that last night in Egypt. Each spring, when the full moon beamed down on the earth, they held a feast to celebrate it. That feast was called the *Passover*. It reminded the Israelites of the night when the angel of death passed over their houses without entering.

When the Passover feast came, the Israelites would eat roasted lamb and unleavened bread dipped in a bitter sauce. They would sing songs to God's glory. The children would ask why this feast was being celebrated, and the parents would say: "Because God spared us in Egypt through the blood of the lamb and freed us from slavery. We want to remember always that we are the people of the Lord."

One day much later, there was another Passover feast, a feast not just for Israel but for the whole world. At that feast people no longer thought about a lamb and slavery in Egypt. They thought of Jesus Christ, who saved the world from the power of Satan.

Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. By His blood we are saved.



77: A detour

The sand in the wilderness by the Red Sea lay warm and undisturbed. Here and there the wind had created small hills and gullies.

As the Israelites passed through that area, they left millions of footprints in the sand. Now there was a path through the wilderness.

The Israelites moved ahead slowly, very slowly. They had to travel slowly because of the children and animals. They formed a huge caravan — the biggest and happiest caravan that had ever passed through the wilderness.

The Israelites did not know the way. Never before had they been outside Egypt. Moses went ahead of them with his staff in the air. The people trusted him.

Moses did not need to know the way either, for Israel had another Leader — a wiser and better Leader than Moses.

If Moses had picked the route, he would have headed northeast and passed through the land of the Philistines. But the caravan

took a sharp turn to the south and passed along the mountains by the Red Sea. The Israelites were getting farther and farther from Canaan all the time.

The Israelites did not understand it, but they did not get upset. The Lord Himself was leading them by means of a cloudy pillar. God was going with them into that vast, strange world.

No one was bothered by the sun; God made sure of that. And whenever God saw that the Israelites were getting tired, the cloudy pillar stood still. God Himself told the Israelites where to stop and rest.

When the sun went down, it did not get dark. God provided light for His people. At night the pillar of cloud became a pillar of fire.

The people followed, awe-struck. The Lord was their Shepherd. All they had to do was follow Him in faith.

Back in Egypt, Pharaoh sat in his palace. His servants stood around still and full of fear as the king stared out the window. There was no activity in the gardens; no men were at work in the fields. In the

distance he could see his unfinished building projects.

Finally the king spoke. "Why did we let those Israelites go?" he snarled. "How could I have been so foolish after holding out so long? We suffered all those plagues and calamities for nothing."

From another room in the palace came wails of mourning. The body of the king's son was being embalmed.

Suddenly a door flew open. A messenger fell down at the king's feet. "O king," he cried, gasping for breath, "the slaves aren't holding a feast in the wilderness. They are fleeing. But they've lost their way! I saw their caravan heading south from Etham. That route will lead them nowhere!"

The king jumped up. He saw his chance. His eyes flickered with wicked joy. He reached for his sword.

"Hitch up the chariots!" he shouted. "With the sword we'll drive them back to their work."

Soon a thunderous rumble sounded in the streets as 600 chariots set out after the Israelites. Pharaoh wasn't finished yet!

78: Walls of rock and walls of water

The people of Israel were resting. God had shown them again where to stop. They had gone farther and farther south along the mountains. They came to a passage leading to the sea — a small valley between the mountains. Into the valley they went. In front of them were the waves of the sea. On both sides were mountains — high, steep walls of rock. Behind them was the route back to Egypt.

Hanging motionless above them was the cloud of the Lord. The Lord was watching

over His flock.

Evening was approaching. It was quiet outside and getting cooler. One of the Israelites was enjoying the sunset; for the third time since the Israelites left Egypt, he was watching a red sun sink beneath the horizon. But this time there were great clouds of dust obscuring his view of the sun. It seemed that the very earth was shaking.

Suddenly the Israelite realized what was happening and gave the alarm: Pharaoh was coming after them with his cruel army!

The Israelites pressed together in despair like frightened sheep. Where would they go now? There was no way out; they were trapped in that valley. High mountains left and right, the raging sea ahead of them, vengeful enemies behind them.

There was no way out. Death was at their door. They were beside themselves with fear.

They cried out to God and said to Moses: "Were there no graves in Egypt? Did you have to bring us here to die out in the wilderness? What have you done to us?"

Moses stood before the people calm and unafraid. He did not look around him anxiously; he looked up. He saw that the pillar of cloud was slowly passing over the Israelites to take up a position between them and their enemies.

His powerful voice echoed like a trumpet between the walls of rock: "Don't be afraid. Stand your ground. Today you will see the deliverance that the Lord has prepared for you. The Egyptians you see now you will never see again. The Lord will fight for you. You must be still."

Moses walked ahead of the people with his staff. Quickly they formed rows and followed him. Soon they reached the sea.

The waves were breaking on the shore. It was already getting dark. Moses pointed to

the distant shore with his staff. It was far away — too far to see in the fading light.

Then a big wind started to blow. It howled and whistled over the heads of the Israelites. It swooped down on the water and cut through it like a knife, pressing the waves back and plowing a path through the sea, a valley between two mountains of water. The wind blew so hard that it dried up the seabed enough for people to walk on. The wind created a path in the sea, a path so long that no one could see the end.

Moses walked along this path into the sea, with walls of water towering over his head. The people followed him, completely still, trembling in awe at this great miracle. The wind whistled over their heads, but it did not touch them.

The sun had set by now, but it was still light. The light of God's presence streamed down on the Israelites from the Lord's pillar.

Quickly they advanced between the two walls of water held in place by God Himself. God had given them a way out!

79: Judgment on Egypt

The Egyptians were determined to bring the Israelites back. After a furious pursuit, they entered the narrow valley where the Israelites had camped. They stopped and looked around in amazement. Where had the slaves gone so suddenly? Had they disappeared into the ground? Had they fled over the mountains?

Suddenly one of the soldiers saw them. In great excitement he pointed straight ahead. There they went! The Israelites were walking through the sea!

How was it possible? The Israelites were

following a dry path through the sea, and the light of heaven was showing them the way!

The soldiers reined in their horses, but the voice of Pharaoh urged them on. In his insane wrath, he drove them ahead. If a slave could follow that path through the sea, so could Egypt's army and king!

The soldiers set off in a wild gallop, moving between the walls of water. The howling wind came right at them. It was dark between those menacing walls of water. A great, threatening black cloud hung between the Israelites and the Egyptian army. There was thunder rumbling in the cloud. Bad weather ahead!

The Egyptians had trouble advancing along the path through the sea. The frightening cloud continued to hang before them. It moved around in front of them like a living being struggling to hold them back. The cloud provided light for Israel and darkness for the Egyptian soldiers.

Fear mushroomed in the hearts of the Egyptians. They had a sinking feeling that this expedition was bound to fail and end in disaster. Yet they continued to advance, following their king. They used the whip on the horses, making them neigh anxiously. They shouted to each other not to give up. All through the night they struggled on.

By daybreak they were very close to the Israelites, but conditions were so bad that they could go no farther. The seabed beneath them was a swamp. The wheels of the chariots got stuck in the mud and broke. The horses stumbled. Bolts of lightning from the pillar of cloud struck between them. The thunder drew closer and closer.

Finally they understood that this was no ordinary struggle. A mysterious power was holding them back. The God of Israel was fighting for His people.



“Fleel” some of them shouted, and they tried to turn their chariots around. Others struggled on. Confusion reigned, as horses reared up in front of each other and chariots collided and tipped over.

Just as the sun began to give color to the tops of the mountains, the last Israelite climbed up the bank on the far side of the sea. Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea at God’s command.

The wind died down, and the two walls of water came together. The Egyptian soldiers could see the waves closing over their heads. Screaming in terror, they held out their hands to hold back the sea.

It was too late! The walls of water collapsed upon them. The sea raged, and their cries were drowned out by the waves. Here and there a hand clawed its way to the surface and thrashed around. A blue feather from a horse’s bonnet floated on the

water. There was nothing more to be seen of Pharaoh’s proud army; it had been destroyed completely.

The people of Israel assembled on the seashore. Anxiously they watched the scene in the sea, too filled with awe to move.

When the sea was finally calm, the Israelites started to relax. They extended their arms to the heavens. Thousands of them sang a song of praise, drowning out the sound of the waves. Their cruel oppressor was dead. God had delivered them from slavery. Now they were truly free.

That day the Israelites celebrated a great feast on the seashore. Moses sang a song that welled up in him spontaneously, and the people joined in. The sound of their joyful song went over the water:

Praise the Lord;
exalted is He.

Rider and horse
He casts in the sea.

Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron, who was almost 100 years old, took her tambourine and sang alone, leading the women. The women rejoiced and answered the men. It was a beautiful song, with the men and the women singing in turn:

Praise the Lord;
exalted is He.
Rider and horse
He casts in the sea.

Nearby, the bodies of the Egyptians washed up on the shore.

80: Water in the wilderness

The earth shook. The feet of the Israelites rose and fell on hot stones and glowing sand, leaving millions of footprints behind. A great nation was traveling to its fatherland.

With heads bowed and backs bent, the people pushed on. The sun high overhead beat down upon them, and the blowing sand stabbed at them like little needles.

It was a deathly still in that barren land. There were no singing birds or murmuring trees. Naked, blinking rocks, glowing hills of sand, a blue sky above — that's all there was.

Heat enveloped the Israelites. It rose from the ground and descended from the sky. The surfaces of the rocks glowed. Not even the wind brought relief; it was hot breath in that horrible land.

Feet swished through the sand. Every step was a struggle. A cloud of dust hovered over the procession.

Nobody felt like talking. There was only one word to be heard. Every now and then someone would croak: "Water!" The people sighed and moaned and grumbled. They all had the same wish: "Water! Water!"

Three days had passed since the Israelites were led through the sea in such an amazing way. They had entered the Wilderness of Shur. At first they had water from Egypt in jugs and leather bags, but that water didn't last long. Now they were walking through a thirsty land. The hot air burned in their throats. Many a tongue was stuck to the roof of a mouth. Eyes were red and sore.

The Israelites kept looking around for water, but there was none to be seen.

The Lord's pillar of cloud stayed in front of them. The Lord went with them through this barren land.

There were some Israelites who looked at the pillar of cloud and thought to themselves: "God is with us. We can put our trust in Him." But most of them didn't think about God. They had all but forgotten about their amazing exodus from Egypt and their deliverance at the Red Sea.

Finally they came to some small, scraggly bushes growing by some rocks. The people surged ahead and surrounded the bushes. A joyful cry went up: "Water!"

The sight of water gave them new strength. The people crowded around the little pond. The closest ones fell to their knees and started lapping up the water. Immediately they spit it out and pulled faces. It was bitter, foul-tasting water. Not even the animals would drink it.

There they stood, deeply disappointed. They had thought their deliverance was at hand, but now they were worse off than ever. Now they could feel just how worn and exhausted and thirsty they were.

They crowded around Moses, crying and grumbling. Anger showed on their tired faces. Moses was their leader; he was the one who had brought them here. It was *his* fault.

Moses called to the Lord for help. The Lord drew his attention to a piece of wood, and Moses threw it into the water. "Go ahead and drink," he said happily. "The Lord has made the water sweet for you."

A few Israelites bent over the water. Slowly, hesitantly, they tasted it. Was it the same water? Surely a piece of wood couldn't change the water's taste!

Of course not! Wood can't change water — but God can. The water became tasty and safe for people to drink.

All the Israelites drank. Silent and ashamed, they filled their jugs with the precious water. They said: "We will call this place *Mara*, for here God turned bitter water into fresh water."

After they drank their fill, they continued their journey through this land of death. They knew that their lives were safe in God's hands.

Soon they came to Elim, which was a great oasis in the dry wilderness. There fresh water bubbled up from twelve springs. Seventy palm trees provided shade.

The Israelites pitched their tents by the water and rested from their journey. They were content, for they had water and bread and a mighty God to protect them.

Far away beyond the mountains a glorious land awaited them — a land even more glorious than Elim. In their hearts the Israelites gave thanks.

81: Bread from heaven

As long as Israel had water and food, he was content and thankful. But his gratitude did not last long.

Israel belonged to God, but he had not yet known God for long. Israel was God's child — a young and troublesome child. Whenever he got hungry or thirsty, he started to cry. If God didn't help him quickly, he got into a bad mood. He didn't know how to wait patiently for God to act. He didn't trust God. That he would still have to learn. And he repeatedly forgot about God's miracles.

The Israelites had brought a large supply of bread and meat with them from Egypt, but by the time they reached the Wilderness of Sin after a month of travel, the food was gone. There they were in the wilderness, without bread.

They complained and grumbled. They were a people of slaves, and they had grumbled all their lives. That's all they could think of doing. They cried out to Moses and Aaron: "In Egypt we had it better than here. In Egypt we sat by the cooking pots and ate all the bread we wanted. Why have you dragged us away? Do you want us all to die out here in the wilderness?"

Moses and Aaron were deeply disappointed because the people again forgot their God. The Lord comforted them and let them know what they were to tell the people.

"Why do you complain to *us*?" they asked. "Are *we* the ones who delivered you? It was *the Lord*! Remember? You are not murmuring against us but against Him. He has seen your needs. This evening He will give you meat to eat, and tomorrow bread will rain down on you from heaven. Will you then believe that He is taking care of



you?”

While they were speaking, a bright glow covered them all. The glow came from the pillar of cloud, which had become brighter than the sun. The complainers fell silent, and the people went to their tents.

That evening the Israelites heard the sound of thousands of birds in the air. Great swarms of quails flew around the camp — plump birds migrating from one place to another. Tired from their long flight, the birds alighted among the tents of the Israelites where they could easily be killed.

That evening fires were burning everywhere. The smell of roasted flesh hung over the camp. Once more the Israelites were quiet and content. The child had its way again and was satisfied.

The next morning, when the Israelites

came out of their tents, they found that an even greater wonder had occurred. The sun was still behind the mountains, and the dew was starting to vanish. Beneath the dew, the ground was covered with something white and flaky and fine as hoarfrost.

“What’s that?” the people called out.

“It’s manna,” Moses answered. “Bread from heaven, bread that the Lord has given you for food.”

Quickly the people gathered the manna, about a jugful for each person. As soon as it got hot, the manna on the ground melted and disappeared.

The manna was as sweet and nourishing as honeybread. It could be eaten raw, but it could also be used for baking bread. If the Israelites wished, they could cook it.

“Don’t save any for tomorrow,” Moses

told them. "Each day the Lord will give you bread from heaven."

Some of the Israelites didn't listen to Moses. They saved some manna for the next day, but they found that it was spoiled by then. It had a foul smell and was infested with worms.

On the sixth day, Moses told everyone to gather enough manna for two days. They were to save half of the manna for the sabbath. Moses promised that it would not spoil. Because the people were to rest on the sabbath there would be no manna on the ground.

Again there were people who didn't believe Moses. They said to themselves: "If it spoils overnight on other days, it will no doubt spoil overnight before the sabbath too. We won't save anything for the sabbath. We'll go out and gather more manna tomorrow."

The next morning there was no manna on the ground. The doubters had nothing to eat. But those who believed Moses found that their manna was fresh and unspoiled on the sabbath, just as if it had fallen from heaven that morning.

The Israelites ate manna the whole time they were in the wilderness. God took care of His people like a father.

At God's command, Aaron filled a golden jar with that wonderful bread from heaven. It was to be preserved to remind later generations of the great miracle.

82: Two dangers

Despite all the miracles God had performed, the Israelites still did not believe and trust Him fully.

After a further journey of several days,

they came to a mountainous area called Rephidim. Every morning the manna lay ready for them, but there was no water. And the water they had taken with them from Elim was gone.

It soon became apparent that the Israelites still had not learned their lesson. Again they blamed Moses: it was *his* fault that they were without water. This time they got so angry that they came at Moses with stones. They were ready to kill him.

Moses called out to the Lord: "What must I do with this people?"

God still had patience. Again He helped, ordering Moses to go to the face of a certain mountain. Some of the elders of the people followed, muttering complaints and threats.

The bare rock was exposed to the bright sun. Moses raised his staff and struck the scorching stone. At once the rock split and water gushed out, flowing across the flat land like a stream.

This was another demonstration of God's love and power. Moses called that place *Massah* and *Meribah*, which means *temptation* and *quarreling*.

Thirst was a constant danger for the Israelites. But there was an even greater danger in the dry mountain terrain.

That area was the home of the Amalekites, who lived by hunting and robbery. Rough, brown Amalekites hiding behind the rocks had seen the Israelites coming. The Amalekites had already heard reports about Israel's miraculous deliverance from Egypt. Their hearts were filled with hatred for Israel, the nation that wanted to travel through their territory. Would these foreigners, these intruders, drink *their* water and allow the flocks to graze in *their* pastures?

The Amalekites spied on the Israelites

from their hiding places. When the Amalekites saw the big herds and the treasures and valuables the Israelites had taken with them from Egypt, they were filled with envy and greed.

They did not dare attack the main Israelite camp. They waited until the Israelites had passed and then attacked the stragglers, the weakest group — shepherds and women and porters.

The Amalekites rushed at these Israelites like the wind. Quick as lightning, they disappeared with the booty, leaving the Israelites frightened and confused.

Moses called Joshua, a young man from the tribe of Ephraim. Joshua was a humble, God-fearing man, but he had the courage of a lion. "Choose some men," Moses told him, "and attack the Amalekites."

It sounded simple, but it was very, very difficult. The Israelites had not yet enjoyed two months of freedom. They had always been slaves. They knew how to carry heavy burdens and how to handle hammers and axes. But they had never handled swords. They had *received* many blows, but they had never *given* any. As for the Amalekites, they were trained for fighting and murder from their youth on. They were battle-hardened veterans.

Joshua knew this, but he obeyed Moses without argument. He fixed his hopes, on God, for he believed that God is able to protect His people.

Carefully Joshua chose the strongest and most courageous men. In his heart was a hopeful prayer.

83: The wings of faith

Joshua and his men did not have much

time to prepare for battle. The struggle began the very next day. The enemy came storming along like a living brown wall. Their sharp swords gleamed in the sun, and their battle cries filled the air.

The Israelites, with their simple weapons, fought bravely. Joshua led the troops. He was a fiery commander. Brave and full of faith, he risked his life for his people.

On a hilltop not far from the battlefield stood an old, gray man with a long staff. His arms were extended to heaven in prayer. It was Moses.

Two other men, Aaron and Hur, were with him. They were watching the armies struggle below.

They could hear the sounds of battle — the clash of swords, screams, cries for help. It was a chilling scene.

The two armies seemed evenly matched. Sometimes the Israelites were driven back and sometimes the Amalekites.

Whenever Israel floundered, Moses raised his hands in prayer. At once his people recovered and seized the initiative. When they pressed the enemy back and Moses watched in joy, letting his staff sink to the ground, the Israelites lost their power and were pushed back again by the Amalekites.

Suddenly Moses understood that the victory was to be won not on the battlefield below but on the quiet hilltop. His trembling hands lifted the staff to heaven as a flag, a banner flying above the Israelites. The banner symbolized that Israel's help came from God.

Again the swords of the Israelites came down hard on the shields of their enemies. A joyful cry went up among the people. The enemy was retreating; he was being pushed back! He could not hold out against



Israel's power!

Moses' arms were getting tired. He let the staff sink to the ground, for he could no longer hold it up. Then Aaron and Hur ran to his side. They rolled a huge stone behind

Moses for him to sit on and supported his tired arms until the sun went down.

By that time the enemy was completely defeated. Those who were still alive fled in great fear and hid in the mountains.

The Israelites celebrated and honored their heroes. But some who knew better looked to God's stars in the heavens, the silent stars that twinkled brightly high above the land where the battle had raged. They thanked God for the victory.

Moses built an altar on that hill and called it "The Lord is my banner."

Soon after the battle at Rephidim, an old man came out of the wilderness and visited the camp of the Israelites. It was Jethro, the wise, old priest. He had come to Moses to bring him his wife Zipporah and his two sons. What a glorious reunion for Moses!

Moses told his father-in-law what the Lord had done for Israel. Jethro rejoiced when he heard it. He praised God and offered the Lord a sacrifice.

Moses was very busy those days. From morning till evening people came to him for advice. He hardly had a moment's peace. It was too much for him to handle all by himself.

Wise Jethro gave Moses some good advice: Moses should enlist the help of the elders of Israel. A few days later Jethro left again, all alone, a solitary servant of God in a heathen land.

In the desolate wilderness through which the Israelites moved there lived a large, majestic bird. That bird, the eagle, liked to build its nest in inaccessible places high in the mountains. No enemy would dare approach its nest. The young were safe in the care of their mother.

When it was time for the young ones to learn to fly, something very beautiful happened. If a young eagle sat trembling on the

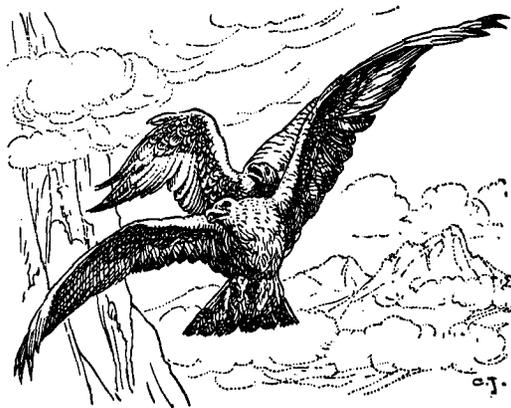
edge of the nest, not daring to plunge from its perch, the mother would push it out. She would force it to use its wings.

The mother would then fly alongside the young one. If she saw that its wings were still too weak, that it was in danger of falling to the rocks below, she would get under the young one in a flash and let it come down on her strong back. Then she would carry the young eagle back to the nest.

Before long the young one would be soaring high in the sky alongside its mother.

That's how the eagle looked after its young. And that's also how God looked after His child — the nation called Israel. He led Israel out of Egypt and showed him the way through the barren wilderness. Whenever Israel was in need, God was there to help. He did not *punish* Israel for all his grumbling; He *blessed* him instead. He gave Israel bread from heaven and water out of the rock. He protected Israel from his enemies.

God did that to help the weak faith of His people grow. His people had to learn to trust in God always. Like the eagle, Israel had to learn to soar high in the sky, using the wings of faith.



84: Ten commandments

An immense wall of red granite jutted into the sky. It seemed to rise straight out of the plain. A distant peak bored up through the clouds. A path wound its way up the slope, passing scrawny bushes and blocks of sheer rock.

There was a man climbing up the path. He kept on climbing until he was no more than a small, white fleck against the mountain.

Israel was camped in the plain. There were thousands of tents next to each other. The people waited silently, tensely, their hands above their eyes as they stared into the bright sky. There went Moses, their leader, their hero. He was climbing Mount Sinai to talk with God. God Himself had called Moses.

Their hearts beat fast in joyful fear. Something wonderful and glorious was going to happen at Mount Sinai. Nearby was the place where God had spoken to Moses out of a burning bush. That was a year ago, when the Israelites were slaves. Now they were a powerful, free people.

Here, on this mountain, God wanted to make friends with Israel. He had never done that with a nation before. The almighty God who created heaven and earth was going to make a holy covenant with Israel, that nation of complainers.

This miracle left the people speechless. They stood and stared at Mount Sinai. Suddenly they caught sight of a white fleck gradually getting bigger. Moses was coming back!

Moses' eyes beamed with happiness. His voice was full of joy. "Thus says the Lord," he told the Israelites. "You know, O Israel, how I have cared for you. I have carried you on eagles' wings. If you pay attention



to everything I say and keep My covenant, you will be My own possession among all peoples. You will be a holy people, the most blessed nation on earth."

The Israelites did not have to think it over. The entire nation answered in unison: "All that the Lord has spoken we will do."

The people were told to wait for three days. Then they would all hear the voice of the Lord, just as Moses had heard it.

They washed their clothes in the brook. They purified their tents, their utensils, their bodies. No one spoke a cross word or cherished an evil thought. The *hearts* of the Israelites would have to be especially clean if they were going to meet the Lord.

The days passed quietly, with a festive mood in the air. The holy mountain was fenced off so that no one would wander onto its slopes. If anyone did, he would die.

Finally the time had come. The early morning light was starting to break through in the east. The sky was red, and the tops of the mountains shone like pure gold.

Around the crown of Mount Sinai hung a cloud that was darker and blacker than any cloud the Israelites had ever seen. Lightning flashed. Thunder echoed between the mountains.

"Are all of them ready?"

The Israelites waited in festive garments, trembling in awe. Above the thunder they heard a trumpet blast.

Moses went before the trembling people. Slowly they approached, thousands of them

assembling at the foot of the mountain in the early morning light. Mount Sinai was enveloped in smoke, for the Lord was descending in fire.

Then it was silent. The thunder had ceased. The mountains stood motionless in the early morning light. God said: "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage."

The Israelites bowed their heads and put their hands over their faces. They thought that they would now have to die. After all, they were sinful human beings and they had heard the voice of God.

They listened to God as He gave them ten laws, ten commandments:

You shall have no other gods before Me.

You shall not make images of gods or bow down before such images.

You shall not misuse My name.

Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall work, but the seventh day is the sabbath of the Lord your God. On the sabbath neither you nor anyone in your household shall work. In six days the Lord created heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in it. But on the seventh day He rested. Therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it.

Honor your father and your mother that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God gives you.

You shall not kill.

You shall be faithful in marriage.

You shall not steal.

You shall not engage in lying and slander.

You shall not covet anything that

belongs to your neighbor.

If the Israelites were to be God's people, they would have to live by these commandments. They would have to love God above all else and their neighbors as themselves.

It was still again at Mount Sinai. The voice of the Lord was heard no more. Then the thunder began again, and the lightning flashed. The people shrank back in terror. They fled from the might and majesty of the Lord. They said to Moses: "You speak to us from now on instead of the Lord. If God speaks to us again, we will die."

That's how things were done from then on. The people kept their distance, and Moses approached the darkness where God was. Moses was the mediator between God and the people. And he wrote down all the words of the Lord in a certain book, the book of the covenant, so that the people would never forget them.

85: The golden calf

Moses built an altar at the foot of Mount Sinai, an altar of twelve stones to represent the twelve tribes of Israel. The young men of Israel offered burnt offerings and cattle.

Moses poured half the blood upon the altar before God. The other half he sprinkled upon the people. That was a sign of Israel's covenant with God.

Soon Moses had to climb the mountain again to speak with God. Joshua went with him. The people watched the two men as they disappeared. Joshua waited for Moses halfway up the mountain.

That evening people watched the top of the mountain for a sign of their return.

Darkness crept up the face of the mountain. Mount Sinai became a huge shadow in the gray night sky, but there was no sign of Moses and Joshua.

The next day, too, the people waited in vain. A whole week crept by slowly, and then another week.

The Israelites began to worry. Had Moses attempted something too dangerous? Had there been an accident? The edge of the mountain was steep, and the ravines were deep. Perhaps the bodies of Moses and Joshua lay broken at the foot of some cliff.

No one dared to go and look for them. Who would dare set foot on the mountain shrouded by the cloud of the Lord?

Slowly the fearful suspicion became a certainty for the Israelites: Moses was dead. They no longer had a leader.

What would they do without him? Who would now lead them to Canaan? Who would administer justice and pray for them?

It was the season of the grape harvest. In all the surrounding lands, a joyful harvest feast was being celebrated. The year before, the Israelites had joined in this feast in Egypt. As they recalled that occasion, they yearned to have such a feast again. Was there any reason why they could not hold a feast in the wilderness?

Aaron was now Israel's leader. No doubt he would agree to the idea, for he was easy-going. He was not like Moses, the strict leader who had ascended the mountain never to return.

It would have to be a religious feast, a feast in honor of God. Surely Aaron would agree to that!

The other nations had idols at their feasts. They would dance around the idols and offer sacrifices to them. But what did the Israelites have? They had God, but they

never saw Him. It had been a long time since He had spoken to them — more than five weeks.

The pagans could worship more easily than the Israelites, for they could *see* their god every day. They could kneel before him and take him along on trips and be sure that he would always be with them. It would be so much easier for the Israelites if they had an image of God.

That's how they reasoned and talked together. They could not shake off the idea, so they went to Aaron with it. "Make us a god," they said, "an image we can see and carry before us. As for Moses, the man who led us out of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him."

"You shall not make images of gods." Those were God's own words. In that very place He had given His people this command.

Aaron was afraid of the Israelites, and his faith was weak. He did not dare refuse, for he feared that the people would kill him. But he did not dare give in either, for he knew what a serious sin they were proposing.

He would have to think fast. An idea came to him. "All right," he said with a nod, "but the image must be made of gold. Therefore you must bring me all your golden earrings."

He assumed that the Israelites would refuse. But they quickly tore off their earrings and came running to him with handfuls of them. Soon there was a noisy, howling mob before the smelter's oven. Aaron could not hold them back.

The oven was heated. The wood-carvers sharpened their knives. They cut out an image of a calf, a young bull, and covered the image with a sheet of gold. In Egypt the bull was a holy animal.

The people laughed and danced and rejoiced: "This is our god, who led us out of Egypt!"

Did Aaron sense what a horrible cry that was?

Moses was high on the mountain, in the holy stillness of God. He had been there for 40 days and 40 nights listening to the voice of the Lord. The Lord told him how the Israelites were to live once they entered their own land, how they were to bring offerings, build their houses, raise their children, and so forth. In short, God was telling Moses what the Israelites would have to do in order to live in love and peace.

Moses wrote down everything God said — hundreds of laws and regulations. He was very happy, for he was sure that his people would be happy living by these laws. Other nations had laws made by men, but Israel would live by the laws of *God!*

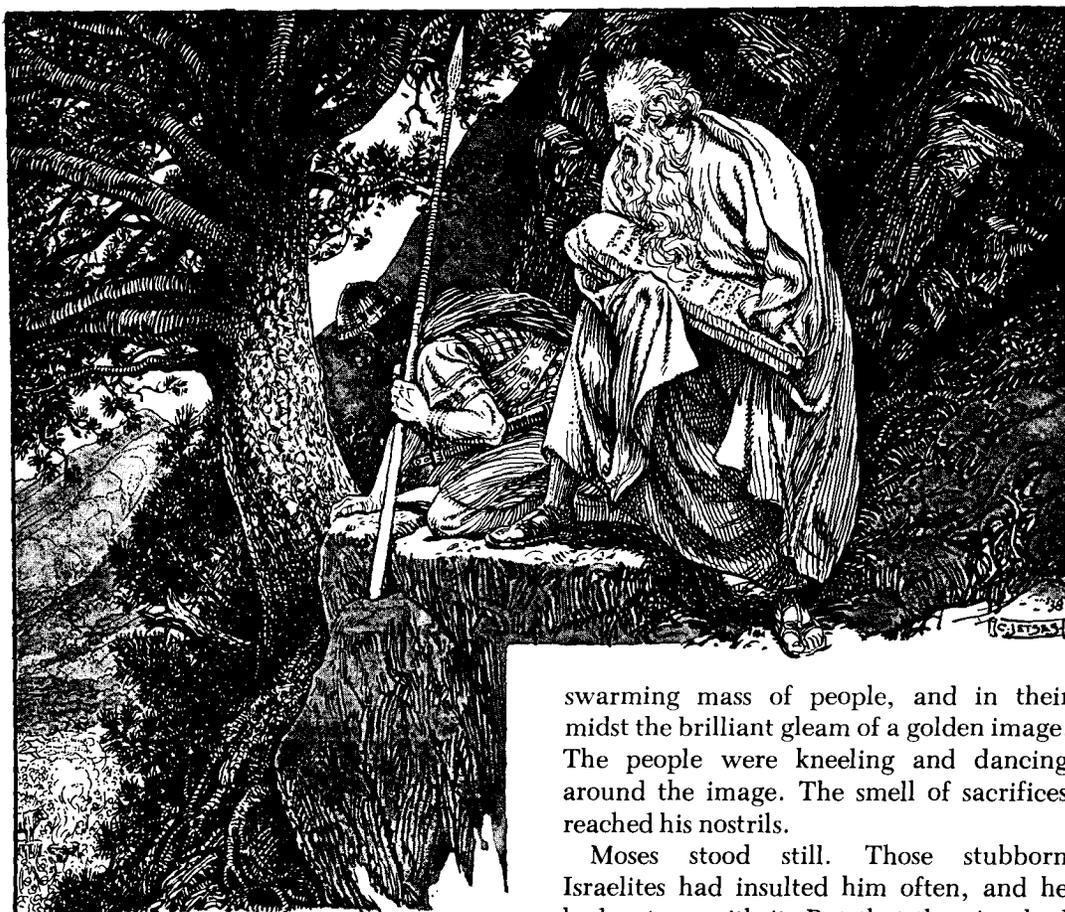
On the fortieth day, Moses suddenly heard God's voice become harsh and angry. "Descend," God said, "for the people have spoiled everything. They have departed from the way I have commanded them to follow. They have made themselves a golden calf and bowed down before it. They can no longer be My people."

Moses could hear the disappointment in the Lord's voice. This made him deeply unhappy. He fell to his knees and begged for mercy for his people.

86: Punishment and forgiveness

Moses started down the mountain. Joshua, who had waited faithfully, saw him approaching and came to meet him.

But Moses' somber face made him feel



uneasy. And what was that sound he heard down below? It came from the Israelite camp. Was there an enemy attack? Joshua said to Moses: "I hear the sound of battle in our camp."

Moses answered gravely: "It is not a shout of conquest or defeat. It is the sound of singing."

A feast! The sound of the songs echoed between the mountains. The sound grew louder and wilder as the two men descended. Moses walked with long strides until he came to a bend in the path. From there he could see the camp below. He saw a

swarming mass of people, and in their midst the brilliant gleam of a golden image. The people were kneeling and dancing around the image. The smell of sacrifices reached his nostrils.

Moses stood still. Those stubborn Israelites had insulted him often, and he had put up with it. But that they insulted God, who wished to make them the happiest people in all the world — that was too much for him!

It had taken Moses years to learn to be gentle and patient. Now his wrath erupted in all its fury.

He had two pieces of slate in his hand, two tablets on which God Himself had written the holy law. Moses smashed them to pieces against the rocks. What good were those tablets if the people would not obey that law?

Then Moses went down into the camp and walked upright through the mass of

shameless, dancing people. Wherever he went, the festive sounds died away.

A shiver of fear ran through the ranks of the Israelites. Anxious cries were heard. People began raising their hands in fear.

Moses went straight to the golden calf and knocked it off its pedestal.

"Aaron!"

Aaron appeared. Pale and trembling, he stood before Moses.

"Aaron, what have these people done to you that you would bring down such heavy guilt upon them?"

Aaron bowed under Moses' tongue-lashing. He started to stammer. He tried to defend himself, but he couldn't. Embarrassed, he pointed to the people. "You know what evildoers these people are. They wanted a god they could see. They thought you were never coming back. I said: 'Give me all your gold.' They did so. I threw it in the fire, and this calf was the result."

Moses had heard enough. Behind Aaron stood the whole tribe of Levi. The Levites could look Moses straight in the eye, for they had not kneeled before the image.

"Who is on the Lord's side?" Moses called out. "Let him come to me."

Only the Levites responded. At Moses' command they went through the camp to punish the people. Three thousand of the godless sinners were put to death.

The golden calf was ground up into powder, and the powder was mixed into the drinking water. Then the people were told to appear before Moses.

"Drink," said their angry leader. "Drink the god before whom you kneeled."

They obeyed, completely broken in spirit. They sensed the scorn in Moses' words, and they knew he was right. They realized how foolish and wicked they had been.

Night fell. In their sleep the Israelites finally forgot their shame.

But Moses did not fall asleep. He sat in his tent praying for wisdom.

What would become of the Israelites now? Would they have to go on without God, just like any other nation? Would they become a wandering band of nomads trying to conquer a land for themselves?

How could God's wrath be taken away? Who could bear this guilt for the people?

The next morning the Israelites humbled themselves before their leader. "You are no longer worthy to be God's people," he told them. "But I will speak to the Lord on your behalf. Perhaps He will forgive your sin."

Up the mountain Moses went, slowly, lost in thought. The path was perilous and steep; the journey was difficult.

This time Moses was just as sad as he had been happy the last time. The guilt of Israel weighed him down.

Moses loved his people even more than he loved himself. When he kneeled before God, this unselfish leader prayed: "Lord, I will bear their guilt for them. Kill me and forgive the people. Wipe my name out of Your book."

The Lord refused. That wouldn't work. One day someone else would sacrifice Himself for the people — a prophet greater than Moses. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, bore Israel's guilt and died for us on the cross.



When Moses returned to the people, he had a glorious message for them.

They could not bear to look at him. He had been closer to God than ever before, and his face shone with God's glory. He had to cover his face with a veil.

The Israelites listened to Moses. His words echoed the love of God. God had forgiven the people, and He still loved them even more than Moses ever would. Israel would receive His law on new tablets of stone. The Lord would go with them to Canaan after all. The Israelites were still God's people, but they knew that they did not deserve such an honor.



bronze jars, animal skins, and other fabrics. One of them had both hands full of gold coins. They disappeared between the tents.

The little girl felt uneasy. She was allowed to give something — but she didn't have to.

A house for God? A portable house made of beams and curtains just as if God were a man? A temple that the Israelites could take along with them on their travels?

The little girl looked up at the cloud that hung silently above Mount Sinai. That's where God revealed Himself, high above the people. God was good. And now He wanted to come and live among His people like a father among his children.

The little girl laughed in amazement and joy. Suddenly she felt just how much she loved the Lord. She ran off through the streets of the great city of tents. She pressed ahead, dodging between all the people, with the necklace warm in her hand.

There stood Moses. A veil covered his face. Otherwise people could not look at him. Something of God's glory shone through despite the veil.

Aaron and the elders of Israel stood next to Moses. Israel's treasures lay in heaps at their feet. Those treasures came from the same people who had once brought gold to make an image of a calf to worship. Is that

87: Gifts for God's house

There was a little girl sitting in the shadow of a tent. She was playing with a gold necklace which her mother had given her.

She was faithful in helping gather the manna every day. All by herself she would get a jug of water from the stream and carry it back on her head. That's why her mother gave her the necklace.

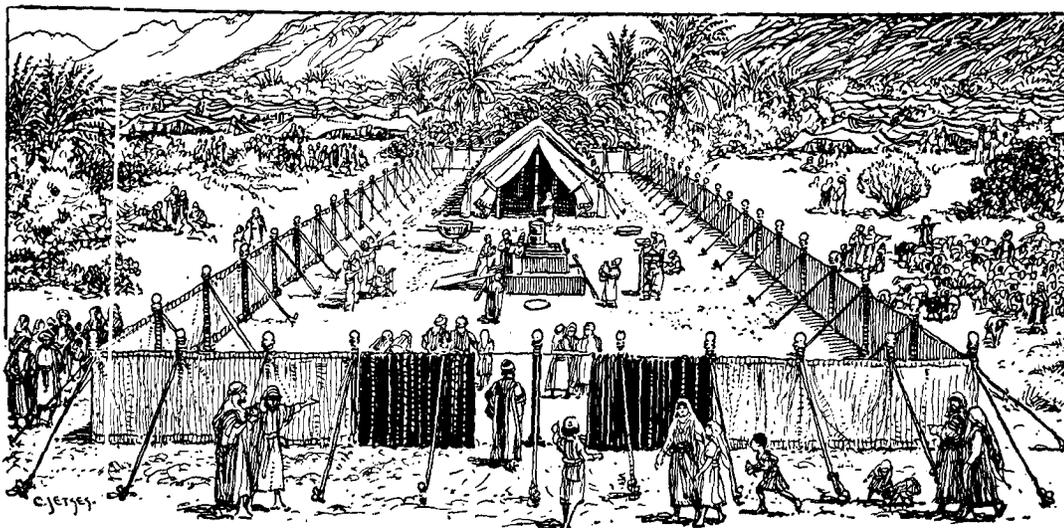
She breathed on the necklace and rubbed it on her clothes to make it shine. She loved the necklace not just because it was made of pure gold but especially because she had received it from her mother as a reward.

A man stopped in front of her and said: "That's a beautiful necklace you have there. You can bring it to Moses if you like."

"To Moses?" she asked, wonderingly.

"A tabernacle is being built," the man explained, "a house for God. We are allowed to give gifts for God's house."

A group of people walked by just then. They were carrying gold and silver jewelry,



why they were so generous with their treasures? Were they still feeling ashamed?

"Enough!" someone cried.

The little girl was afraid that they would refuse to take her necklace. She held it out to Moses. "Take this," she said. "I want to give a gift for God's house too."

Moses opened his large hand, and the girl respectfully placed her necklace in it. Then she headed for home, singing and dancing. She no longer had the necklace she loved so much. Yet she was happier than she had ever been before, for she had now been allowed to do something for the Lord.

We do not read anything about that girl in the Bible. But this is just the sort of thing that must have happened when the tabernacle was being built. In a spirit of love and excitement, the people helped build God's house.

This great project took a long time to complete. Two talented men named Bezalel and Oholiab were in charge. They knew exactly how to do it. God Himself had drawn up the plans. All the Israelites had to do was build according to those plans. They

went about the work as a labor of love.

Thousands of eager hands were busy every day. The women wove heavy curtains and embroidered beautiful figures on them. The men cut down acacia trees and made the beams. Other men covered the beams with a thin layer of gold. All the workers did their best, for this project was for the Lord.

88: The tabernacle

One whole year had passed since Israel's departure from Egypt. Now, at last, the great project was completed: the tabernacle was finished! On the first day of the new year, the beams were placed in silver footings and locked together by golden clasps. Then the curtains were hung. The people stood by and watched. Rising in their camp was a beautiful, costly sanctuary surrounded by a fence made of beams and curtains.

Near the tabernacle stood one of the

elders of Israel. He was telling the people about the tabernacle and explaining what it all meant. This elder was one of the 70 wise men appointed to help Moses in his work.

The open area within the fence was called the outer court. Within this area stood a bronze altar of burnt offering on which a sacrifice was offered every morning and evening. The sacrifice was consumed completely by the fire, for it was wholly consecrated to God. This showed the Israelites that they belonged completely to God and were expected to devote their lives wholly to Him.

Also in the outer court stood a large bronze laver, which the priests used to wash their hands and feet. They had to be clean as they went about God's work.

The priests were sons of Aaron. All the men of the tribe of Levi were permitted to help with the work. The Levites were chosen to serve in God's house because they refused to kneel before the golden calf.

There were two rooms in the tabernacle. The larger of the two was called the Holy Place. Only the priests were allowed to enter it — not the Levites.

This room was lighted by a beautiful golden seven-armed lamp. There was also a golden table in the Holy Place. Each week fresh bread was placed on the table. The message of the bread was: "Lord, we give You this bread to show You how thankful we are."

Also in the Holy Place stood the golden altar of incense. That was where the priests burned incense. Just as the sweet scent of the incense rose above the camp, the prayers of God's people rise to heaven.

The costly, heavy curtain was called the veil. Behind it was another room, a smaller room, which was called the Holy of Holies. There was no lamp burning in that room, and

no window to let in light. It was always dark.

In that darkness stood a box made of wood and overlaid with gold — the ark. The ark had a covering made of gold — the mercy seat. Above the mercy seat were two golden cherubs, two angels spreading their wings. The holiest spot in the entire tabernacle was between those two angels.

The cloud of the Lord would soon hang in the air above that part of the tabernacle. God wanted to live in the darkness of the Holy of Holies, as a father among his children.

Only Aaron, the high priest, was allowed inside the Holy of Holies — once a year. That special occasion came on that great Day of Atonement.

Two goats would be brought into the outer court. One would be slaughtered and sacrificed for the sins of the people. Its blood would be drained into a bowl. Aaron would go into the Holy of Holies with that blood and sprinkle it on the mercy seat and the ark, as part of the ritual pointing to atonement for the sins of the people.

When the high priest emerged from the Holy of Holies, he would lay both his hands on the head of the other goat and say: "On you I lay all the sins of Israel." That goat would then be led into the wilderness, never to return. The second goat was called the *scapegoat*.

In such a manner, the sins of the people were to be wiped away. On the great Day of Atonement, the Israelites were reminded of the need for purification.

This ritual had a deep meaning. It helped Israel remember its need of a Redeemer and reminded the people that the Messiah would come one day as the true High Priest who would bear the punishment for all their sins, as the One who would truly purify them and cleanse them

of their gut.

When the tabernacle was set up and all the furnishings and utensils were in place, Moses brought the first offering. As the scent of that offering ascended to heaven and the people kneeled in the outer court and around it, the cloud of the Lord gradually descended from Mount Sinai. It passed over the kneeling people and came to rest over the tabernacle just above the ark.

The people cried with joy and praised God, the Father of Israel and King of their nation.

That evening, the little girl who offered her necklace as a gift for God's house saw Aaron in his high priestly garment, which was as blue as the sky. On the fringe of his garment hung tinkling bells. On his forehead Aaron wore a golden plate with the inscription "Holy to the Lord." To the chest part of his garment were attached twelve precious stones, each bearing the name of one of the tribes of Israel. When the high priest entered God's house, then, he bore the people on his heart. "He also bears me," thought the little girl.

She felt very happy, for she had joined in the great work to glorify God.

89: Meat in the wilderness

The wilderness. A mountainous area. An endless burning oven of rock and sand.

Rising and falling through this area runs an almost impassable path. Along that path, a long, white snake slowly creeps north — the people of Israel.

The rest at Mount Sinai was over. The Israelites had been at Mount Sinai for more than a year and had started to feel at home

there.

Now it was time for them to move on. Again the sun blazed overhead, the sand glowed beneath their feet, and the hot wind made their faces burn. The wilderness swallowed the Israelites. The last part of the journey, along small, dangerous paths and tricky mountain passes, was more dangerous than any other part.

After the rest at Sinai, the cloud of the Lord advanced and called the people to follow. "Come! The promised land is waiting."

The promised land! The thought of that land made the Israelites' feet light and their journey bearable.

They imagined a tent in the cool shadow of the tall trees on the bank of a stream. They saw green hills and waving fields covered with grain, flowers and flocks. It was still far away, but one day it would be theirs!

The journey lasted much longer than they had expected. And it was painfully difficult in places.

The Israelites had sore feet from all the walking. Their eyes were burning from staring ahead, and their hearts were tired of hoping. They began to lose courage. Bent and discouraged, they trudged ahead. They found no joy in the journey. The water had a foul taste. Not even the food tasted good.

The future? Who thought about the future? They had no strength left to plan for the future. Instead they thought about the past.

Far behind them lay Mount Sinai — a glorious place. Still farther behind them was Egypt, where they had been forced to work hard.

Their journey through the barren wilderness was just as horrible as slavery.

In Egypt they could at least eat fish from the Nile. They had cucumbers, eggs and melons — cool, juicy foods. Life in Egypt didn't look so bad after all!

As for the promised land, it seemed a hopeless distance away.

In the ranks of the Israelites were people who were not really part of the nation. They were adventure-loving nomads from other nations who had joined the Israelites when they left Egypt. These aliens were the first to start grumbling. "This manna, this sweet bread — we're sick of it! If only we had stayed in Egypt!"

Some of the Israelites joined in. "Who will give us meat to eat?" they wailed. "For such a difficult journey we must have meat. All we ever see is manna."

As Moses walked through the camp in the evening, he could hear the people grumbling; he heard them whining in their tents like spoiled children. He sighed. The Israelites were falling into the same old sin, despising God's good gifts. The people were not grateful, and this made Moses' heart ache.

Everything could have been so wonderful! They could have marched to the promised land as a heroic people. But they continued to complain and were never satisfied. This robbed even Moses of his strength.

Moses was on his knees in the tabernacle, discouraged and defeated. He told everything to the Lord and said: "By myself I can no longer take responsibility for leading this nation. The burden is too heavy." He was exhausted. He despaired so deeply that he wanted to die in order to be released from his burden.

But the Lord wouldn't let Moses die. His work was not finished yet. The Lord comforted him. He promised to give Moses the

help of some wise, old men. Moreover, Moses was to tell the people: "Wait till tomorrow. Then you will eat meat — not just for one or two days but for a whole month, until you loathe it."

Moses brought the people this message, but he could hardly believe it himself. How was it possible out there in the wilderness?

A quiet fear gnawed away at him. There was something very strange and ominous about what God had said.

The next day black clouds appeared on the horizon. The air was filled with a rushing sound, like the sound of a storm approaching. The people hid anxiously in their tents — until they saw what kind of cloud it was. Then they came out.

"Birds! Birds! Quails!" they shouted. They remembered them from a year before. But this time there were even more of them.

The birds flew right at the tents and fell down breathless on the ground — thousands and thousands of them, great heaps of them. The Israelites shouted and laughed in delight. Eagerly they seized the birds and killed them. They started fires. Soon they were roasting the quails and eating them — gulping them down greedily and licking their lips. Before swallowing a giant mouthful, they would already grab another piece of meat. Some of them ate the meat raw.

That night they lay in their tents groaning. It had been a long time since they had eaten meat, and their stomachs were no longer accustomed to rich, fatty food. Many of the Israelites died with pieces of meat stuck between their teeth and were buried in the wilderness.

When the Israelites moved on, carrying enormous supplies of dried quail, they looked back in sorrow at the ring of little hills around their camp. "Kibroth-

hattaavah," they mumbled. "Graves of craving." That was the name that place bore from then on. A blessing had turned into a curse.

90: Unbelief and rebellion

The Israelites left the ring of graves behind them and trudged on. Sorrow and heartache went with them. And there was even more pain in store for Moses.

This time it was Miriam, his own sister, who made life difficult for him. Aaron, who was easily swayed, joined her.

Miriam had cared for little Moses faithfully many years before in Egypt, when cruel Pharaoh wanted to drown him. Now, more than 80 years later, she still wanted to mother him.

In her heart she was jealous of Moses. Moses was the little boy she had watched over as he drifted on the Nile in his cradle of reeds. At that time he could do nothing but cry and kick with his little feet. Now he was the leader of his people, the most important man in Israel — and therefore also *her* leader. He had enjoyed this status for more than a year. He was even more important than Aaron, although Aaron was older.

Miriam wanted to be the most important one herself. After all, she was a prophet too! God Himself had spoken through her the year before at the Red Sea, when she sang the beautiful song that God put in her heart.

All of this she said in secret to Aaron, undercutting Moses. Perhaps Moses knew what was happening, but he was meeker than anyone in Israel. He was not proud and eager to rule, and he would gladly have turned over his work to Miriam. Then she

could see for herself just how difficult it was.

The Lord heard Miriam's words, and He answered her through Moses. He chastened Miriam and Aaron. Moses was God's best friend. God Himself had called Moses to his difficult task. How did they dare speak evil of him?

Miriam was terrified when she heard this response. She went away from Moses silent and ashamed. The people scattered as she approached and pointed to her in horror. She was suddenly white as snow and covered with sores. Miriam had become a leper!

This caused Moses even more pain than her jealousy. He wrung his hands together and cried out to the Lord: "O God, please heal her."

God, who is merciful and could see that Miriam was sorry for her sin, answered Moses' prayer. For seven days Miriam lived outside the camp in the wilderness as a lonely outcast.

Then she returned to the camp, fully healed. The people waited for her before moving on.

Canaan was getting closer and closer. Finally, one month after the departure from Mount Sinai, a joyful cry went through the ranks. Heads bobbed up, and the people strained to see what lay ahead. Hands trembling with joy pointed to mountains in the distance.

Directly before the Israelites lay the same barren hill country that they plodded through every day. The tops of the mountains and hills were bare. But behind the mountains in the distance lay the promised land. That they knew.

The cloud of the Lord continued to move ahead slowly. Then it stood still. The Israelites pitched their tents and set up their

camp. But no one went into his tent. The people all stood outside and gazed at the mountains in the distance. A solitary bird of prey soared high above those mountains. That bird could already see the promised land — that's how close they were. Would the land be as good and beautiful as Moses said it was?

It was busy in the camp, and far from peaceful. The Israelites were excited, joyful and anxious.

"First we should send some spies into the land," the people said to Moses. "After all, we must be careful. Who knows what dangers may be waiting for us? The spies can seek out the weakest place, the place where we should attack. And they can tell us whether the land is really fruitful."

Unbelief again had the Israelites in its grip. Doubt was holding them back. Moses knew what they were thinking. He yielded to their request, with God's approval. The Israelites would soon discover that they could trust in God.

The next day twelve spies set out to cross the mountains — one from each tribe. Joshua was one of the spies. The people stayed behind. They had asked for spies because they doubted God's promise. And now, the longer they waited, the more they doubted.

91: The report of the spies

Day after day the Israelites watched impatiently for the spies to return. Finally, after 40 days, they saw some dark figures outlined against the bright sky high on a mountain ridge. There they came! They were carrying fruit back to the camp — pomegranates and figs. Two of the spies



carried a pole between them. Suspended on the pole was the biggest cluster of grapes the people had ever seen.

The Israelites went out to meet the spies, rejoicing. They crowded around them and hurled questions at them. The whole procession marched toward Moses and the camp.

Soon an anxious stillness fell. Hearts were pounding in hope and fear as the spies began to tell their tale. "We went through the land," they said, "and it is truly a land of grass and flowers, of milk and honey — a beautiful land."

The hopes of the people began to soar, but they were quickly dashed. Among the twelve spies were only two men who trusted the Lord — Joshua and Caleb. The other ten were like Israel as a whole — doubters, men of little faith.

"Here are the fruits of Canaan," said the spies bitterly. "But rest assured that none of us will pluck those fruits. We will not be able to enter the land. The land is inhabited by strong peoples in walled cities that we will never be able to conquer."

The faces of the Israelites fell. There was no more rejoicing.

Then Caleb stepped forward. "Let us proceed calmly and take over the land," he

cried out, "for we will surely be able to overcome those peoples."

The ten doubting spies laughed at him scornfully "Don't believe him," they said. "We saw giants in the land — Anakites. When we looked at them, we felt like grasshoppers. How could we ever conquer a land of giants?"

The people were convinced. They started to grumble and wail. Many of them broke out in tears. The whole nation began to murmur against Moses and Aaron. "If only we had died in the wilderness," some of them sobbed.

"Why is the Lord bringing us to this land?" others asked, bewildered. "To die here? To let our wives and children be taken prisoner? Wouldn't it be better for us to go back to Egypt?"

"Yes, let's go back," some of the Israelites began to shout. "First we must choose a leader — a different leader. We have been deceived by God and by Moses."

Quickly the people turned into a rebellious gang, a wild, disorderly mob. After their long and dangerous trip they smashed everything they had — joy, peace, their tie with God. They cursed the land which they had longed for all this time.

Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before the entire nation. Joshua and Caleb tore their clothes as a sign of mourning and tried to bring the people to their senses. "Stop it!" they shouted. "There's no need to be afraid. The promised land is unbelievably fruitful, and the Lord will give it to us. Believe in God. He is stronger than our enemies. Defeating those enemies will be as easy as eating our bread."

But no one believed them. "Kill them," some of the people shouted. "Stone those deceivers."

The Israelites had gone too far. God in-

tervened in all His glory to protect His servants. A great light as bright as lightning streamed from the cloud of the Lord. The Israelites retreated in a rush. They covered their eyes with their hands because of the blinding light.

Suddenly it was still again. The cloud hung dark and heavy above the tent. Moses had gone inside, bowing low. The people sensed that a great catastrophe awaited them.

They waited for Moses to emerge from the tent. Finally he came out. Never before had they seen such pain and sorrow in his eyes.

"Listen," he said, in a husky voice. "This is what the Lord says. You don't want to enter the promised land? Then you won't have to! You want to turn back? So you shall. You wish that you had died in the wilderness? Very well, that's just where you will die, as punishment for your unbelief. All who are over 20, except Caleb and Joshua, will die in the wilderness. The children about whom you worried so much will enter the land as a new people — but not until 40 years have passed."

The sun went down on a people in deep mourning in their tents. The ten spies died as punishment for their unbelief. The promised land was closed to them forever. There is only one key that could unlock the land of the promise — the key of faith.

The next morning a group of men approached Moses. They were brave and resolute men with sharp swords. "We now realize that we have sinned," they said. "Today we will enter the land bravely."

Moses shook his gray head. "Don't do it," he said, "for the Lord is not with you."

They refused to listen to him. Their despair drove them across the mountains. Perhaps there was a different key that

would open the land to them — boldness and recklessness.

Only a few wounded men returned. The others were in the promised land — lying dead between the mountains.

The wilderness. A mountainous area. An endless burning oven of rock and sand.

Moving along a difficult, winding path was Israel, led by the cloud of the Lord. The people were bent over, as if they were on the way to a funeral. And so they were, for the wilderness would be their grave.

The children followed unwillingly. “Father, Mother, why are we turning back? Why don’t we go on to the promised land?”

“Later, children. Someday *you* will enter the promised land.”

“Why not now, Father?”

Indeed, why not?

Because no one can enter the promised land with unbelief in his heart.



92: Korah, Dathan and Abiram

The people of Israel continued to wander through the wilderness. They had shown that they were not ready to enter the promised land. They rested when the cloud stood still and trudged on when the cloud moved.

The people wandered through the wilderness like a flock of sheep in search of green pastures. There was always a blue sky over their heads. Wherever they went, they left behind small rises in the sand. Each camp was surrounded by a ring of those small hills, which were the graves of the dead who perished in the wilderness. That trail would follow them for 40 years — all the way to Canaan. Only then would it be long enough.

The land of milk and honey would lie open before a new generation. The older generation would die off in the wilderness.

The Israelites wandered around without hope, without a goal, somber and still. Evil thoughts arose in their discouraged, dissatisfied hearts.

Korah was a member of the tribe of Levi and a cousin of Moses and Aaron. He worked in the tabernacle, close to the Lord. Yet he was dissatisfied and embittered. He ate the manna provided by God and he participated in the services in the tabernacle, but he did not think about God anymore.

Korah was unhappy. What did he have to look forward to? A few more years of wandering around in the wilderness — and then death. But his cousin Aaron would be allowed to enter the promised land. Aaron was always the lucky one. Aaron was the high priest, the one who was allowed to

wear that beautiful sky-blue robe with the tinkling bells. People bowed down before Aaron, but no one noticed Korah when he walked by in his white Levite's garment. Korah served in the outer court and was subject to Aaron and his sons. He was not allowed to offer sacrifices.

Every day Korah was reminded of his station in life. Slowly his jealousy grew. Why couldn't *he* be high priest and have Aaron serve under him?

It didn't matter to Korah that his thoughts were sinful. His life was spoiled anyway. Perhaps honor and power would bring him a bit of happiness before he died!

In the evenings he would sit in front of his tent and talk to the people of his own tribe about Moses and Aaron. "They're proud men," he would say, "and they enjoy lording it over us. They led us into the wilderness just so they could be our boss. And we, holy people that we are — we put up with it. We don't have to obey Moses or Aaron or anyone else, for we have God in our midst. They have no right to tell us what to do." That's how Korah talked to the people every day, until a fire began to rage in their hearts.

The tribe of Reuben was camped close to Levi. Dathan and Abiram, two men of that tribe, were also embittered. Reuben was father Israel's first-born son. Didn't that give the men of Reuben the right to rule Israel?

Soon a rebellion broke out. An angry band of 250 men, with Korah as their leader, appeared before Moses and Aaron. "We want to be priests too!" they demanded. "We are all holy men. Why do you elevate yourselves above the congregation of the Lord?"

Holy men — that's what they called themselves!

Dathan and Abiram were not among the 250 men. When Moses summoned them, they refused to come. "Moses has ruled over us long enough," they declared. "Didn't he promise to bring us to a land of milk and honey? Now he is letting us die in the wilderness. No, we will not obey Moses."

What false, ungrateful language! Was it Moses' fault that the promised land remained closed? Moses was one of the innocent ones, the ones who were suffering for the sins of the others. Was that their way of thanking him for his love and faithfulness?

"Lord," Moses prayed, "I have not taken as much as one donkey from You, and I have never done evil to any of Your people."

To the rebels he said: "All right. If it is the Lord's will, you will be priests. Come to the tabernacle tomorrow. Take along a censer such as the priests carry — each one of you. The Lord Himself will show us who belongs to Him."

Tomorrow! Thus they still had a whole day to think it over.

The next morning they appeared at the tabernacle — all of them. Proudly they stood in the outer court and burned incense like priests.

They did not have to wait long for God's answer. The earth began to tremble. Moses told the people to run away from the tents of Korah, Dathan and Abiram. The earth cracked open under the feet of the three godless men, and they disappeared into the abyss. They were buried alive. Then the 250 men who wanted to be priests fell dead.

The next day, some other Israelites began to stir up rebellion. A plague broke out among the people, and many died. But

when Aaron stood between the dead and the living with a censer, God's wrath was stilled.

This made it clear to all the people that Moses and Aaron were not in charge because they enjoyed being the boss. The people saw that the two brothers were servants of God chosen by the Lord Himself.

93: The sin of Moses

The Lord wanted to make sure that the lesson of Korah's rebellion was never forgotten. The censers of the 250 men were turned into bronze plates and were used to overlay the altar in the outer court of the tabernacle. As the Levites worked in the outer court every day, they were reminded that God chooses His own priests.

One day God decreed that each tribe was to bring a long shepherd's staff to Moses. A name was written on each staff. Moses brought the twelve staffs into the tabernacle and laid them before the ark. One of the twelve was Aaron's staff.

The next morning, the staffs were brought out again. The people saw that one of them, a dead branch of an almond tree, had come to life. Leaves and little branches were growing out of it. It had even produced blossoms and ripe almonds overnight.

Whose name was inscribed on the staff? Who was God's choice to serve as high priest? Aaron! Long afterward the blossoming staff was preserved in the tabernacle.

More years slipped by. Moses, the leader chosen by God, went before the people along their winding path and did his work with love and patience.

He brought God's Word to the people. He taught them and administered justice. He was their advisor. Moses loved the people of Israel and cared for them just as a wise and faithful shepherd cares for his sheep.

Moses was the meekest of all the Israelites. He was a hero of faith. Yet, even he once made the mistake of forgetting about God.

The people were camped at Kadesh. Again they were low on water, and again they advanced on Moses and Aaron with their threats and complaints. They accused Moses of all sorts of things. "You have brought us out here to die!" they grumbled.

God said to Moses: "Speak to the rock. Then it will provide water for the people."

Moses and Aaron led the people to the rock. An angry, screaming mob gathered around the rock, with sparks of hatred flashing in their eyes. They shoved and elbowed each other aside to get to the front. In their wild thirst, they acted like animals.

Standing before them was Moses. He was discouraged as he looked down on those thousands. Those stubborn people who moaned and complained at the slightest obstacle in their path — when would they ever learn to be faithful? Didn't they have him, their leader, to help them in time of need?

Moses felt wise and strong when he compared himself to the foolish people before him. He wanted to teach them that they had nothing to fear as long as *he* was their leader. "Listen, you rebels!" he cried out. "Do you want us to bring forth water for you from the rock?"

Us? Moses meant himself and Aaron.

Then he struck the rock with his staff. He struck it twice, and water came gushing out. There was enough water for all the



people and animals.

The people stared in amazement at Moses, their powerful leader. Moses knew at once that he had sinned, for he had stepped into the role of a magician.

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron: "Because you did not trust in Me and did not sanctify Me in the eyes of the people, I will not allow you to lead the people into the promised land."

Poor Moses! He was already so old, and he had witnessed so much misery in his life!

This was the most bitter news God had ever given him.

94: On to Canaan

After the Israelites left Kadesh, they traveled on to Mount Hor. There, at God's command, Moses stripped Aaron of his high priest's garment and clothed Aaron's son Eleazar with it. Then Aaron died, old and tired of life.

The people were sorry to see Aaron die. They mourned him for 30 days. Aaron had been a weak, sinful man, but he had borne Israel's cause in his heart. He had gone often into the Holy of Holies to make atonement for the sins of the Israelites. One day there would be a better High Priest who would atone completely for Aaron's sins.

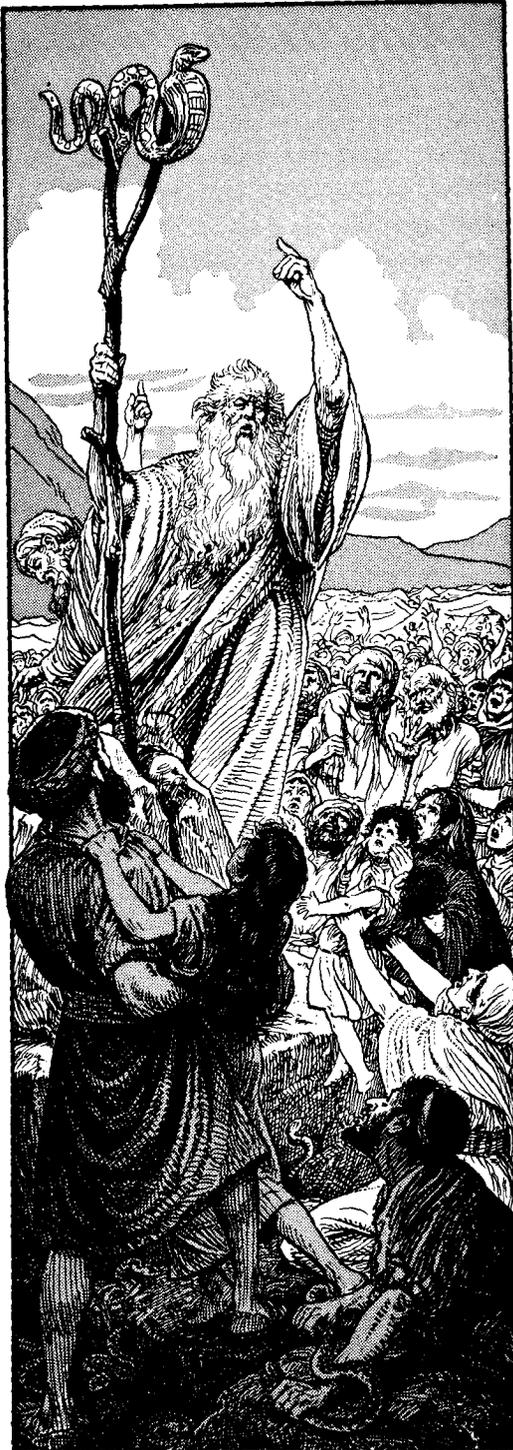
The sun went on shining just as though nothing had happened. The sand still glowed. And the Israelites marched along behind the cloud.

The 40 years were almost at an end. "On to Canaan!" That shout was music in the ears of the Israelites.

Before they reached Canaan, they came to the border of the land of Edom. The Edomites, who were descendants of Esau, would not let the Israelites pass through their land. Therefore the Israelites had to make a great detour. The Lord forbade them to make war on a brother nation.

Once more the Israelites had to enter the wilderness. Again they had to endure the heat and eat manna — when they had looked forward to the cool shade of Edom's trees and the grain of her fields.

In their great disappointment, the people became rebellious once more. They cried



out to God and Moses: “Why have you brought us out of Egypt? There is no bread and water here. That manna, that tasteless food — we’re sick of it!”

Again the punishment came swiftly. Poisonous snakes appeared everywhere in the camp. Their bite was deadly. Many Israelites died.

Then the people were sorry. In deathly fear they ran to Moses and begged for help. “We have sinned!” they cried out. “Pray for us.”

The Lord took note of their repentance. He commanded Moses to make a copper snake. The snake was put on a pole in the middle of the camp. Whenever an Israelite was bitten by a poisonous snake, he was to look to the copper snake. Then his life would be spared. The poison would be in his body, but it would not harm him.

This was a heavenly miracle. It was also God’s last lesson for His people before they reached the promised land. If anyone did not believe God’s Word and turned away from the snake, he would die. But if someone did as God said in faith and obedience, he would be saved. It was not the copper snake that gave life; it was faith.

Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of man, Jesus Christ, was lifted up later so that all who believe in Him would have eternal life. The copper snake in the wilderness was a lesson — but not for Israel alone.

95: Balaam the magician

Far to the north, on the banks of the Euphrates River, lived an amazing man — Balaam the magician. People bowed before him as if he were a king. “He is a powerful

man," they said. "He can do things that no one else can do, for he is in contact with dark powers. The gods are his friends. They let him see the future. They have put part of their own power in his hands."

People feared Balaam. If he gave them a dirty look, they crumpled, but if he smiled in a friendly way, their joy knew no bounds. If Balaam wished someone well, things went well for him. But if Balaam cursed someone, the curse would haunt him and make his life unhappy. That's how powerful Balaam was.

Balaam was also famous. People came to him from near and far with money and gifts. "Foretell the future," they asked. Then Balaam would mumble some mysterious words that no one could understand. Those words were supposed to be the key to understanding the future.

"Bless us," they demanded. "We will give you a lot of money." Balaam would raise his hands above them and promise them health and power, honor and wealth — whatever they wanted.

"Curse our enemies," they begged. That would cost them bagfuls of money. Balaam would shake his fist in the direction of the enemy's territory and call out the most fearful curses.

Balaam would do anything — as long as he was paid for it. If those same enemies came to him offering money, he would bless them. Anything for money!

Balaam was so rich that he didn't know what to do with all his money. He had it piled up in the cellar underneath his large house. Yet he always hungered for more. There was only one desire in his heart — money! There was only one god he served — gold!

One day Balaam was given an opportunity to stuff even more money into his

cellar. Rich, powerful emissaries arrived at his home. They got off their camels in front of his house and knocked on his door.

"We have come from a faraway land," they said. "We are from Midian and Moab. We have a message for you from Balak, our king."

Balaam invited them in. They called their servants and piled up gifts before his greedy eyes. Their leader addressed Balaam: "Thus says Balak, king of Moab: 'There is a great people that have come out of Egypt. They have conquered all the land around us. They have defeated Sihon, the king of the Amorites, and Og, the king of Bashan. Therefore, O great magician, come and curse this people for us. Perhaps we will then be able to defeat them.'"

There was silence. The emissaries waited. They let Balaam hear the clink of the gold coins in their bags.

Balaam's eyes gleamed with greed, but he did not say yes. A quiet fear had been eating away at his heart for years. Now that fear suddenly became great. Balaam had heard of the nation of which the emissaries spoke. It was Israel! Their God was the one who made them so powerful!

Balaam knew that God and was terrified of Him. He knew perfectly well that Israel's God was the only true God, the Creator of heaven and earth. If he were to curse the people of that mighty God, it might cost him his life.

Yet, the clink of the gold coins was music in his ears. "Stay here overnight," said Balaam. "I'll tell you tomorrow whether or not I can go back with you."

That night, as the magician lay on his bed, hovering between desire and fear while dreaming of gold, he heard a voice speaking to him: "You shall not curse this people, for they are blessed." It was the

voice of Israel's God.

In the morning Balaam said to the emissaries: "Go back to your own land, for the Lord will not allow me to go with you."

He watched them until they were out of sight. His heart was heavy, for he yearned for all that gold that would have been his.

96: Balaam and the angel

One day not long afterward, Balaam found another delegation at his door. This delegation was even bigger than the first, and it was made up of still more important men.

The emissaries said to Balaam: "Thus says Balak: 'Don't let anything stand in the way of your coming to me, for I will reward you richly. I will do anything you ask of me. Come and curse Israel for me.'"

Balaam felt bitter when he heard this message, for he knew that he could not curse Israel. He answered: "Even if Balak gave me his own house full of silver and gold, I would not be able to transgress a command of the Lord my God."

Yet the gold looked even more tempting to Balaam than the first time. Perhaps he could find a way out. "Stay here overnight," he said.

That night Balaam lay awake again, hungering for the gold and looking for a way to deceive God.

Didn't Balaam know yet that he had no choice but to obey God's will? God would have to teach him a lesson. He would show the entire world that there was no evil power capable of harming Israel.

That night God said to Balaam: "Go with them, but you will do and say as I tell you."

The most important thing to Balaam was that he was allowed to go. Then there was still a chance of getting the gold! Eagerly he saddled his donkey in the morning, took two servants with him, and headed south. The emissaries went ahead on their own. Because they were riding camels, they would arrive before Balaam. They could announce the news to the king.

The road to Moab was long and lonely. While his donkey trudged along, Balaam had plenty of time to think about God's words, but that's not what he did. All he thought about was the spells and curses he would pour over Israel. And he dreamed about the wealth that would be his.

Suddenly the donkey shook its head and reared up. Then it ran off into a field. Balaam was almost thrown to the ground.

What was the matter with the donkey? There was no one and nothing around.

Angrily Balaam beat his donkey to make it return to the road. Soon he was seated on the donkey heading south again.

A bit farther along, the path narrowed as it passed between two walls. At the narrowest point between the walls, the donkey acted up again. It jumped to the side and jammed Balaam's foot against the wall. The pain gave Balaam a rude awakening from his daydreams. He screamed at the animal and cursed it. After he beat the donkey again, it moved ahead.

A little farther down the road, Balaam and the donkey had to go through a narrow pass bordered by sheer walls of rock. There, for the third time, the donkey acted strange. It could go neither left nor right. It couldn't even turn around. Trembling in fear, the donkey lay down and refused to go any farther.

Balaam lost his temper. Balak was waiting for him with bags of gold, but now

this stupid animal threatened to make the whole plan collapse. Beside himself with rage, he beat the poor beast with his staff.

Then something very strange happened, something that gave the magician a frightful scare. The donkey spoke up! In a voice like a human voice, it asked: "What have I done to deserve these three beatings?" Two big, brown eyes full of pain stared at Balaam.

"Because you are playing tricks on me. If I had a sword, I would kill you."

Again he heard that reproachful voice: "Am I not the donkey on which you have ridden ever since you owned me? Have you ever known me to play tricks on you?"

"No," said Balaam.

Suddenly the wise magician saw what the donkey had seen all along. God opened his eyes. Right in front of him on the road stood a shining angel with a drawn sword. Balaam fell to the ground next to his donkey in fear and awe. He heard a voice speaking to him: "Your donkey has saved your life three times. If the donkey had not stopped, I would have killed you. But I would have let the donkey live."

Balaam trembled. Humbly he bowed and stammered: "I will turn back. I have done wrong."

God did not want Balaam to turn back. He *hail* to go on. Once more he was told: "You will say only what I tell you to say."

Balaam would be a servant of God — against his own will.

97: Balaam blesses Israel

Balak was waiting impatiently. When Balaam, the magician finally arrived, he received him joyfully and honored him.

The next morning a great procession wound its way up one of the mountains near the Israelite camp. The procession was made up of the king, Balaam, many of the most important men of Midian and Moab, and servants bringing animals to sacrifice. The mist had not yet risen from the ground. It was still dark in the valleys.

The procession came to a halt on the top of a high mountain. Balak and Balaam looked at the scene far below them. In the plains of Moab they saw a gray, swarming mass. It looked a little like a great herd of cattle, but it was the camp of the Israelites, the people of God, who were now to be cursed.

At Balaam's command seven altars were built. Fourteen costly animals were offered on those altars. Balaam hoped to win God's favor through sacrifices. Who knew what God might allow him to do?

In his heart Balaam did not believe that he would be able to pull God away from His people. He remembered the words of the angel of the Lord: "You will say only what I tell you to say."

Yet, he was not ready to give in. His hatred was greater than his fear. He hated the people camped below, and he hated the God who wanted to rob him of his reward. He was not yet ready to let go of the clinking, shining gold. That's why he fought against God Himself. The devil was driving him on.

Balaam stood on the edge of the mountain, his eyes gleaming. He raised his hands in the air. "Cursed be Israel!" — that's what he wanted to say. But when he opened his mouth, he found that he could not utter those words. Balaam was amazed — and uneasy. He was no longer in control of himself; someone else was governing his tongue. He defended himself and fought

remove
comma

like a madman against that mysterious power, but it didn't help. He spoke, but no curse came forth. From his rebellious mouth came nothing but words of blessing.

"How shall I curse those whom God has not cursed?" he cried. His voice resounded across the mountains: "Israel is a mighty people. I would gladly be one of them and die among them."

There stood the king, listening, with his most important servants and advisors around him. The king was struck dumb with rage. He pulled Balaam back from the edge of the mountain, screaming: "What have you done? I brought you here to *curse* my enemies, but you have *blessed* them instead."

Somberly Balaam shrugged his shoulders. He was no longer the old Balaam. Now he felt small, insignificant and subdued.

But he wasn't ready to give up yet. Balak took him to the top of another high mountain, where he would get a better view of all the tents in Israel's camp. Again sacrifices were offered on seven altars. Balaam walked back and forth anxiously. He made strange gestures and mumbled mysterious words. He called on all the evil powers to help him. This time he would have better luck.

Again he raised his hands in the air. Again he did his utmost to pronounce curses but he couldn't. It was as though God was laughing at him.

Finally Balaam cried out: "God is not a man, that He should lie! Will God say something and not do it? Behold, I have been commanded to pronounce a blessing. If God chooses to bless someone, there is nothing I can do about it. There is no misfortune in Israel, for God Himself is with that people." That was an even



greater blessing.

Balak was in despair. He clenched his fists. "If you are determined not to curse the Israelites," he cried, "then at least refrain from blessing them!"

He took Balaam to another high place, a point from which they could see the entire Israelite camp. Again sacrifices were offered.

Balaam waited passively. He was completely overcome. This time he did not even try to curse Israel, for he knew that he was completely in God's power and could only do what God would permit him.

Now he pronounced an even more glorious blessing. Balaam sang about

Israel's beauty and strength, about its special happiness as the people of the Lord. Israel would grow and become more and more powerful. No one would be able to hurt Israel. "Blessed are those who bless you, O Israel, and cursed are those who curse you."

Balak's patience was at an end. He lost his temper again, threw his hands in the air, and screamed: "You were supposed to curse my enemies, but instead you have blessed them three times. Get out of here! Go back to your own land."

But Balaam wasn't finished yet. God was using him to sing *His* song — a song that Balaam himself didn't understand. He sang about a star that would rise in Israel's heaven, a star of Jacob. That star was a mighty king who would defeat Moab and reign forever.

As they were climbing down the mountain, Balaam's heart was full of rage because of his defeat. Because he hated God more than ever, he gave the king some cunning advice.

They had failed to pull God away from His people. Therefore they should try pulling the people away from God. The king should organize a sinful feast and invite the Israelites to join in the feast. Perhaps they would sin and lose God's love.

The king followed that advice. Balaam's wicked plan almost succeeded. The Israelites came and ate and drank. In their delight, they hardly knew what they were doing. They forgot God and knelt down before idols.

They were severely punished for their sins. Many of them died. Yet, Israel remained God's people. God held on to Israel. No one could pull His people away from Him.

The Israelites had already defeated two

kings. They also overcame these enemies who had tried to lead them astray. The Israelites took over all the land east of the Jordan.

One day, as they were pursuing their enemies between the mountains, they spotted an old man on a donkey. The old man was traveling north. Soon they overtook him and he lay dead on the rocks.

Balaam had spoken God's words, but his heart remained full of hatred. Now he finally received his reward.

98: Moses looks back

An old man sat in his tent with his head in his hands. Sadly he stared at the ground.

He heard happy voices outside. People were singing and dancing. He heard the sounds made by a strong, happy people, a people that had conquered its enemies.

The Israelites were camped in the flat fields of Moab between a mountain and a river. The mountain was called Nebo. Behind them was the winding path they had taken to get there, a seemingly endless route through a land of heat and thirst, of sin and death.

The river was called the Jordan. Beyond the river lay the land of milk and honey — the promised land.

For 40 years the Israelites had longed for the promised land. Now they had almost reached it. Three powerful enemies had already gone down to defeat at their hands. The way was open before them.

God Himself led the way. All the Israelites had to do was follow in faith. In a few days they would cross the river. Then their greatest desire would be fulfilled.

There sat Moses in his tent, alone with his



great sorrow. He had longed for the promised land more than anyone else. He was twice as old as anyone in the new generation of Israelites. The surviving Israelites had either been born in the wilderness or had left Egypt as children.

Moses remembered what slavery under the Egyptians was like. Before the new generation of Israelites were born, he had suffered with his people and had become a fugitive for their sake. Later he led them out of slavery. During the long years of wandering in the wilderness, he bore all their cares on his shoulders. How he had toiled and suffered to bring Israel to the promised land!

Now that they were about to enter that land, Moses, who was 120 years old, was not allowed to go with them. *They* would go in, but *he* would die. Why? Because he had once failed to honor God. He had sought glory for himself instead.

Moses felt he could not bear the punishment. "I will ask the Lord about it once more," he thought to himself. He knelt down. His gray head touched the earth. He pressed his aged hands together. Respectfully he prayed: "Lord, I know that I do not deserve it. But You are good and merciful. Let me cross the river with the others and see the good land beyond the Jordan."

He did not dare say more. Tensely he waited and listened. Finally he heard God's voice speaking to him: "It is enough. Speak to Me no more about this matter."

Now Moses knew that there was no more hope. For a long time he sat still, thinking. Didn't God love him anymore? Was God a harsh master with no compassion for His servants?

But Moses was certain that God still loved him. Every day he felt God's love in his heart. That love was a great power in his life. It had given him strength ever since

the day of his birth.

Moses thought back over his life — 120 years of it. God had saved him from death in the Nile when he was still a little baby. That was a manifestation of His love. Moses then grew up as a prince in Pharaoh's court, where he learned how to govern a nation. God was preparing him to lead Israel. That was a manifestation of God's wisdom.

Later Moses had to flee, after trying to deliver the people on his own. He became a shepherd in Midian. There he had overcome his pride and his temper. He became a humble, gentle person, looking to God in all situations. That, too, was God's doing.

But in the confrontations with Pharaoh — who had helped him? And who stood by him during the long, difficult journey at the head of a nation of chronic complainers?

No, God was not a harsh master. He was a Father, a loving and wise Father who knows what is best for His child.

Moses felt ashamed of his prayer. A great longing began to grow in his heart. He wanted to be close to his Father — even closer than he had been on Mount Sinai.

99: Moses looks ahead

Moses had been Israel's leader for 40 years. Now his work was all but done. God had said that he would not enter the promised land. Moses was about to die.

Once more Moses called the people together at the foot of a mountain. They came by the thousands, silent and sad. They knew what was going to happen.

For the last time they listened to the voice of their leader, the powerful, calm voice that had encouraged them so often.

They listened as Moses repeated the laws God had given them and urged them to be faithful to their covenant promises. Moses warned them to be obedient always, so that they could be a holy people of God.

The people would receive a new leader — Joshua. Joshua was one of the two spies who had urged the Israelites to enter the promised land. He was one of the few who had enjoyed the full assurance of faith when the people first arrived at Canaan's border 40 years before.

The high priest Eleazar prayed for Joshua. And Moses laid his hands on Joshua's head.

Then the people saw Moses' eyes shine with joy. He spread out his hands and blessed the twelve tribes one by one. He sang a joyful song about Israel's happiness. He also sang about a prophet yet to come, a much greater prophet.

There was no need for Moses to worry about leaving the people behind. God Himself would be their leader; He would stay near them.

Higher and higher Moses climbed, up a winding mountain path, all alone. God came to him and threw a strong arm around His servant's shoulder. It was Moses' last journey.

His eyes were still as clear as the eyes of a young man. His back was not yet bent. Yet, he was about to die.

The people watched Moses climb. At last they could see him no longer. Their friend, their father, was gone forever, but they did not have to feel sorry for him.

They thought of how often they had made things difficult for him with their grumbling and unbelief. They knew how much Moses loved them — more than he loved himself.

Their wails went up as they mourned him. After all the grief Moses had suffered,

he would not know the joy of the promised land.

Moses stood on top of the mountain next to God. He was God's friend. The Lord let him see the entire land of Canaan. He saw it even before the Israelites.

He saw the white houses under the green palm trees. He saw the hills and the fruitful pastures with brooks running through them. He saw the Lebanon mountains in the north, and in the south he saw the mountains that the Israelites had crossed 40 years before. He saw the good and beautiful land, from the Jordan all the way to the sea. He knew that his people would be happy there.

Then God said: "Come, My child. It is time."

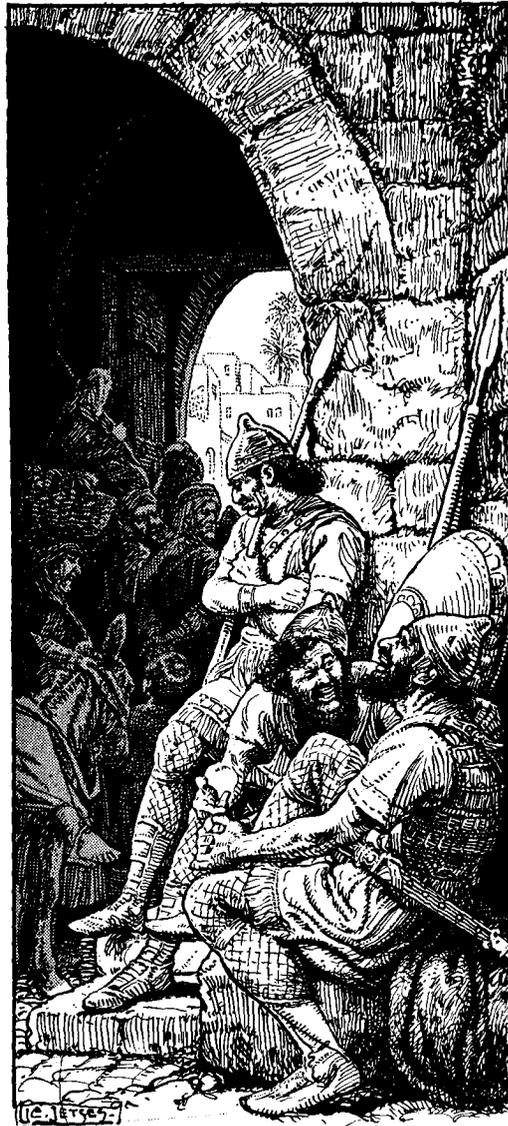
Moses died. The Lord took him by the hand and brought him to another land — a better land than Canaan. That land he was allowed to enter.

100: Rahab and the spies

Two men crossed the Jordan River silently and ducked into the bushes on the other side. They had entered the land of Canaan. Three hours ahead of them lay the gray walls of Jericho. Jericho was their destination.

The two men were Israelites. They had been given a difficult and dangerous assignment: they were supposed to spy out the city.

They were not afraid. They knew that God would protect them. That's why they walked calmly down the road, just as if they were local people. They showed no signs of fear as they walked past the guards at the city gate.



No one paid attention to the two men. They walked through the streets and looked around until it was dark. By then they had seen enough. The wall surrounding the city was meters thick. The city was very well defended. The spies would have a great deal to tell their leader.

Finally a few of the people of Jericho began to look at the two Israelites suspiciously. Perhaps there was something strange about their clothes. Or it may be that people had noticed how much they were looking around.

It was time for the two spies to leave, but the city gate was locked. They could not leave that evening. The two men walked on and came to a house built high above the street, on the thick city wall.

It was an inn. They walked up the steps and knocked on the door. A woman let them in. Her name was Rahab. She gave the men water to wash themselves and placed food before them.

While she was busy serving her guests, a rumor began to race around the city. There were people running through the streets. Soon someone was pounding on her door. "Rahab! Open up! Those two men in your house are spies from Israel. The king has sent us to arrest them."

The two men were frightened. "Now we're lost!" they thought.

But what was the woman up to? She did not run to the door and open it. The woman wanted to save them! The two spies were amazed.

"Come with me," she whispered. Quickly she led them up the stairs to the flat roof of her house, where she was drying flax. She told the two men to hide under the flax. Then she hurried downstairs and opened the door.

Calmly she stood in the doorway and talked to the soldiers sent by the king. "Two men?" she said. "Yes, they were here, but I didn't know who they were. They left when it got dark. They wanted to get out before the city gate was closed. If you hurry, you can probably catch them. They couldn't be very far away yet."

She stood in the doorway watching the soldiers as they left on the run. A few minutes later she heard the sound of the heavy city gate being opened. The two spies were safe!

Rahab was a heathen woman, and Jericho was a godless city. Yet, there was something in her heart which caused her to act as she did. This sinful woman believed in the God of Israel.

She went up to the roof where the two men were hiding. "Listen," she said to them. "Your God is very powerful, and I am sure that He will give you this land. We have heard how He dried up the waters of the Red Sea before your eyes and how you defeated the Amorites. All of Jericho trembles in fear of you. Now that I have saved your lives, swear to me that you will be good to me and that you will not harm me or my family when you come back to take this city."

The men made the promise gladly. When they saw that Rahab had a red cord in her hand, they said: "Let this cord hang from your window when we come to capture the city. That way our people will know where you live, and no one will harm you. See to it that your father and mother and your brothers and sisters are in the house with you."

It was agreed. The red cord was tied to the window, and two dark figures slid down the cord along the dark city wall. No one spotted them.

Rahab pulled the cord back in and quietly closed the window. The two men outside the city bent low to the ground and crept across the fields to the hills. There they hid for three days, until they saw the tired soldiers of Jericho retreating slowly to the city.

The two spies knew they were safe. They

walked to the Jordan, crossed it again, and returned to Joshua. They told him everything that had happened.

“The Lord will give us the entire land,” they said. “All the people of the land tremble before us.”

This encouraged the Israelites even more. The news went all through their camp. Everyone heard about the red cord that would be hanging from a window in Jericho.

101: Crossing the Jordan

Three days later came a glorious day — a day the Israelites would never forget.

Joshua had become the leader in Moses' place. He was just as courageous, just as obedient, and just as full of faith as Moses had been. Early in the morning he arranged the ranks of the Israelites in the exact order the Lord had specified.

The priests were at the head of the procession in their white garments. They were carrying the ark on their shoulders. The people marched along behind them.

The procession moved into the Jordan Valley — lower and lower, ever closer to the river. It was spring. The snow high in the mountains had just melted, and the water in the Jordan was high. The river raged and surged.

Beyond the river lay the land of Canaan. The people could see the sun shining on the hills. The palm trees were swaying gently.

But how would they get across the river with all their little children and their livestock?

They remembered that God had promised to bring them into the land of Canaan. This time there was faith in the

hearts of the Israelites. They kept on marching forward toward the raging waters. They craned their necks to get a look at the priests, who reached the water first. To their amazement, they saw the water swirling and foaming at the priests' feet. The priests kept advancing. God had told them to advance, and that's what they were doing. Water or fire — it made no difference to them.

The water retreated before them with each step they took. A glistening white path opened up through the river. The priests carried the ark along this path, and the people followed. To their left the water surged on toward the Dead Sea, and to their right it was held back by an invisible force. The people walked along a wall of water, silently and in awe.

The priests stopped in the middle of the river. They waited there until all the people filed by. Only then did they move on to the other side.

Twelve men each grabbed one large stone. They piled the stones on top of each other as a memorial, so that the Israelites would always remember the place where the priests had stood as the people crossed the Jordan. Twelve more stones were carried across the river with the people.

When the last priest set foot on Canaan's soil, the wall of water collapsed with a thunderous noise. The path across the river was no more. The stone memorial also disappeared from view, but it would be visible when the water level was lower. Soon the Jordan was flowing on toward the Dead Sea again, just as it had done for hundreds of years.

The Israelites were now in the land of Canaan. The significance of the crossing had not escaped them: God had indeed brought them into the promised land.

Through the depths, through the water, right through death itself, into the promised land they marched.

They made their camp at Gilgal. There they celebrated the Passover, exactly 40 years after celebrating it for the first time in Egypt.

After the Passover they reaped their first harvest in Canaan. The harvest was left for them by their enemies, who fled before them. Waving fields of ripe, sweet-smelling grain stood before them. Manna no longer fell, for the journey through the wilderness was over.

High on a hill by Gilgal, a memorial of twelve stones was erected — one stone for each tribe. This eternal reminder spoke without words. Hundreds of years later, people would still point to the stones and say: "Don't forget what a great miracle the Lord performed when He brought us into this land."

102: The fall of Jericho

Joshua stood on a high hill near Jericho and looked around. In the flat fields behind him lay the tent city of Israel. Ahead of him, still and deserted, lay the hill country of Canaan. In the distance he could see the city of Jericho, the strong fortress the Israelites would have to capture first.

Jericho was the palm city; it had an abundant supply of water. The white houses and towers gleamed peacefully against the background of the surrounding hills.

Joshua knew that there were godless people living in Jericho. The Lord had warned them often, but they refused to listen. Now Joshua and the Israelites had

come to punish those corrupt people. The Israelites would take over their land and live there as the holy people of God.

The gates of Jericho were locked. No one was allowed in or out. The walls surrounding the city were so strong and thick that houses were built on top of them. Heavily armed soldiers waited behind the walls. How would the Israelites ever be able to take that powerful city?

Joshua was the leader. It was up to him to decide on a battle plan. That's why he stood on that hill, thinking and looking around. But no plan of attack came to mind.

Suddenly, not far away, he saw a warrior with a drawn sword in his hand. Bravely Joshua went up to him. "Are you for us or for our enemies?" he asked, in threatening tones.

The stranger answered: "I have come as the commander of the Lord's army."

Joshua's heart trembled in awe and fear as he heard these wonderful words. He was on holy ground. He took off his shoes and bowed very humbly before the angel of the Lord.

Joshua was told that the Lord Himself had drawn up a plan of attack. The Israelites would not have to capture the city; the Lord would do it for them. The Lord would fight for His people. All they had to do was obey in faith.

Before long the Israelites marched on to Jericho. The soldiers led the way. Then came seven priests with trumpets of ram's horns, and some other priests carrying the ark. The people followed in long rows.

Behind the city walls, the people of Jericho watched them coming. They had their weapons ready to beat back the Israelite attack.

But there was no attack. The great

procession moved through the fields around Jericho without a word. After circling the city, the Israelites marched back to their camp.

The people of Jericho were puzzled. What could this mean? Why did those queer Israelites march around the city in such a mysterious way? They simply couldn't understand it. It made them feel even more anxious than before.

Every day the people of Jericho witnessed the same spectacle. Each morning a long, silent procession would approach from the east and circle the city as somberly as a funeral procession. The only sound was the blowing of the trumpets. Then they would go back where they had come from. For six days this went on.

That's all there was to the confrontation between Jericho and Israel. The men of Jericho began to make fun of those foolish Israelites, who seemed to think they could capture Jericho without a battle. For the first time in weeks, they began to feel safe behind their walls again.

The seventh day dawned. The darkness had not yet vanished from the fields when the watchmen on Jericho's walls caught sight of the foolish procession approaching. Silently the Israelites marched across the dew-covered land. As usual they circled the city. But this time they did not go straight back to their camp. They kept on walking around Jericho — twice, three times, four times. They didn't even stop to rest. They kept going until they had walked around Jericho seven times. Then they finally stopped.

A heavy silence hung in the air. Then the priests put the trumpets to their lips and blew again. Joshua jumped up and cried: "Shout, for the Lord has given you the city!"

The people shouted at the top of their

lungs, and the trumpets sounded. The noise surged across the land and struck the walls and strong gates of Jericho.

The thick walls trembled on their foundations. They began to crack and shake. The gates tore loose from their hinges, and the walls tumbled down.

The Israelites streamed into the city over the broken walls, with drawn swords in their hands.

When evening came, Jericho was a great, smoking heap of rubble. Not one of the godless scoffers was left. Their houses and possessions had gone up in flames. The Lord had given strict orders that no one was to take anything for himself. The Lord had cursed the city on account of its sin.

Only one piece of Jericho's wall was left standing. On that section of wall was a house with a red cord hanging from the window. It was Rahab's house. Because of Rahab's faith, God had spared that house when He destroyed the walls. The two spies escorted Rahab and her entire family to the tents of Israel.

103: Achan's sin

Night had fallen. In the deep darkness a man slipped out of his tent, dodged the watchmen, and hurried over to the ruins of Jericho.

The ground was still glowing under his feet. The smoke-filled air took his breath away. He scorched his fingers as he clawed through the ashes and stones. His heart was pounding. He was not frightened by the dying fires of Jericho; he was afraid that someone might catch him in the act.

He kept going. A strong desire drove him to keep sifting through the smoldering

ruins. He went into half-collapsed cellars and shoved aside glowing pieces of wall.

Finally he found a valuable treasure — a beautiful robe undamaged by fire. It was a garment that a king would be proud to wear. He also found a bar of gold and a bag full of shiny silver coins.

That was only a small part of Jericho's riches, but for this man it was enough. Those treasures would make him a wealthy man when the Israelites were settled in Canaan.

The man returned to his tent without being detected. He buried his treasure beneath his tent. He flattened the earth and smoothed it out with his feet. Then he made his bed above the treasures.

He tried to sleep, but he felt as though God was staring at him in the darkness.

Now that Jericho had fallen, the next city on Israel's route was Ai. It was a small city nestled between some hills.

Joshua sent out spies to help him plan the attack. When they returned, they said: "It is not necessary to send the whole army against Ai, for there are not many people living there. Two or three thousand men should be enough."

Joshua sent 3000 men. The next day some of them returned. They had been defeated. The rest of the army had been left behind on the battlefield. A small party of soldiers from Ai had beaten them back.

There was silence in the Israelite camp. The people sat in small groups, upset and disappointed. They had lost courage, and their trust in God was beginning to waver. They could not understand why the Lord, who had blessed them so wonderfully, now deserted them suddenly.

Joshua tore his clothes in grief and fell on his knees before the ark of the covenant. "Lord, why didn't You help us?" he prayed.

"How will we conquer the land if You are not with us?"

Then the riddle was solved. The Lord told Joshua that Israel had sinned. That sin stood between God and the people. There was a man in the army who had disobeyed God's holy command by taking some of the treasures of Jericho. As long as the thief remained unpunished, the Lord could not be with Israel.

But who was the thief? There were only two who knew — God and the guilty man. The thief would not give himself up. Therefore God would have to point him out.

The next morning all the people assembled before Joshua. In his hands was a bag containing twelve stones — eleven white ones and one black one.

The head of each tribe was to take a stone out of the bag. The Lord guided them in their choice. The black stone pointed to the tribe of Judah. That was the tribe to which the thief belonged.

The families of Judah stepped forward to draw lots. The lot pointed to the large clan of Zerah. Within that clan the lot then fell on the family of Zabdi.

Now the lot would be cast for the last time. It was deathly still when the men in Zabdi's family stepped forward one by one to take a stone from the bag.

Who was the man with the black stone in his trembling hand? It was the thief who had dug through Jericho's ruins during the night!

"Achan! Achan!" the people shouted.

Then Achan confessed his sin. The treasures were found in his tent.

Achan and his household and all his treasures and possessions were dragged away to a lonely spot known as the Valley of Achor. There he was stoned for en-

dangering Israel's covenant with God through his disobedience.

104: The capture of Ai

Again the soldiers of Israel marched on Ai. This time they were sure they would triumph — not because there were more Israelite soldiers than the time before but because God was reconciled with His people.

Joshua had devised a clever battle plan. Not far behind the city, in a ravine and between some rocks, he hid part of his army by night. Then he marched straight toward the gates of the city with the rest of his soldiers.

The men of Ai saw him coming. Because of their previous victory, they were not afraid. Recklessly they charged out of the city to attack Joshua's army. After a brief skirmish, Joshua's soldiers took to their heels. With a joyful cry, the men of Ai pursued them. That was the second time they had defeated the Israelites — or so they thought.

Their celebration came too soon. They did not realize that Joshua was luring them away from their city. They did not see the other members of Joshua's army emerging from their hiding places behind the rocks and in the ravines.

Joshua's men entered Ai unchallenged. By the time the men of Ai realized what was happening, it was too late. The smoke from their city was rising to heaven. "Retreat!" they shouted. But they couldn't retreat because Israelite soldiers were coming at them from their own city.

They could not flee, for Israelite soldiers were coming at them from the other direc-

tion as well. They were trapped between the two wings of Israel's army. Not one of them survived. Ai became a heap of ruins just like Jericho.

Now the people knew that God had not forsaken them. Before they went any further in making war on the Canaanites, they paused to review the law of the covenant and to pledge obedience to that law.

This they did on two adjacent mountains called Ebal and Gerizim. They built an altar and offered sacrifices to the Lord, thanking Him for His blessings.

Joshua read the laws of Moses to the people. He reminded them of the blessings that were theirs in the covenant, and also of the curses that would strike them if they broke the covenant. There were six tribes on the slope of each mountain for this ceremony. The two groups took turns answering — by shouting "Amen!"

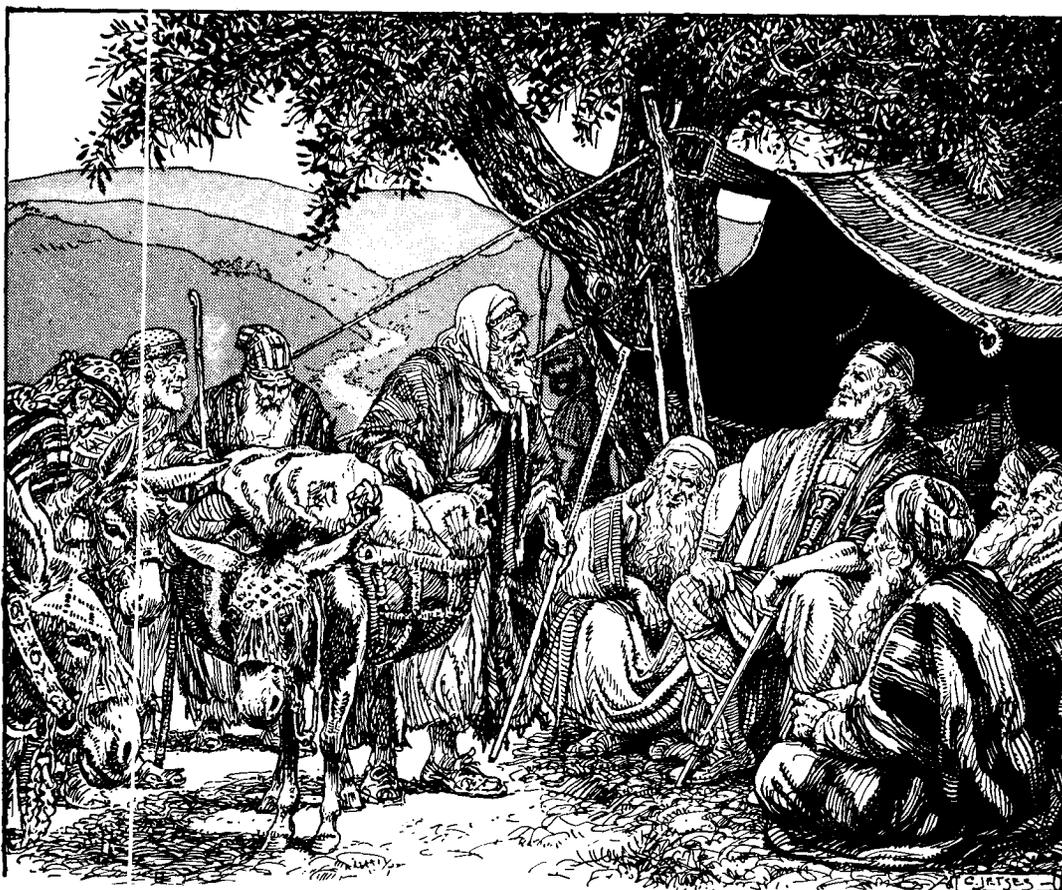
God would be with the Israelites as long as they obeyed Him and believed in Him. The walls of Jericho had been toppled. Faith alone would make Israel rich and happy.

105: The Gibeonites

Gibeon was a strong city, an almost impregnable fortress. And all the men of Gibeon were brave heroes.

But what good would their courage do against the Israelites, that amazing nation that marched right through the sea and through the swollen Jordan River? Jericho was also a strong city, but its walls had been ripped to shreds like paper. The whole city was destroyed in one day. No one and nothing could hold out against Israel's God.

Now the Israelites were encamped at



Gilgal. Soon they would leave Gilgal to conquer the rest of Canaan. Gibeon would be destroyed just like Jericho and Ai. All the Gibeonites would be put to death.

The rulers of the city were desperate as they talked the situation over. Five kings in the south of Canaan had made an alliance against Israel. They thought they might be able to defeat the Israelites if they joined forces.

The Gibeonites refused to ally themselves with the five kings; they saw how futile it was. They did not send an army against the Israelites, for they knew that Israel's God was fighting for His people.

Yet, there *had* to be some way of escaping death. Could the Gibeonites somehow make friends with the Israelites? If so, they would surely be spared.

It might work — as long as the Israelites did not realize that the Gibeonites lived in Canaan. The Israelites claimed Canaan as *their* land. They wanted to conquer it completely and occupy it.

The Gibeonites would have to proceed in a cunning way, then, and they did.

One day, as Joshua was sitting in front of his tent with some of the elders of Israel, he caught sight of a company of old men approaching. It looked like a delegation of

important men. Yet their clothes and shoes were all but worn out. The leather wineskins carried by their donkeys were torn and patched. Worn and covered with dust, the men came over to Joshua and bowed low before him.

"My lord," said their leader, "we greet you in deep respect. We have come to ask you to make a covenant with us."

"Who are you?" Joshua asked. "Where do you come from?"

They answered: "My lord, we have come from a land far away. Just look at our bread. It was still warm from the oven when we left home. Now it has turned into dry crumbs. These wineskins were new when we filled them, but now they are torn. And our clothes and shoes are worn out from the long, long journey we made. Make us happy by letting us be your friends. Even in our faraway land we have heard about your God and the wonders He performed in Egypt."

Joshua beamed with delight. He was happy that Israel was becoming so famous that even a faraway nation was afraid.

The Israelites immediately brought refreshments to their guests and prepared a great banquet. Joshua was very friendly to them and made a covenant with them. He and the heads of Israel swore an oath not to make war against the nation his guests represented but to let them live.

Once the strangers were on their way home, Joshua began to feel uneasy. There was one thing he had forgotten: he had not consulted the Lord.

Three days later the Israelite army marched up to a great city in the middle of the land of Canaan — the city of Gibeon. The Israelites planned to conquer that city.

The gate of the city swung open, and out came a large delegation of elders — the

most important men in the city. The Israelites had seen those men before!

Again they stood before Joshua, frightened and embarrassed. They addressed him in respectful tones as they stared at him with their cunning eyes. "Surely you will not harm us!" they said. "After all, you made a covenant with us!"

Joshua and the leaders of Israel trembled when they realized how they had been deceived. Yet, however wickedly the Gibeonites had acted toward them, the Israelites could not kill them. Their promise was holy and could not be broken. The Gibeonites' lives would be spared, but they would not keep their freedom.

Joshua made the Gibeonites servants in the tabernacle: they were required to cut wood and draw water. Through this menial slave labor, they were punished for deceiving Israel.

106: The sun stands still

The five kings in the south of Canaan heard that the Gibeonites had made a covenant of friendship with the Israelites. Adoni-zedek, the king of Jerusalem, called the kings together. Five large armies marched on the Gibeonites to punish them for their treason. They surrounded the city and besieged it.

Under cover of darkness, a brave Gibeonite slipped through the enemy lines and hurried over to Joshua in Gilgal. "My lord, deliver us! Help us!" he begged.

Even though the Gibeonites had deceived the Israelites, Joshua had to be faithful to them. Immediately he mobilized Israel's warriors. That same night they set out toward Gibeon, to do battle with the

five armies of the Amorites.

“Don’t be afraid of them, Joshua, for I will deliver them into your hands.” Those were the words God spoke to Joshua when Joshua asked Him what to do. Those words still resounded in his heart when he and his men attacked courageously early in the morning, at a point near the walls of Gibeon.

It was an intense battle, and it lasted many hours. The Lord made Israel strong. The Israelites drove their enemies away from the city of Gibeon and pursued them. The Lord Himself participated in the battle. Heavy, black clouds hung low over the enemy lines. Hailstones clobbered the Amorites as they fled. More enemy soldiers were killed by the hailstones than by the swords of the Israelites.

The sun made its way across the heavens at its usual pace. It was already high above the houses of Gibeon. Elsewhere in the sky, above the valley of Aijalon, the moon broke through the clouds. Darkness would fall before the battle was over, and the Israelites’ enemies would scatter during the night. By morning they would all be hidden in the mountains.

Joshua thought about the situation. He raced along at the head of his army, tired and sweaty but full of fire and courage. He was sad that he would not be able to finish the battle that day.

He was doing the will of the Lord — everything that God commanded him. The Lord wanted the Israelites to kill all the godless enemy soldiers so that His people could live in peace in the promised land.

Joshua felt one with God in his holy zeal. His great faith drove him on. Faith can open a path through a raging river and cause thick walls to collapse. For faith nothing is impossible!

Suddenly Joshua stopped and pointed to the heavens with his sword. “Sun, you stand still at Gibeon,” he cried out, “and moon, you stand still over the valley of Aijalon.”

Then he ran on, leading his soldiers. There was no doubt in his heart as he threw himself into the task God had given him. He drove out the Amorites, fighting hour after hour. The sun did not set, and darkness did not fall. The sun stood still and the moon stayed where it was until the last enemy soldier was killed. It had been a long, long day.

Only then, at God’s command, did the sun sink beneath the horizon. The moon resumed its normal course, and the stars shone in the heavens.

Never again was there a day like that one, a day on which the Lord granted such a strange request. There was a divine power at work in Canaan.

107: Settling down in Canaan

There was no city in Canaan that could withstand Israel. Jabin, the mighty northern king with many chariots at his command, was defeated along with all the others.

Joshua’s work was finally done. He had defeated 31 kings in battle. Here and there small groups of enemy soldiers were still in hiding — not enough to send out the army against them. Each tribe would have to clean out its own territory.

The land of milk and honey was divided up. Each tribe was assigned an area of its own. The people began to settle down in the promised land.

The Levites were not given a separate

area. They set out in all directions with the people of the other tribes. They would live among the other tribes in 48 specially designated cities. The Levites, as servants of God, would be teachers and leaders in Israel. Because the Levites did not receive any land, the people of the other tribes would turn one tenth of their annual harvest over to them.

The time of struggle and toil was past. The Israelites would find rest in the promised land. The land through which Abraham had wandered as a stranger was now taken over by his descendants — thousands of them. God's promises were fulfilled. And Joseph's bones were buried in their final resting place.

In Shiloh stood the tabernacle. There the priests offered sacrifices. God lived in Shiloh as a Father among His children.

When Joshua was very old, he called the people together once more at Shechem, near the mountains called Ebal and Gerizim. He knew that he would die soon. The time had come to say farewell to the people he loved with all his heart.

His fervent wish was that the Israelites would always be happy. And he knew that they could be happy forever — as long as they continued to cling to the Lord in full devotion.

There were many wicked powers that sought to pull them away from the Lord. Joshua knew that. Therefore he spoke to the Israelites for a long time. He warned the people about the idols worshiped by the heathens. He reminded them about the goodness and grace of God. He used fiery, passionate language. He was still the same hero of faith who had led them into Canaan. He cried out for all to hear: "Choose this day whom you will serve — the idols, or God the Lord, who gave you

this land. As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord!"

This zeal swept the people along. "The Lord is our God!" they shouted. They had made their choice.

Then the Israelites returned to their homes. Not long afterward, Joshua went to the land of eternal rest.

108: Canaanites / in the promised land ✓

The iron chariots of Jabin dashed furiously down the highway. Through the mountain passes they went, heading south.

Jabin was a Canaanite king who lived after the time of Joshua. Sisera, his cruel captain, led the way.

The chariots swarmed all over the promised land. No village, no house was safe from the cruel raiders. They stole grapes from vineyards in which they had not worked. They filled their wagons with grain harvested by others. They even rounded up the cattle and drove them along in huge herds.

No one dared to stand up to Sisera, the merciless soldier with a heart of iron. Sisera left a trail of corpses behind him. He even killed women he found hauling water from wells.

No one dared to go out on the road. Only in the cities did the Israelites feel safe — and in hidden caves in the hill country.

The trembling inhabitants of the oppressed land spent much of their time in caves. Sometimes they stole through the abandoned fields and examined their empty barns, ruined by Sisera's men. *They* did the work, but the harvest belonged to Sisera.

Sisera was a cruel ruler. For 20 years he oppressed the Israelites as though they were mere slaves.

The Israelites, once the mighty people of the Lord, had forsaken their God. When Joshua said farewell to the people, they cried out that the Lord would be their God. But once Joshua and the other elders who had seen God's miraculous deeds were dead, faith went to sleep. Those miraculous deeds did not live on in the minds of the new generation born in Canaan.

Life was simple and peaceful. The Israelites lived in a fruitful land. They ate and drank; they worked and slept. Sometimes there was a feast. The sun continued to shine whether they prayed or not. The grain seemed to grow by itself. And there was always enough bread.

Sometimes strange stories were told, stories about Moses and Joshua and the journey through the wilderness. But those events were part of the distant past. They were beautiful stories, but that's all they were — stories.

Among the Israelites lived heathen Canaanites. They had not been wiped out and removed from the promised land as God had commanded. Why should the Israelites start a war when they could live in peace? Moreover, there was much that the Israelites could learn from the Canaanites.

The Canaanites knew just how to cultivate the land. They made images of wood and stone and kneeled before them. That made the grain grow faster. They had images of Baal, a god who lived on the sun. They also had images of Astarte, the goddess of heaven. They placed altars before the images and offered sacrifices on those altars. Sometimes

beautiful, exciting feasts were celebrated.

The Israelites began making wood and stone images of Baal and Astarte. They offered sacrifices before those images and kneeled before them. They didn't remember that this was sinful. They showed no gratitude to God, who had given them the promised land.

The ungrateful Israelites no longer thought about God. But that didn't mean that God forgot about His people. He punished the Israelites to bring them to their senses. Just as a shepherd strikes a stubborn sheep to make it return to the fold, the Lord wanted to drive His people back to Him.

He sent a strange nation to oppress the Israelites and plunder their land. The time of rest in Canaan was over. Now came a time of blood and tears.

The faith that had gone to sleep finally woke up. The old stories became alive for the Israelites. They thought about them often and begged the Lord for deliverance.

That was what the Lord was waiting for. He called a certain man, a hero who drove out the enemy. Peace returned — and rest.

But the Israelites were a foolish people. Repeatedly they wandered away from the Lord. Repeatedly the Father had to chastise His children. Again and again, when His children cried out for help, He stood ready to save them. The Lord was full of love for His people.

This had happened three times. Othniel chased away the king of Mesopotamia. Then came Ehud, who delivered his people from the Moabites. He even penetrated the palace and killed the king. Finally, courageous Shamgar, a simple farmer, killed 600 Philistines by himself, using an oxgoad.

These three men were believers; they

Spring

were heroes who received strength from God to carry out their deeds. The Bible calls them *judges*.

But now the land was again in a miserable state. In fact, the situation was worse than ever before. The people who were almost wiped out by the Israelites under Joshua had turned the tables: now the Israelites were virtual slaves.

In houses and caves, arms were extended in prayer. Prayers went up all through the tormented land. But prayer alone was not enough to stop the enemy. "O God, we have sinned. Have mercy on Your people!"

109: Deborah and Barak

In the hill country of Ephraim lived a wise woman named Deborah. Her house was under a palm tree. Many Israelites came to her for advice. She was a mother to them.

But in this situation Deborah could not help, however much her heart bled because of the misery of her people. Day and night she wrestled with Israel's plight in her thoughts and prayers. All she could do was pray to God to send deliverance.

One morning she came outside and sat beneath the palm tree, beaming with joy. She had not been so happy in years. God had spoken to her, telling her that deliverance was near.

Far to the north, near the kingdom of mighty Jabin, lived a brave man named Barak. Deborah summoned this man, whose name means *lightning*. She had a message for him: he was to strike Israel's enemies like lightning guided by God. "Go to Mount Tabor, Barak, and take 10,000 men with you. Then I, the Lord, will send



Sisera to you with his chariots and troops. I will deliver him into your hands." That's what Deborah said to Barak, passing on God's command.

Barak was a man of courage; it wasn't fear that held him back. But his faith was not as great as Deborah's faith. He hesitated.

"Will my men be brave enough?" he wondered. "They are so frightened of Sisera! If only Deborah would come along, they would not be afraid. They love her, and they would follow her anywhere."

Finally Barak said to Deborah: "If you will come with me, I will go. But if you will

not come with me, I will not go.”

Deborah was willing to sacrifice anything for her people — even her life. She said to Barak: “If a woman must accompany you, a woman will also take the credit. Sisera will die, but not by your hand.”

That day messengers ran through the land. “Assemble at Mount Tabor!” they cried. “Mobilize against Sisera.”

Before long there was an army of 10,000 men drawn from two tribes. Ten thousand excited soldiers crowded around Deborah.

They made their camp at Mount Tabor, a steep hill that rose abruptly out of the green plains of Megiddo near the river called Kishon. Impatiently they waited for Sisera.

They did not have to wait long. Sisera’s spies had already told him that the Israelites were rebelling. Immediately he set out with his army to teach that slave nation a lesson.

The earth trembled as his 900 chariots thundered across the plain. Deborah saw him coming from her perch on Mount Tabor. She heard the wild cries of the soldiers. She also heard thunder rumbling on the horizon. A tremendous storm was brewing. The time had come.

“Up, Barak! Up!” she shouted. “Don’t you see that the Lord is with you?”

Barak charged down the mountain with his 10,000 men. They came at the enemy like lions. Even the heavens joined in the battle: rain and hail struck Sisera’s men in the face. A storm erupted as the clouds burst above the Kishon. The river became a raging, foaming torrent. A wall of water swept across the plain, dragging stones and bushes along. The grassy field of Megiddo became a marsh. Soon the chariots were stuck in mud up to their axles.

Sisera’s soldiers were totally confused and disorganized. The horses reared up and sank into the mud. Chariots tipped over. Finally not a single enemy soldier was following orders.

The great army of Sisera was defeated. Sisera, their leader, abandoned his chariot and fled on foot across the fields.

110: Jael and Sisera

Not far from the battlefield where Sisera and his men were defeated lived a small group of people in tents. These people, called Kenites, were nomadic shepherds. They were originally Midianites, descendants of the family Moses married into before God called him to lead the Israelites out of Egypt.

The Kenite men, including their leader Heber, were away from home. But Jael, Heber’s wife, stood in front of her tent.

Suddenly she spotted someone coming toward her. He had just emerged from the bushes. He was a bewildered man, pale as death, and his clothes were torn.

When she recognized him, she was terrified. It was Sisera, the cruel commander of King Jabin’s army! He was being pursued, and he wanted to hide in Jael’s tent.

No one would look for him in a woman’s tent, for it was strictly forbidden for him to enter the tent of a woman he didn’t know. But that didn’t stop Sisera. Here, among this small band of nomads, he would be safe.

Jael hated Sisera, just as all her people hated him and sympathized with the Israelites. And she certainly did not want to hide him in her tent. Yet, as a woman she

would never be able to fight off this brutal soldier.

Therefore she concealed her terror and hatred. She invited him into the tent, doing her best to act friendly. When he asked for water, she brought him milk — old milk that had curdled. Such milk would make him sleepy.

Sisera started to calm down. Jael promised to wait outside the tent. If anyone came looking for Sisera, she would say that he had run through the village and kept going. Meanwhile, Sisera lay on Jael's bed and laughed about his own cleverness.

Jael was keeping an eye on him through the tent flap. There lay the murderer of women and children. His eyes were closed. He was so tired that he fell asleep.

Was she supposed to protect such a man, a man who would later cause more misery and distress? Hatred overcame Jael. Her name meant *wild goat*. There was no restraining her when her mind was made up.

She took a tent pin and a hammer and crept up to Sisera. With trembling hands she drove the tent pin into his temple. That was the end of cruel Sisera, the clever bandit.

When Barak found his enemy fastened to the ground with Jael's tent pin, he was disappointed. Deborah's prophecy had been fulfilled. The honor of killing the enemy commander had not been reserved for him.

Yet, he was happy about the victory. He joined Deborah in singing a beautiful song of praise to God.

Rest had returned to Canaan. Deborah was the mother of the Israelites and their leader. And the people again served the Lord.

III: God calls Gideon

Hidden in the shelter of a rocky cliff stood a vineyard. A great oak tree, its roots spreading into the cracks of the rock, created shade for the wine press.

A young man was at work there in the stillness, but he was not pressing grapes. He poured grain into the trough and threshed it with a pestle. He sifted out the chaff and threw it on a refuse pile. He gathered the kernels of grain in a sack. The yellow wheat kernels felt like gold as they flowed through his hands, but there was no joy reflected in his dark eyes. Instead there was sorrow in his heart as he went about his work.

Sometimes he climbed onto a rock that glowed in the burning sun and scanned the horizon to the east, surveying the sunny countryside and the yellow fields of grain. Here and there he saw small groups of people working hastily.

The wind sighed as it passed over the hills. He did not see any Midianite raiders, but they would surely appear before long. Every year at harvest time, they came out of the wilderness and swept across the land. This had been going on for seven years. Wild bands of raiders went through the territory of the Israelites. They seemed as numerous as locusts. They struck down anyone who got in their way and destroyed anything they did not consider worth stealing. They didn't leave a single sheep or cow or donkey behind.

After the Midianites assembled again and the long procession crossed the Jordan and headed back into the wilderness laden with booty, the Israelites would come out of their hiding places in the hills, where they had concealed themselves like rabbits in holes and caves. They would wail when they saw what they had lost. However hard



they might work for the next year, they would still suffer hunger.

That's why Gideon was busy at his winepress, working as quietly and secretly as a thief. He hoped to save some of the harvest and hide it in a cave.

His people were in the Midianites' power because they had forsaken the Lord. That's what hurt Gideon most of all.

Now, when the Israelites were in greater need than ever before, they cried to the Lord for deliverance. But it seemed as though He didn't hear them. And Deborah was long dead.

Suddenly Gideon looked up, startled. A

man was seated in the oak tree. The man looked at him and said: "The Lord is with you, you brave hero!"

Gideon shook his head sadly and answered: "If God is really with us, why are my people suffering so much? Why don't we see wonders like the ones our fathers tell us about? The Lord has rejected us and let us fall into the hands of the Midianites."

The man jumped down from the tree and stood before Gideon. "Gideon," he said, "you must deliver Israel. I have come to you to send you on that assignment."

Gideon shrank back. "Me?" he asked anxiously. "I am just a simple farmer, and the least in my father's family. How could I deliver Israel?"

"I am with you," Gideon was told. "Therefore you will defeat the Midianites just as though they were only one man."

I am with you? Gideon fell to his knees. This was no man standing before him; it was an angel — *the angel*. The Lord Himself was speaking to Gideon. If the Lord would help him, anything was possible.

Gideon did not thresh any more wheat. He butchered a goat and brought the Lord an offering on the rock. When he walked through his own village, Ophrah, he felt a holy fire burning inside him. His sorrow and his feeling of hopelessness had vanished.

112: God strengthens Gideon

It was nighttime. Ophrah was asleep. By the house of Joash, Gideon's father, stood an altar devoted to Baal and a sacred pole devoted to Astarte, the goddess of the heavens. The whole city came there regularly to offer sacrifices and to bow



before the stone image and the pole. That was the sin that caused the Israelites' misery. And Joash was among those who were guilty of that sin.

Some sounds broke the stillness of the night. Doors in Joash's house opened. Dark figures crept forward toward the image of Baal. A shiny ax flickered in the moonlight.

"Knock the altar down," said a voice, "and cut down the sacred pole."

It was Gideon. The Lord had commanded him to do this, and ten of the servants joined him.

Early in the morning, when the men of the city came to offer sacrifices to Baal, they found everything destroyed. On the

spot where their altar had stood they found a new altar, an altar dedicated to the Lord. On that altar lay the smoldering remains of an offering.

"Who did it?" they cried. It didn't take them long to figure out that it must have been Gideon.

An angry mob confronted Joash. "Bring Gideon outside!" they screamed. "He must die."

But Joash was a cunning man, and he loved his son more than he loved Baal. "Do you have to fight Baal's battles for him?" he asked. "Is Baal a child? Can't he look after himself? If Baal is really a god, he'll punish Gideon himself."

The mob accepted this reasoning. They waited for the horrible punishment that would strike Gideon. But there was no punishment.

Soon the Midianites entered Canaan again. They were camped in the plain of Jezreel.

Gideon could not wait any longer. He was filled with the Spirit of the Lord. He blew the trumpet and called the men of Israel to follow him. He sent messengers throughout the towns and villages of his own tribe, the tribe of Manasseh, summoning the people to arms. He also sent messengers to other tribes — Asher, Zebulun, Naphtali. Armed men hurried to his side from all directions. Every day his army grew larger and stronger.

Yet, Gideon felt uneasy. He had seen how powerful the Midianites were. He had seen thousands of them hurrying across the flat plains on their camels, their spears pointing straight ahead. He certainly *wanted* to believe this ill-equipped army of farmers could defeat the Midianites, but he could not banish the doubts from his mind. He walked through the ranks of his soldiers with a heavy heart.

"Lord," he prayed, "help me now. Are you really planning to deliver Israel? Tell me, Lord!"

When evening came, he spread a sheep's fleece on the threshing floor. "If I find dew only on the fleece in the morning while the ground is dry," he said to the Lord, "then I will know that You are truly planning to deliver Israel through my hand."

The next morning he squeezed a bowlful of water out of the fleece. The ground under his feet was dry.

Gideon was encouraged by this sign, but his anxiety was not all gone. That evening he put the fleece on the threshing floor

again. "Lord," he prayed, "do not be angry at me for asking You for another sign with the fleece. Let the fleece alone remain dry, and let there be dew on the land."

That night God gave Gideon the sign he asked for. The next morning every leaf and every blade of grass was covered with dewdrops, but the fleece was dry.

This dispelled the last of Gideon's doubts. Courageous and full of faith, he set out with a great army to fight the enemy.

Gideon's faith had been strengthened twice. Now the Lord decided to test Gideon twice. He wanted to teach Gideon and all the people that *He* alone would deliver Israel. Then all the Israelites would believe in Him again.

"There are too many men in your army, Gideon," said the Lord.

Too many? Gideon didn't understand what the Lord meant, but he obeyed God's command and sent away all the soldiers who said they would rather go home than go into battle. Some 22,000 men departed, leaving Gideon with 10,000. But Gideon knew better than to put all his trust in his army.

The Lord tested him again. He designated 300 men and told Gideon to send the rest away.

Gideon no longer relied on numbers. The Lord was with him — that was all that concerned him. With the Lord's help he could defeat any army on earth.

113: A night attack

Gideon climbed a mountain with his small band of men. It was evening. In the valley below, enemy fires were burning, casting their reddish light on hundreds of

tents and camels. Gideon and his men made their camp and rested calmly.

During the night Gideon crept down the mountain quietly. A voice heard by no one else had commanded him to sneak into the enemy camp. Only Purah, his armor-bearer, went with him.

Quietly they crept along, staying out of sight behind the bushes. The watchmen did not see the two dark figures. Soon they were close to the campfires burning on the edge of the Midianite camp.

They heard someone cry out in great fear. Then they heard many voices talking at once. The sounds came from a nearby tent. Gideon could hear clearly what the men inside the tent were saying.

One soldier had apparently awoken from a nightmare. He told the dream to his friend. "Listen to this," he said. "I had such a strange dream! I dreamed that a cake of barley bread came rolling into our camp. It rolled right at a tent and knocked it over. The tent was flattened."

"I know what the dream means," he added anxiously. "We are lost. God has delivered the Midianites and this whole camp into Gideon's hand."

When Gideon heard that, he kneeled down in the darkness next to the enemy camp and gave thanks to God. Now he understood that God had sent him here to strengthen his faith just before the battle.

Quickly he returned to his own camp and awakened his men. In the darkness they crowded around their leader, their eyes shining as they listened to his battle plan.

Each soldier was given a trumpet, a torch, and an empty jug in which to conceal the torch. Then Gideon's band was split up into three sections of 100 men each. Quietly the three bands made their way down the dark slopes of the mountain and surround-

ed the enemy camp.

It was the middle of the night. The Midianite watchmen had just been replaced. The rest of the Midianite soldiers were fast asleep.

Out of the stillness came Gideon's signal to attack. With a shout he broke his jug on the rocks. He waved his torch around wildly, creating a hellish appearance in the darkness. The blasts of his trumpet added to the confusion.

Immediately the 300 men in a great circle around the camp did the same. The Midianites awoke in terror and looked out of their tents. All around them they saw torches swinging wildly and heard trumpet blasts.

"For the Lord and for Gideon!" That was the cry the Midianites heard on all sides, a cry that struck fear into their hearts. How many armies had surrounded their camp? Had all the men of Israel taken up arms?

In their wild fear the Midianites did not know what they were doing. Not one soldier obeyed a command. In the darkness and confusion, they seized their weapons and charged. Every dark figure around them they took for an enemy soldier. Soon they were fighting each other and killing their own comrades in arms.

Gideon's men stayed in their places around the camp. Soon the entire Midianite army was in flight, screaming with terror.

On all sides the Midianites faced the danger of death. They retreated in great confusion, stumbling repeatedly in the darkness. They headed for the Jordan so they could reach their own land, which lay beyond it.

Many of them got lost and were still wandering around in circles the next day when the Israelites found them and killed them. Gideon's messengers had summoned

many men of Israel to help finish off the Midianites. Gideon himself crossed the Jordan with his band of men to track down the Midianites who had gotten away. He killed the kings of the Midianites and carried away their treasures as booty.

The grateful Israelites wanted to make Gideon their king, and his son after him, but Gideon flatly refused. Didn't the Israelites understand who had given them the victory?

"I will not rule over you," he answered. "Neither will my son be your king. *The Lord* will be your king."

That's what Gideon emphasized to his people for the rest of his life: *the Lord* was their king. There was no other god.

After Gideon died and was buried in Ophrah, the city of his father, the Israelites forgot his words. Because they no longer had anyone to lead them, they returned to idols. They even began to worship the priestly garment that had been made for Gideon. Through this foolish ingratitude, they were plunged into new misery.

114: A special child

Things went from bad to worse in Israel. There came a time when each town and each village had its own idol. God was forgotten more and more. Hardly anyone bothered with His commandments.

Sin led to punishment. Foreign peoples gained the upper hand in Israel. They served as God's whip to chastise Israel.

There were still judges who delivered the people for a while and tried to lead them back to God, but not even those judges were well acquainted with God's laws. One of them, Jephthah, sacrificed his own



daughter when the Lord granted him victory over the Ammonites. He thought he was doing a good deed.

To make things even worse, a powerful new nation moved onto the scene — the Philistines. They emigrated from Crete and other islands and took up residence along Canaan's coast. They were a small nation, but they loved war. They raided Israel's territory and oppressed the Israelites.

God's people seemed to be in a hopeless position. But God was watching His disobedient children. However great His wrath, His love and faithfulness were even greater.

While His people lived in sin and unbelief, *He* waited patiently for them to repent. He even took steps to free them from their bondage to sin.

There were still a few faithful believers in Israel, people who served the Lord. Among them were Manoah and his wife. They were members of the tribe of Dan, and they lived near Philistine territory. They had no children. They were a lonely couple in a house that had never known the joyful cries of children.

One day, when Manoah's wife was working alone in the field, the angel of the Lord appeared to her. She did not ask him anything, but he did give her the answer to a question that had lived in her heart for years. The angel told her that she would have a son!

There was more good news: that baby would be a special child. He would be a Nazirite, a man whose life was devoted to God. And he would struggle against the Philistines.

When the angel was gone, the woman was too excited to continue with her work. She hurried over to her husband and told him what had happened. For a long time they discussed the wonderful news. But with their joy came worry and concern about the new responsibilities they would have to assume as parents.

If their baby was to be a special child, how were they supposed to bring him up? They didn't know. Therefore Manoah prayed to the Lord to send the angel again so that they could ask him how to handle the boy.

Not long afterward, when the woman was alone in the field again, the heavenly messenger appeared once more. Quickly she summoned her husband, and together they listened to God's message. The baby to be born would have to abstain from grapes, wine and strong drink all his life, and he was not to cut his hair. These special rules would be signs that he was a servant of the Lord.

Within a year, the promised child arrived. A baby's gurgling sounds could be heard in the quiet home of Manoah. The baby was named *Samson*, which means *sun child*, for he was like the sun in the life of his lonely parents.

Samson brought not only light but also

sorrow into his parents' lives as he grew up to be a big, healthy, amazingly strong man. When his mother watched him playing among the other boys in the village, bigger and more robust, his long hair trailing behind him as he ran, she couldn't help feeling proud.

But he could sometimes be so wild and headstrong, so rough and willful! At times his mother wondered whether he really loved the Lord and whether he realized that he was supposed to be a servant of the Lord. If not, how could he deliver Israel from the Philistines?

115: Samson's riddle

When Samson became a man, he liked to wander through the country. Whenever he saw roving bands of Philistines, his eyes flickered with hatred.

One day, in Philistine territory, he saw a girl who appealed to him in a special way. When he told his parents that he wanted to marry this Philistine girl from the village of Timnah, they were very disappointed. Such a marriage was forbidden in the laws of Moses. If an ordinary Israelite was forbidden to marry a heathen woman, how could a Nazirite like Samson even consider it for a moment?

But Samson was determined to have his way. He wanted his father and mother to come along to Timnah to persuade the girl's parents to agree to the marriage.

Samson did not have the patience to walk along slowly with his parents. When they got close to Timnah, he struck out on his own along a different path through the hills. He crossed vineyards and tramped through the woods. Suddenly he was con-



fronted by a roaring young lion.

Samson was without a weapon, but he was not afraid of the lion. He felt a tremendous strength welling up in his body. He jumped at the lion and grabbed it with both hands, tearing it apart as if it were a young goat. Then he threw the lion's body into the bushes and walked on, as though nothing special had happened. He didn't even tell his parents about the lion.

A little later Samson was on his way to Timnah again with his parents. He was going to marry the Philistine girl. He remembered the lion and took the same detour to see what was left of it. The carcass had dried out in the sun. Wild bees had made a hive inside and had filled part of the carcass with honey.

Samson stuck his hand into the beehive. He laughed off the bee stings and took out some honey. Then he rejoined his father

and mother, giving them some honey to eat. But he did not tell them where he had found the honey.

The wedding feast lasted seven days. The whole village joined in the celebration. When the Philistines saw what a big, strong man had appeared to claim one of their women as his bride, they were afraid of his power. His flowing hair and flashing eyes made them feel uneasy. Therefore they assigned 30 young men to keep an eye on him.

Samson did not know this. He took the 30 young men for friends who had come to celebrate the marriage with him. There was much eating and drinking, singing and dancing. There were also many games.

Samson said to his 30 companions: "I have a riddle for you. If you can give me the answer within seven days, I will give each of you a linen inner garment and outer garment. But if you do not give me the answer, you must provide 30 such garments for me."

The 30 Philistines agreed, and Samson gave them his riddle: "Out of the eater came something to eat; out of the strong came something sweet."

For three days the 30 Philistines puzzled over this riddle. Finally they realized that they would never figure it out.

Then they began to hate that foreigner from Israel. First he took a woman from their village as his bride, and now they would have to give him a costly prize for outsmarting them.

On the fourth day they went to Samson's wife and said to her: "Did you invite us to this wedding feast to make us poor?" They threatened her with a horrible punishment: they would burn her and her entire family if she did not get the answer to the riddle for them before the seven days were

over.

The young bride's fear overcame her love for her husband. Although she had been married to Samson for less than a week, she tried to deceive him.

She asked him for the solution to his riddle, but he would not tell her. "I haven't even told my own father and mother," he said.

She acted angry and spiteful. "Now I know you don't love me!" she said. "If you really loved me, you wouldn't keep any secrets from me."

When she kept whining and crying day after day, Samson finally gave in. He was too good-hearted to see his wife cry. "I found some honey in a lion's carcass," he told her.

On the evening of the seventh day of the wedding feast, the 30 Philistines went up to Samson and asked him tauntingly: "What could be sweeter than honey, and what is stronger than a lion?"

Immediately Samson realized who had betrayed him. He was strong enough to kill a lion, but a woman's unfaithfulness was too much for him. "If you hadn't been plowing with my cow, you wouldn't know the answer now," he said.

A great rage welled up in him. Those deceivers would get their garments but their own people would have to pay!

He went to Ashkelon, one of the Philistine cities, and killed 30 men there. He took their clothes to use as payment. That was the beginning of his struggle with the Philistines.

Samson returned to Timnah to present the clothes to the 30 Philistines, but he did not want to see his wife. Then he went back to his father's house.

After a little while, he regretted his break with his bride. "I'll go patch things up with

her," he said to himself. He took a young goat along so that they could have a festive meal.

When he arrived in Timnah with his goat and knocked on the door, the girl's father answered. He turned pale at the sight of Samson. "I thought you no longer loved my daughter," he said trembling. "Therefore I gave her to someone else as wife."

That was how the Philistines treated Samson.

116: Betrayed by his own people

The Philistines had deceived Samson twice. They even dared to give his wife to someone else. In his bitterness and his yearning for revenge, Samson wandered alone through the hills.

"This time I am surely justified in doing something to the Philistines," he said. "They deserve it!" He got his revenge in a cunning manner.

The area was rich in foxes. Samson caught 300 of them and tied their tails together in pairs. To their tails he then bound lighted torches. Seemingly without compassion, Samson watched the animals run off in terror. In their efforts to outrun the fire, the foxes went all over the territory of the Philistines. They ran through the fields where the grain stood ripening and crawled into the bound sheaves. They invaded the vineyards and the olive groves. Wherever they went, they set fires. The harvest of the Philistines went up in flames.

Because the Philistines could not take revenge on Samson directly, they went to Timnah and set his bride's house on fire. She and her father died in the flames.

When Samson found out, he was beside



himself with rage. He went through the land of his enemies demonstrating his fury and power by killing any Philistine that crossed his path. After that he went back to the hills and settled down in Judah's territory, living in a cave in the rock of Etam. He found food each day out in the field. He had become a lonely, somber man.

Samson was betrayed again, but the second betrayal was even more painful for him. His own brothers, his own people, turned against him.

The Philistines marched on Judah with a great army, for they knew that Samson was hiding in Judah's territory. The Israelites trembled in fear when they saw the Philistines coming. They did not dare take them on in battle. They wanted peace. They would do anything for peace — even betray their great judge.

Three thousand men of Judah marched to the rock of Etam and lined up in front of Samson's cave like a pack of frightened dogs outside a lion's hollow. "We have come to bind you and turn you over to the

Philistines,” they said, embarrassed.

Samson did not want to fight against his own people. However much they disappointed him and however much he despised them, he still wanted to help them. One day he would sacrifice his own life for his unfaithful, deceitful people.

“Swear to me that you will not kill me,” he said earnestly. They promised that they would not.

He extended his great, hairy hands to be bound, the hands that had already killed so many enemies of his people. The men of Judah wound two new ropes around his wrists and led him to Lehi, where the Philistines were waiting.

When the Philistines saw their great enemy approaching, bound and powerless, they came running toward him shouting in delight. They were eager to get their hands on him.

As soon as Samson heard their cries, his blood began to boil. He felt an enormous power stirring in his body. He knew that God had made him stronger than ever before. The new ropes around his wrists snapped like rubber bands when he began to pull them apart. He reared up to his full height and shook his long hair as if it were a lion’s mane.

The Israelites shrank back in fear. But the Philistines, who were sure they would win this time, came at Samson with their spears and swords.

Samson had no weapon. In the dry sand lay the jawbone of a donkey. That was all he needed. He seized the jawbone, which became a frightful weapon in his hand.

The men of Judah stood by and watched. Samson was alone as he fought the Philistines. With his tremendous strength, he pressed them back. Soon they were fleeing in confusion.

A thousand Philistines lay dead in the sand. Samson stood erect on the blood-drenched battlefield and cried out: “With the jawbone of a donkey, I killed all those donkeys! With a donkey’s jawbone I killed a thousand men.”

He threw his weapon down in the sand and sauntered away. The men of Judah watched him, deathly still. He didn’t even look at them. He wandered on through a dry wilderness looking for water, but he couldn’t find any. His strength began to give out; he felt weak and miserable. Finally, after a long search, he fell down in the sand exhausted. There lay powerful Samson, the great hero who had sung a proud song of victory. Now he was as weak as a child.

Finally he cried out to the Lord: “You have given deliverance through Your servant. Now I must die of thirst and fall into the hands of the Philistines after all!”

But that was not what the Lord had in mind. His intention was simply to teach Samson how weak he was without God’s help.

Things had gone far enough. “You have given deliverance,” Samson confessed. He didn’t say: “I was the one who killed all those Philistines.”

A rock split open and clear water bubbled out, forming a pond in a hollow in the ground. Samson dragged himself over to the pond and gulped the water thirstily. His strength came back, and he called the spring *the well of the one who cries out*.

117: Escape and betrayal

After Samson’s victory over the Philistines at Lehi, Israel was at rest. The Philistines did not dare bother the

Israelites. They were too afraid of Samson to risk his wrath.

Samson feared no one. Sometimes he walked right through the land of the Philistines. One day he walked into Gaza, one of their cities, in broad daylight.

He had not come to Gaza because the Lord sent him. It was his own idea. His reckless heart, which loved to flirt with danger, had sent him there.

He walked through the streets, making no effort to disguise himself, for he was confident of his own strength. He knew a woman in Gaza. He went to her home.

The Philistines were frightened when they saw Samson in their city. Even though they all hated him, no one dared to attack him. But now that he was within their city walls, they started feeling braver. Never before had they had such a fine opportunity to get rid of him once and for all!

The men of the city were summoned to surround the house. The city gates were closed. When the great doors swung shut, the bar was put in place so that they would not open.

Now Samson was a captive. The next morning the Philistines would kill him. Wasn't a whole city stronger than one man?

In the middle of the night, a door opened. Samson stepped through the door and walked along the silent, dark street. The men surrounding the house had gone home.

Soon Samson reached the locked city gate. He laughed to himself, took hold of the heavy posts, and tore them right out of the ground. He put his shoulder under the bar and slowly lifted up the entire city gate. The creaking, grating sounds of wood and stone breaking echoed through the city streets. With the whole city gate resting on his shoulders, Samson laughed again and



walked off into the darkness, following a winding path up a hill.

The next morning, the sun's rays reflected off the city gate left on top of the hill for all to see. The Philistines were amazed as they contemplated the damage Samson had done.

The Philistines were still eager to get rid of Samson. Not one of them was a match for Samson in strength. But there was one enemy even stronger than Samson — the sin in his own heart. Powerful Samson could overcome anyone but himself!

In the valley of Sorek lived a beautiful

young Philistine woman named Delilah. Samson got to know her and fell in love with her. He was a lonely man longing for love and companionship. He thought he had found love in the shining eyes of Delilah. Therefore he came to her house often.

When the Philistines found out, the rulers of their five cities came to visit Delilah. They sat in the room where Samson often sat — because they knew he was far away. They let the coins in their bags jingle as they said: “You must help us, Delilah. After all, you’re a Philistine. Each one of us will give you eleven hundred silver pieces if you help us destroy Samson.”

The choice was not difficult for Delilah, for there was no loyalty in her heart. She loved money more than she loved Samson. She was already thinking of ways to spend that money. Yes, she would betray Samson.

118: Samson’s secret

Soon after Delilah agreed to betray Samson, he came to visit her again. There was deceit in her heart, but she acted warm and loving.

She simply had to know the secret of his power. “He must have some sort of magic that makes him strong,” she thought.

“I know so little about you,” she said, “yet I love you so deeply. I want to know all about you. You are not a giant, but you have the strength of a giant. Where do you get that strength?”

Samson evaded her troublesome question with a quick answer. He loved to spend time with Delilah, and he didn’t want to spoil the atmosphere. Therefore he said: “If I were bound with seven fresh bowstrings

that have not been dried, I would lose my strength.”

Delilah didn’t entirely believe him. All the same, she bound him with seven fresh bowstrings when he went to sleep. Then she cried out: “The Philistines are upon you, Samson!” Samson jumped up at once and broke the bowstrings as if they were mere threads.

He saw no Philistines in the room. The only person he saw was Delilah, who had forfeited Samson’s love and warmth.

Delilah acted very angry and disappointed because of Samson’s lie. And Samson could not stand to see anger in those pretty eyes. He felt he could not live without the love of this beautiful Philistine woman.

When she asked him again what his secret was, he gave her a new lie. “If I were bound with new ropes that have never been used before,” he said, “I would be powerless.” He wasn’t even suspicious of Delilah. To Samson it was just a game.

Delilah awaited her opportunity. When Samson was fast asleep, she bound him with a set of new ropes that had never been used. Again she woke him up by shouting that the Philistines were upon him, but he freed himself simply by flexing his muscles. The thick ropes fell to the floor, ruined.

Then Delilah started treating Samson like an enemy. She would have nothing more to do with him unless he told her his secret.

Samson was in despair. He could not live without Delilah. But he was not allowed to tell her about the reason for his amazing strength. It was a secret between Samson and God.

In his heart a voice spoke up, warning him against Delilah, but Samson did not listen. His love made him deaf to that voice and blind to Delilah’s deceit. He played

games with the great gift God had given him. Love for an unworthy woman had overpowered him and gotten him into trouble once before. Apparently he had not learned his lesson.

"Tell me the truth," begged Delilah as she flattered him and pretended to love him.

Samson began to weaken. "My hair . . ." he said. He hesitated. Then he looked at a loom standing in the room. The loom gave him an idea.

"If you weave my seven locks of hair into the loom, I will lose my strength," he said.

When Samson was asleep, Delilah tried it. She intertwined the threads on the loom with the locks of Samson's long hair. Samson's head was firmly attached to the loom. The result was a colorful web that could not be untangled.

Again Delilah shouted: "Samson, the Philistines!" He jumped up and tore the loom right off its mooring with his hair. The tangle of thread and hair dangled from his head.

After that Delilah made things extremely difficult for Samson. Each time he came to see her, she nagged and whined the whole time he was there. "If you really love me so much," she would ask, "why have you deceived me so often? Go away!"

Her attitude upset Samson. He was so unhappy that he felt ready to die. Finally, to show Delilah that he loved her even more than he loved God, he bared his soul to her and gave away his secret.

"My hair has never been cut," he explained, "for I am a Nazirite of God. I am consecrated to God. My long hair is a sign of that consecration. If that long hair were ever cut, I would be just like anyone else."

Delilah read the despair in Samson's honest eyes. She knew that there was no

secret left in his heart. She sent word to the rulers of the Philistines that she knew the secret at last, and they brought her the money.

Samson was in deadly peril!

119: The death of Samson

Soon Samson went to visit Delilah again. It proved to be his last visit.

She saw him coming, but she had no compassion on him. She laughed. When he arrived, she was nicer to him than ever.

It was such a pleasure for the tired wanderer to be in Delilah's house again. He loved to go to sleep with his head in her lap.

While Samson was sleeping, a man tiptoed into the room and cut his hair. Soon the seven long locks lay on the floor. Gone was the sign of Samson's strength and of his covenant with God. He was no longer God's servant.

"The Philistines are upon you, Samson!" cried Delilah. He jumped up and laughed when he saw that there really were Philistines in the house. He would strike them and kill them, as he had done so often.

They held his arms and jumped on his back, and he could not shake himself free. They threw him to the floor and bound him. His eyes sought Delilah, but a cruel Philistine soldier quickly gouged them out.

Samson was led away to Gaza as a slave. He walked through the city gate that he had once carried off on his shoulders. This time he was bent over, and he couldn't even see it. The great warrior who had spent all of his adult life wandering through the hills was now a prisoner. He was locked in a musty dungeon where he was put to work



grinding in the mill like the lowliest slave.

Even more painful than his menial forced labor was the sorrow and repentance in his heart. What he felt in his heart hurt him more than the loss of his eyes.

Some time after Samson was captured, the Philistines celebrated a great feast in honor of their god Dagon. The Philistines had something to celebrate: Samson was now their prisoner. They brought him from

the prison to the temple in Gaza, where the feast was held. There the Philistines could all get a look at him and make fun of him.

A young boy led blind Samson to a great square in front of the temple. This square faced the temple, which was built against a steep hillside. The roof of the temple, on which thousands of Philistines had gathered, rested on pillars. The whole temple was full of Philistines eager to celebrate

the recent triumph. On the roof of the temple alone there were about 3000 people.

That day Samson was scorned and abused for the last time. The Philistines played a cruel game with the old, blind lion. They baited and tormented him. A cheer went up from the crowd every time blind Samson struck out at his tormentors and missed.

When they were finally tired of their cruel game, they entered the temple singing. Samson felt the boy's hand in his again. He was led to the stone pillars on which the temple rested. He leaned against one of the pillars and listened to the screams of thousands of Philistines who would soon be oppressing the Israelites again.

In his horrible suffering and anguish, he cried out to God. "Lord, Lord," he begged, "give me back my strength just this once."

Suddenly he felt a stream of energy and power flowing through his body. His prayer had been answered. God had returned to His servant. That was a sure sign that Samson's sin had been forgiven.

There was great joy in Samson's lonely heart. Now he would be God's servant one last time. He was ready to surrender his life in God's service. What was his life worth to his people as long as he was a slave of the Philistines?

He knew how to take revenge on the Philistines. His hands, trembling with joy and strength, felt the pillars, the central pillars on which the whole building rested. "Let me die with the Philistines!" he shouted.

Samson pushed at the pillars with all his might. They creaked as he pushed them farther and farther apart. The roof sagged, and the Philistines screamed. Then the whole building collapsed with a great roar.

Thousands of people lay dead in the rub-

ble. Samson took more Philistines with him in death than he had managed to kill while he was alive.

Later some Israelites came into Philistine territory to retrieve Samson's crushed body. They buried it in the village of his father.

Samson had been Israel's judge for twenty years.

120: Ruth and Naomi

At one point during the time of the judges, there was a great famine in the land of Canaan. A man who lived in Bethlehem sold his house and land and went to Moab with his wife and two sons. In Moab there was enough food for all. He planned to stay there until the famine was over.

The man's name was Elimelech. His wife was Naomi. His two sons were named Mahlon and Chilion.

They lived in Moab as foreigners. They were surrounded by heathen people. They had escaped the clutches of hunger, but they could not flee the arms of death. Death was not afraid to enter Moab.

Elimelech became ill and died. He was buried in Moab. That was a bitter disappointment for Naomi, for it left her stuck in a strange land with two sons to care for.

When Mahlon and Chilion grew up, they married young Moabite women. One married Ruth, the other Orpah.

Ten years later death entered Moab again and took Mahlon and Chilion away. They were buried alongside their father.

Now Naomi was left in Moab alone. She was old, and her sorrows had turned her hair gray. She had lost all she had in the land of Moab. Every day she grew more homesick for her own people and for the

land where she had once been so happy.

She went on living in Moab for a while with her daughters-in-law, who were just as lonely as she was. But when she heard that the Lord had delivered His people and that the famine was gone, she couldn't wait any longer.

She prepared to go back to Bethlehem. That was where she belonged, and there she would be buried.

Ruth and Orpah accompanied Naomi when she set out, for they loved her dearly. She had been a good and loving mother to her two daughters-in-law.

They walked along, silent and sad, full of unhappy thoughts. All three of them had lost so much! And now they would have to part.

Finally the three reached a point where Naomi could not expect her daughters-in-law to accompany her any farther. Naomi stopped to say goodbye. She would never see her daughters-in-law again.

"Go back, my daughters," she said. "Go back to your own people and your own family. That's where you belong. There you can get married again and achieve new happiness. May the Lord bless you for being so good and kind to me and to my two sons buried in Moab."

Orpah kissed her mother-in-law and went her way, feeling very sad.

But Ruth did not turn back. Weeping, she clung to Naomi. That kind old woman had been much more to her than a mother. Through her she had come to know God. The God of Naomi also loved Ruth. Ruth did not want to stay in Moab, where idols were worshiped.

"Look, Orpah is going back to her own people and her own gods," said Naomi. "Why don't you follow her?"

Ruth refused.

"No," she sobbed. "I will not desert you. Wherever you go I will go. *Your* people will be *my* people, and *your* God will be *my* God. Only death will separate us."

Naomi could see that Ruth's mind was made up. She did not press her any further.

After a long journey, the two of them arrived in Bethlehem. Naomi had left Bethlehem as a young and happy woman, but she returned old and bent.

"Is that Naomi?" the women of Bethlehem asked in amazement.

Naomi answered in sorrowful tones: "Don't call me Naomi — the pleasant one. Call me Mara — the bitter one. The Lord has dealt harshly with me."

Ruth stroked Naomi's wrinkled old hand. She was a great comfort to Naomi.

121: Ruth and Boaz

When Ruth and Naomi returned to Bethlehem, the harvest season was just beginning. The heavy grain was ripe and stood waiting in the fields. The harvesters were busy.

Naomi and Ruth had no grain. They were paupers, for Naomi's land had been sold.

Ruth said: "Mother, let me go out to the fields and glean some ears of grain."

Naomi answered: "Go ahead, my daughter."

In those days, the ears of grain that the harvesters missed or dropped could be gathered up by poor people. That way no one ever had to go hungry. It was a beautiful custom.

Ruth found a field owned by a wealthy man and started gleaning there. After a while the owner came into the field to see

how the harvesters were doing. His name was Boaz. He was of the family of Elimelech, Naomi's deceased husband.

Boaz was a friendly, kind master. His servants were very attached to him.

"The Lord be with you!" he said.

"The Lord bless you!" the harvesters replied.

Then Boaz spotted a young woman he had never seen before. She was busy gleaning ears of grain left behind by the harvesters. "Who is that woman?" he asked.

The servant supervising the harvesters answered "That's the young woman from Moab who came back with Naomi. She asked us for permission to glean in this field. She has been busy all morning; she takes almost no time to rest."

Boaz had already heard a good deal about Ruth. He went up to her and said: "My daughter, keep on gleaning in my fields throughout the harvest season. I'll see to it that my servants are good to you. Whenever you're thirsty, they'll give you something to drink. Don't go to anyone else's fields."

Ruth bowed deeply before this kind man and asked: "Why are you so good to a stranger?"

"Because I have heard of your love and faithfulness," Boaz replied. "I have heard how you sought refuge with our people and our God."

Ruth was happy and thankful. She continued working zealously.

When it was time to eat, Boaz called her and gave her a place in the shade among his servants and workers. He gave her bread and roasted grain to eat — as much as she wanted. What was left she could take home to Naomi. He also allowed her to help herself to the wine that was so good for thirst.



When she was back at work, Boaz said to his servants: "Make sure to leave some ears of grain behind for her. Let some fall from the bound sheaves for her to gather."

Before Boaz went home, he saw to it that Ruth would be well treated and find plenty of grain. That evening, after Ruth threshed her grain, she went back to Naomi with a whole sackful.

The old woman was happy and amazed. She asked: "Where did you glean, my child?" When Ruth told her the story, she folded her hands gratefully and asked the Lord for a blessing on Boaz.

Ruth stayed in the fields of Boaz throughout the harvest. When winter came, she and Naomi would have enough grain.

Later that year, something beautiful happened: wealthy Boaz married poor Ruth and bought back Naomi's land for her. Now all their cares were behind them.

When Ruth and Boaz had a son, Naomi forgot her unhappiness. She took the baby

on her lap, and all the women of the neighborhood came to see. Now Naomi no longer wanted to be called Mara, for life was not bitter for her anymore.

The baby was named Obed, and the family stayed in Bethlehem. Israel's King David was his grandson.

122: The birth of Samuel

Once there was a woman who was most unhappy with her life. Her name was Hannah, and she lived in Ramah, which was in the hill country of Ephraim.

Hannah was in good health, and she was not poor. Why, then, was she so unhappy? Because she had no children. In those days it was considered a shame for a woman to be childless.

The other women in the village looked down on Hannah because she was not a mother, as they were. One of them, Peninnah, lived in the same house; Hannah and Peninnah were married to the same man. Peninnah, who had many children, tormented Hannah every day because the Lord seemed to have forgotten her. "You're a useless creature!" she would say. "What have you done for the future of our people? Nothing! You're no more useful than a slave."

Such scorn made Hannah's life unbearable. She cried a great deal and sometimes refused to eat because she was so unhappy.

She had one comfort: Elkanah, her husband, was very good to her. He was also Peninnah's husband, but he loved Hannah more. He would say: "Hannah, why are you crying? And why aren't you eating? Don't be so sad. Am I not worth more to

you than ten sons?"

The love of Elkanah was not enough to wash away Hannah's sorrow. Only God could do that. But it seemed as if the Lord didn't hear Hannah. Sometimes she thought that even God despised her.

Every year Elkanah and his family made a trip to Shiloh, the site of the tabernacle, which served as the temple of the Lord. Elkanah would offer a sacrifice to the Lord and eat a festive meal with his family afterward. He would divide up the meat himself. Peninnah and her sons would each get a portion, but Hannah was always given a double portion. That was Elkanah's way of showing Hannah how much he loved her.

Peninnah's cruel eyes would burn with hatred and envy. Then she would torment Hannah even more than usual.

One day in Shiloh, things went so far that Hannah couldn't take it anymore. She was so full of sorrow that she had to complain to someone about her need.

She walked over to the tabernacle and entered the outer court of the women. There she sank to her knees and let her tears flow. In God's house she was safe. No one would make fun of her there.

In her bitter disappointment she prayed to God, but she did not pray aloud, as most women did. Her secret sorrow was too tender for that. She moved her lips without making a sound, but in her heart she was screaming. "Lord," she begged, "take note of my sorrow and remember me. If You give me a son, I will consecrate him to You for his entire life."

She prayed a long, fervent prayer, forgetting all about her surroundings.

In the gate of the tabernacle, leaning against the door frame, sat Eli, the old, gray high priest. He was watching her. He knew that Israel had fallen on evil days.

Sometimes godless people went right into the tabernacle. Eli did little to stop them. He was too old and too easily upset to resist.

This woman had caught his eye as soon as she went into the tabernacle. She had entered in such a strange way, and now she was on the floor, apparently mumbling to herself.

Eli decided that she must be drunk. He stood up and walked over to her. "Aren't you ashamed to be drunk in God's house?" he asked sternly.

The woman lifted her head. A pair of steady eyes stared at Eli. Eli was taken aback when he saw how much sorrow there was in those eyes. A voice choking on sobs answered him: "My lord, I am not a wicked woman. I am very unhappy and I have poured out my heart before the Lord."

Eli was embarrassed. He wanted to put things right again. Therefore he said: "Go home in peace. God will answer your prayer."

Eli tossed off that remark lightly. He did not realize that he had spoken a prophetic truth, but Hannah sensed it at once. Her sorrow vanished. Her heart was full of joy as she looked hopefully toward the future. God's comfort descended upon her.

When Peninnah made fun of her again, Hannah ignored her. She ate, and she looked happy. A year later, when she bore Elkanah a son, her joy was complete.

She named her baby *Samuel*, which means *asked of God*.

The year Samuel was born, Hannah did not go to Shiloh; she stayed home with her baby. She did not go to Shiloh again until Samuel was old enough to manage without her.

Samuel walked to Shiloh next to his mother — a small boy in a white robe. They went to Eli together. Eli was sitting at



his usual post by the gate of the tabernacle. He was older and grayer than the last time Hannah had seen him.

Hannah told him that Samuel was the son she had prayed for. She also told Eli about her vow to consecrate her son to the Lord. She asked if the boy could now become a servant in the tabernacle.

Because little Samuel was a member of the tribe of Levi, it was permitted. The next day Hannah went home alone. The son for

whom she had prayed so fervently stayed in Shiloh, but she was not sorry. What better place could she find for Samuel than God's house? She sang a song that welled up from the deep joy in her soul. "Some people the Lord makes poor, and others, He makes rich," she sang. "Some people He humbles, and others He exalts."

Later God gave Hannah more children. She was no longer held in contempt, for she was a happy mother.

Every year she went to Shiloh and brought Samuel a new robe she had made. She did not forget her first-born.

123: Samuel and Eli

There was a little boy serving in the Lord's tabernacle among the priests and Levites. He slept in a room near the sanctuary and helped Eli, the high priest, in all sorts of ways.

Samuel enjoyed serving God in the tabernacle. But there were many things going on in Shiloh that made him unhappy. Eli's sons, Hophni and Phinehas, were wicked men, although they were supposed to be priests. They stood cursing by the door of the tabernacle. They made fun of the worshipers, and they scoffed at prayer. When sacrifices were offered, they took the best parts for themselves, the parts that were supposed to be reserved for God. In short, they turned the tabernacle into a place of horrible sin.

Eli knew what they were up to, but he did nothing about it. He was weak and old — and far too gentle and patient. Sometimes he would say to his sons: "What you are doing is not right, my sons. It's not allowed." But he did not scold them. Eli

was afraid of his sons — even more than he was afraid of God.

One day a prophet came to Eli to warn him in the name of the Lord. Unless Eli and his sons repented, a horrible judgment would strike them.

Eli listened, but he did nothing. The next day he was sitting calmly on his chair by the gate of the tabernacle, apparently at ease. Although he did not join his sons in their wickedness, he was just as indifferent to God's law as they were. There seemed to be nothing that could shake him out of his false rest.

The years went by, and Eli grew older and older. His eyes became so weak that he could no longer see properly. It appeared that death was near, but he still did not repent.

Samuel grew up in the midst of all these godless people, surrounded by indifference and sin. Yet his heart remained pure and close to God. The people loved him, and the Lord loved him too.

One night Samuel woke up suddenly from a sound sleep. Someone had called him. He got up and went to the room where Eli was sleeping.

"Here I am," he said. "What would you like me to do?"

Eli sat up and yawned. "I didn't call you," he answered. "Go back to bed, my son."

Samuel obeyed. He must have imagined it. But he was hardly back in bed when he heard the same voice calling him: "Samuel! Samuel!"

This time he was sure. He went back to the old priest and said: "Here I am. You *did* call me."

Eli was puzzled. "You must have dreamed it," he said. "I didn't call you. Go back to sleep, my son."

Samuel obeyed, but he couldn't figure out what was happening. Was it possible that he was mistaken?

While he lay in bed thinking, he heard the voice again: "Samuell! Samuell!" This time it was so clear that it seemed to be right in his own room.

Samuel went to Eli's bed for the third time. Very deliberately he said: "I'm positive that you called me!"

Only then did Eli understand who was calling the boy. He answered: "It was the Lord who called you, my son. Go lie down again. When you hear the voice, say: 'Speak, Lord, for Your servant is listening.'"

Little Samuel was trembling as he walked back to his room. It was deathly still as he lay waiting in the darkness. His heart pounded with fear and awe.

"Samuell! Samuell!"

This time Samuel answered softly: "Speak, Lord, for Your servant is listening."

The Almighty spoke to the little boy on the bed. It was glorious for Samuel to hear God's voice. But the message made him sad.

The Lord said that punishment would soon strike Eli's house. Hophni and Phinehas would die on the same day. Eli, who knew all about their sins but did nothing to stop them, would not escape punishment either.

When the voice of the Lord was gone, Samuel could not get back to sleep. He lay awake thinking until the first morning light stole into the room. Then he got up and opened the doors of the tabernacle as usual.

He did not look forward to telling Eli what God had said, but Eli called him: "Samuell!"

Samuel went to Eli. He could hardly bring himself to repeat what God had told him.

The old, dull eyes of the high priest seemed to bore into his soul. Eli wanted to know everything.

Samuel held nothing back. He expected Eli to be filled with sorrow and remorse.

Nothing happened. Eli sighed. His head drooped. "What can I do about it?" he said. "He is the Lord. Let Him do what seems right in His eyes."

Then he sat down on his chair, just as apathetic as always.

124: The capture of God's ark

The judgment was not long in coming. The Philistines marched into Israel with a mighty army and defeated the Israelites. On the battlefield lay 4000 dead.

The elders of Israel were upset as they gathered to discuss the situation. Where could they turn to get help?

They did not dare ask God for His help. They knew He would not listen to them, for they lived in great sins and were not prepared to renounce those sins.

Suddenly they thought of the ark. The ark went ahead of the people when they crossed the Jordan on their way into Canaan — and the water fled before it. The ark was carried around Jericho — and the walls collapsed. They would take the ark with them on the battlefield. Then God would have to fight their battle for them!

The Israelites had sunk so low that they thought of the ark in magical terms. Convinced that the ark could help them, Hophni and Phinehas went into the Holy of Holies to get it. Eli opposed the plan, but they didn't care what he thought. Lonesome and somewhat uneasy this time, Eli stayed behind at the violated sanctuary.

As soon as the ark arrived in the Israelite camp, it gave the Israelites fresh hope. Their shouts of joy made the earth shake. The Philistines, whose camp was nearby, were terrified. They saw gold gleaming in the bright sunlight, and they saw the Israelites cheering and dancing. When they learned from their spies that the ark of the Lord had been brought to the Israelite camp, they said to each other: "Surely that's Israel's god. Woe is us, for he is the mighty god who fought against the Egyptians. We must be strong. We must show that we are men. We must fight harder than ever!"

Their great fear made them fiercer warriors than ever before. They charged at the Israelites so recklessly and fought so fiercely that the Israelite army suffered a crushing defeat. Hophni and Phinehas were among the 30,000 dead piled up on the battlefield.

The ark was carried off in triumph to the land of the Philistines.

One man from Israel's army escaped from the battle unharmed and ran off to Shiloh. He arrived that same day, his clothes torn as a sign of mourning.

When the news of the disaster got around, a great wail went up in the city. Eli, who sat before the tabernacle waiting, heard the wail.

His unrest had grown greater and greater. His heart was full of concern for the ark of the Lord. When the messenger from the battlefield reached him, he asked what all the noise meant.

"Israel has been defeated!" the messenger lamented.

Eli sat straight up. "The ark?" he asked.

"Both of your sons were killed," the man moaned.

"The ark?" Eli asked again.

"The ark of the Lord has been captured by our enemies," the messenger sobbed.

Eli threw his hands up in despair, and then he lost his balance. He fell backward off his chair, broke his neck and died.

God had finally punished Eli for his unfaithfulness. For 40 years he had been judge over Israel.

125: The return of the ark

The Philistines were having a celebration. They had captured the God of Israel. Now they had two gods, while Israel had none. The Israelites had lost their power and would be slaves forever.

The Philistines danced and rejoiced before the ark, beside themselves with joy. A jubilant mob carried the ark through the streets of Ashdod to the temple of Dagon, their god.

They put the ark of the Lord down before a statue of silent Dagon staring straight ahead. These devout pagans brought the ark to their god as if it were an offering to be laid at his feet.

"Look, Dagon," they said reverently,



"you have given us the victory. Here is the god you have defeated."

Evening fell. The doors of Dagon's temple were closed. Dagon was alone with the ark of the Lord in the darkness.

Early the next morning, when the priests came into the temple, Dagon was lying on the floor. He had fallen from his pedestal. There he lay, face down before Israel's god.

This was a horrible shock to the priests. Reverently they helped their god to his feet and put him back on his pedestal. They stole a fearful glance at the ark, which stood by silently, gleaming in the morning light.

No one would be told what had happened in the temple. Dagon would surely keep it a secret. The priests wouldn't give the secret away either.

The next morning the priests were in for an even greater shock: they found Dagon's hands lying on the threshold. His sacred head had been cut off too.

The priests shook with fear. Carefully they gathered up the pieces of their god. They stepped high over the holy threshold so as not to touch it. "From now on no one may step on this threshold," they said. Inside they found that the rest of Dagon was again prostrate before the shining ark.

While they stood around discussing the situation, they received reports from the city about a horrible pestilence that had broken out. Soon there was more bad news: a plague of mice had invested the fields and was gobbling up the entire harvest.

The Philistines became deathly afraid of that mysterious god of Israel. They did not want the ark of that god in their midst anymore.

Quickly the ark was transported to Gath. This time no one rejoiced during the journey.

In Gath the ark was placed in the temple. Soon the mice invaded the city, and Gath was afflicted with an even worse pestilence than Ashdod. The ark was sent on to Ekron.

All of Ekron was wailing when the ark arrived. A deathly fear gripped the people, for the pestilence and mice moved with the ark.

"Do you want us to die?" the people of Ekron screamed. "Why have you brought that horrible ark here?"

Something had to be done. The rulers of the Philistine cities held a meeting. The ark they had brought into their country with such rejoicing was a burden, and now they wanted to be rid of it. They had captured Israel's amazing god, but they did not have him in their power.

Could it be that all the plagues were a mere coincidence? Could it be that the plagues really had nothing to do with the ark? The priests and magicians were consulted. "The god of Israel must give us the answer himself," they said.

They placed the ark on a new wagon and piled on some gifts. To the front of the wagon they hitched two cows that were nursing calves. The calves were returned to their stalls.

If the plagues were a coincidence and were not sent by the god of Israel to warn the Philistines to return the ark, the cows would go right back to their calves. But if it was indeed the god of Israel who had brought about all the misery, he would make the cows pull the wagon with the ark back to Israel.

Although cows never abandon nursing calves, the two cows hitched to the wagon set out at once down the road to Israel, lowing anxiously. They looked to neither side, for an invisible power was driving them on. It drove them east across hills and

valleys and through farmer's fields. They kept going until they reached the village of Beth-shemesh in Israel's territory.

The people of Beth-shemesh were busy with the harvest. When they saw the ark coming down the road, they ran off to meet it in amazement and joy. The ark had been in the hands of the Philistines for seven months. Now God had brought it back.

The two cows stopped by a large stone. Some Levites picked up the ark and set it on the stone. The men of Beth-shemesh cut up the wagon for wood to use in a sacrifice. They sacrificed the two cows as a burnt offering to God.

There were people in Beth-shemesh who did not know enough to show reverence for the ark. Even though they had often been told that the ark of the Lord was holy, they touched the golden angels above the mercy seat. They even lifted up the cover to peek inside the ark. Their sin did not go unpunished: many of them died suddenly.

Soon some men arrived from the village of Kiriath-jearim. They brought the ark to the house of Abinadab. His son Eleazar, a God-fearing man, was put in charge of the ark.

For twenty years the ark remained in Abinadab's house. Wherever the ark encountered unbelief, it brought destruction. But wherever it encountered faith, it brought blessing.

126: Samuel as judge

Eli was dead, the tabernacle was profaned, and the ark stood forgotten in some farmer's house. As for the land of Israel, that poor, oppressed land — it was full of sin.

The Philistines were cruel rulers, and they feared no opposition. The Israelites were dispirited and no longer hoped for deliverance. Faith had all but vanished in the promised land.

Yet, God had not forgotten His people. There was still Samuel, God's faithful servant.

Samuel had become a powerful figure, but in his heart he was still just as humble as when he had come to Eli's bedside as a small boy. He often heard the voice of the Lord speaking to him.

In Ramah, where Samuel was born, he built an altar. He offered many sacrifices for the people there. Each year he traveled through the land to pray and to offer sacrifices. He wanted to help his people in their difficulties and bring them God's Word. He was a mediator between God and Israel. He loved them both, and his deep desire was to bring them close together.

That was all Samuel lived for. When he spoke to his people about their sins, his words were like lashes of a whip he was using to drive the people to their God.

Finally, after twenty years in which Samuel allowed himself no rest, his fondest wish was fulfilled. The Israelites began to feel remorse for their sins. Samuel sensed it here and there. Soon it spread from village to village and from tribe to tribe.

"We have sinned!" someone would cry out. Before long the whole village would be saying: "We have sinned!"

There was joy in heaven — and also in Samuel's heart. He said to the people: "If you wish to turn to the Lord with your whole heart, get rid of the foreign gods and serve the Lord alone. Then He will deliver you from the power of the Philistines."

The people smashed and burned the

Baals and cut down the sacred poles of Astarte. When the land had been cleansed, Samuel called the people together at Mizpah to pray to the Lord for deliverance.

The Philistines found out about the meeting, but they did not know why it was called. They thought that a rebellion was brewing. Therefore they marched on Israel with a great army, sure of victory.

The Philistines were seasoned warriors. They knew that Israel's army was not adequately armed, for the Philistines had taken all the smiths of Israel prisoner. But the Philistines forgot that God has mercy on His people.

It was an unforgettable day at Mizpah. Samuel offered a sacrifice and prayed for God's help. And the Israelites fought.

This time they did not take the ark along, as in a previous battle with the Philistines. God Himself led them to battle. He made threatening, dark clouds hurry across the sky toward the Philistines. The thunder rumbled angrily above the heads of Israel's frightened enemies. Lightning scattered the soldiers and opened huge breaches in their ranks. God was fighting for His people!

The Philistines fled in great confusion, overcome with fear of Israel's God. The jubilant Israelites pursued them.

It was a glorious victory. Many Philistines were killed. The rest of them were chased back to their own country in disgrace.

Samuel saw to it that a great stone was erected at Mizpah. He called the place *Eben-ezer*, which means *stone of help*.

The Lord's help did not end with this battle. A happy time began for Israel. The cities that the Philistines had conquered were returned to the Israelites. And the other enemies of the Israelites were held at bay. Israel was free as long as Samuel lived.

What more could the people want? Samuel was their wise judge. And their mighty King was God.

Yet, the people were not satisfied. One day the elders of Israel came to Samuel and said: "You have become old, and your sons are not as wise and righteous as you. Give us a king such as all the other nations have."

There was some truth to what they were saying. Joel and Abijah, the two sons of Samuel, were judges in Beersheba. Their task was to look after things in the south, which was too far away for their aged father. But they were more interested in money than justice. If two men came to them to get a dispute settled, they would decide in favor of the one with the bigger bribe to offer.

Samuel was not Eli. Now that he knew about the sins of his sons, he would summon them and punish them for their deceit.

Israel's request for a king was a great disappointment to Samuel. All his life he had done his best for his people. Now that he was old, they wanted to push him aside in favor of someone else.

The Lord said to Samuel: "*You* are not the one who has been rejected. They have rejected *Me*. They don't want *Me* to be king over them."

That was the biggest disappointment of all for Samuel. He warned the people earnestly: "If you are ruled by a king, you will not be free. He will make soldiers of your sons, and your daughters will have to serve in his palace. You will pay heavy taxes, and you will all have to serve him."

The people did not listen to Samuel's advice. "Give us a king!" they demanded.

The Lord said to Samuel: "Grant their request and appoint a king to rule over them."



127: Saul's anointing

Two tired men were wandering through the fields. They had traveled a long way, and it was starting to get dark. They had climbed to the top of each hill they reached in order to survey the land all around.

The taller of the two was Saul, the son of Kish. Saul was a Benjaminite. The other man was a servant of Kish. For three days they had been looking for a pair of donkeys that belonged to Saul's father. The donkeys had wandered away, and the two men had not been able to find them.

In the hills before them they saw a city. "Let's head for home," Saul said, discouraged. "Otherwise my father will be more worried about us than about the donkeys."

The servant pointed to the city in the hills. "In that city lives a seer, a great prophet," he said. "Let's go and talk to him.

Maybe he can help us."

It was good advice. Yet, Saul hesitated. "If we go to the seer, what can we give him?" he asked. "We have not taken along a gift for him."

The servant had a small coin in his bag. It was not much, but at least they had something to give the prophet.

As they neared the city, they met some girls with jugs on their heads. The girls were going to the well to fetch water.

"Is the seer in the city?" Saul asked them.

"Yes, he is," they replied. "He came to the city today because there is going to be a sacrifice on the high place."

They hurried on. Just before the city gate they met an old man with a long beard. Saul did not know that it was Samuel. He asked the old man: "Where is the home of the seer?"

The old, gray man smiled at Saul as if he already knew him. He answered: "I am the

seer. Today you are to eat at my home. Tomorrow you can return to your father's house. But don't worry about the donkeys. They have already been found."

Saul's eyes opened wide in amazement. The seer knew in advance why they had come.

Samuel had more to say. "What are a few donkeys to someone like you? After all, everything in Israel is for you!"

Everything in Israel for *Saul*? What sort of mysterious talk was that? Saul didn't know what Samuel was talking about. He felt embarrassed. He stammered: "I am only a simple farmer's son from the smallest tribe in Israel. Why do you speak to me in this way?"

Samuel did not answer Saul, and Saul did not care repeat the question. But his amazement grew greater and greater. The prophet treated him with great respect, as if Saul were a man of special standing. He gave Saul a place of honor at his table and the best piece of meat; in fact, he set aside a whole shoulder for Saul. Samuel said that he had saved the meat especially for Saul. How could the prophet have known in advance that Saul was coming?

That night Saul slept in a cool tent on the flat roof of Samuel's house. When morning dawned, Samuel went onto the roof to awaken Saul. He walked with Saul part of the way out of the city. When they were alone in the countryside, Samuel sent the servant ahead so that he could be alone with Saul. "I have a message for you from God," he said.

Saul knelt down before Samuel on the road. Samuel took out a vial of oil and poured it over Saul's head. Then he kissed him and said: "Saul, the Lord has anointed you to be king over His people."

Full of joy, Saul bowed his head. To him

it seemed like a dream.

Samuel said to him: "I will give you some signs that what I said is the truth. As you are walking home, you will meet two men who will tell you that the donkeys have been found. You will also meet three men who will give you a small present. Closer to home you will meet a group of prophets singing and playing the harp. The Spirit of the Lord will take hold of you, and you will become a different man."

Then they said goodbye. Saul walked along on his own, lost in thought. He had left his father's house to look for donkeys, but he had found a kingdom. The very thought frightened him, but God strengthened his heart.

Saul received the signs, just as Samuel had said he would. When he reached Rachel's grave, he met two men who told him that the donkeys had been found. Later he met three men who gave him three loaves of bread. In Gibeah, his own village, he heard music and the singing of prophets.

Saul could not help believing in the miracle. Suddenly he no longer knew what he was doing. He danced along with the prophets. In his deep joy he sang a song of praise to God. All who had known Saul earlier said to each other: "Is Saul a prophet too?"

Saul did not tell anyone his secret. He locked the secret away in his humble heart. The next morning he was back in the fields doing his daily work.

128: Israel's first king

Not long after his first encounter with Saul, Samuel called the people together at Mizpah again. Saul went to Mizpah too.

The purpose of the meeting was to select a king. The Lord Himself would make the choice.

The people waited in silence to see who would become their king. First lots were cast between the tribes. The tribe of Benjamin was chosen. Next Matri's clan was selected, and then the family of Kish. When lots were cast among the sons of Kish, Saul was chosen.

"Saul! Saul! He is our king!" the people shouted. They wanted to see their king, but he was nowhere to be found.

Because of his modesty and timidity, Saul had slipped away and hidden among the baggage, his heart pounding. He was afraid of the thousands of eyes that would soon be staring at him.

The Lord told Samuel where Saul was hiding, and Samuel went to get him. When Saul appeared before the people, they saw that he was the tallest man in the country.

Samuel said: "Here is the man the Lord has chosen."

"Long live the king!" cried the people.

A few of them grumbled: "A frightened farmer from the tribe of Benjamin? He's supposed to be our king?" Many of the Israelites brought gifts to Saul, but some did not. They despised their king and made fun of him.

Saul pretended not to notice. He was not proud and haughty. He went back home and continued to work in the fields, just as he had always done. Israel's king plodded along behind the plow, waiting for God to call him.

He didn't have to wait long. One evening he was returning from the field with his oxen when he heard that something had happened. Even before he reached the village, he heard ominous sounds — women crying, angry voices.

When he got home, he saw that the people of the village were waiting for him. Among them were a few strange men with torn clothes. The men looked tired and dusty. They were messengers who had just made a long journey. The messengers had a sad story to tell.

The Ammonites had invaded Israel's territory. They were marching through the land, taking anything they wanted. Now they were laying siege to the village of Jabesh in Gilead, the hometown of the messengers, which was beyond the Jordan. Soon the village would have to surrender. Then Nahash, the cruel king of the Ammonites, would gouge out the right eye of each man in the town to show his contempt for Israel.

When Saul heard this, he was furious. He immediately butchered his oxen and cut them up into pieces. He sent messengers throughout the country, each one carrying a piece of one of the oxen. "Go all through the land," he told them, "and cry out in every village: 'This is what will happen to the oxen of any man who does not follow Saul and Samuel in battle.'"

Messengers ran off in all directions. Soon Saul had an army of more than 300,000 men at his command.

With that army he marched on Jabesh. He had already sent the men from Jabesh back with a message: "Tomorrow, by the time the sun is hot, you will have deliverance.

Before dawn, Saul attacked the Ammonite army. He led the charge himself, for he was the biggest and bravest of the soldiers. The battle continued until the hottest part of the day. The proud Ammonites were completely destroyed and scattered.

The men of Jabesh had been saved. They came to Saul to express their gratitude. The

Israelite soldiers, their feelings stirred by the great victory, shouted: "Where are the people who scorned Saul? Bring them here, and we will kill them!"

Saul shook his head. "No one is to be put to death today," he said, "for *the Lord* has delivered Israel."

The people saw that their brave king was also compassionate, and they loved him even more. Happily they marched behind Saul and aged Samuel to Gilgal, where a great victory celebration was held. Samuel brought the Lord a thank offering and said farewell to the people. There was no need for him to serve as judge any longer. Saul was proclaimed king for the second time. But God the Lord was King over Saul.

Now Saul took up residence in a palace. He sat on a throne surrounded by bodyguards, and he judged the people in place of Samuel. He was the Lord's anointed king. But he was also a servant — a servant of the God he would always have to obey.

129: Unbelief and faith

One day the Philistines, the traditional enemies of the Israelites, invaded the land again with their horsemen and chariots and powerful army. They had come to do battle with Israel.

But now there was a *king* who could lead the Israelites in battle. Saul was eager to lead the attack on the enemy — but he had to wait. Before the battle began, Samuel would have to come to offer a sacrifice to God and pray for victory. "Wait for me at Gilgal," the old prophet had said. "After seven days I will join you there."

That was very difficult for Saul. The

young king was so eager to begin the battle that he could not sit still.

The days crept by. Each day there were new reports about the might of the enemy. Saul's men became dispirited from all the waiting and inactivity. Slowly but surely, their fear of the enemy grew.

A few cowards snuck off to the hills to hide. Every day there were more deserters. Saul watched his army melt away. He tried to stop the cowards from deserting, but their fear was so great that they wouldn't obey him.

By the seventh day, he had no more than 600 faithful soldiers left. He paced back and forth, stamping his feet and seething with impatience. What was the good of being king if he had to wait for some old prophet who didn't know the first thing about war? How could he defeat a powerful army with a band of 600 men?

Gideon had triumphed with only 300 men. But in his despair Saul did not think about Gideon. Saul lacked a strong faith in God's power, an unbounded trust in God's Word. He trusted in his army but his army kept shrinking.

Finally Saul could wait no longer. He had an altar prepared, he summoned a priest, and he commanded that the sacrifice be offered. After all, *he* was the king! *He* had the authority!

The sacrifice had just been offered when Samuel appeared. Saul walked toward Samuel to greet him. His heart was pounding.

"What have you done?" the prophet asked, disappointed.

Saul tried to make excuses for himself, but it didn't work. He had sinned. He should have waited in faith, as the Lord had commanded him.

Samuel said sadly: "What you did was



foolish. The Lord was testing you. If you had obeyed Him, the Lord would have established your kingship over Israel forever. Now He will not let you keep the kingship because you did not serve Him faithfully. The Lord has chosen someone else, a man after His own heart. That man will be king in your place.”

With those words ringing in his ears, Saul went out to do battle with the Philistines.

The attack was begun not by Saul but by Jonathan, his brave son. Jonathan and a band of soldiers were camped by the steep mountain pass of Michmash. High above them on the rock was part of the enemy army.

The army had waited a long, long time, and the sacrifice had finally been offered. Jonathan could not bear to wait any longer. A plan took shape in his mind.

He knew that the Lord could bring deliverance through a few men just as well as through many. If the Lord would help him, Jonathan could defeat the Philistines *alone*.

He walked into the valley with his armor-bearer. The Philistines high above on the rocks heaped scorn on them. “So,” they shouted, “the Hebrews are finally creeping out of their holes. Come up here if you dare, and we’ll teach you a thing or two!”

Jonathan interpreted their scorn as a good sign. No Philistine considered it possible for a heavily armed soldier to climb the steep cliff.

But Jonathan and his armor-bearer knew those hills. They had grown up nearby, in Gibeah. They had climbed such cliffs often as boys, to reach the highest peaks. Now their faith gave them courage.

Jonathan started looking for toeholds. Soon he was inching upward, his armor-

bearer right behind him. Higher and higher they climbed, like a pair of cats. They scaled the sheer rocky cliff and surprised the Philistines at the top.

Before the Philistines could recover from their surprise, Jonathan attacked them, his sword flashing. No one could stand in the face of his courage and passionate faith. Jonathan struck down one Philistine after another, and his armor-bearer finished them off. The rest of the Philistines fled in great confusion through the narrow mountain pass.

That victory touched off the larger battle. Saul and his men charged at the Philistines. Even the cowards emerged from their caves and holes to join in the battle, which ended in a great victory for Israel.

There was no joy for Saul in this victory, for he could not forget Samuel's words of condemnation. Those words created bitterness in his heart. Gruff and disappointed, he marched back to his palace at the head of his triumphant army.

130: Saul's fatal sin

When Saul refused to wait for Samuel at Gilgal, he showed that he did not want to serve the Lord while ruling as king. Later this became even more obvious.

In a wilderness far to the south lived a cruel and dangerous robber nation — the Amalekites. The Amalekites knew the Israelites and hated them because they were God's people. Long before, when the Israelites were on their way to the promised land, the Amalekites attacked them and tried to destroy them. Joshua led the Israelites in battle and defeated them.

Now the Amalekites were a force to be reckoned with again. They had often harmed the Israelites. For 400 years God was patient with them, but He would be patient no more. The Amalekites were about to be punished.

Samuel entered Saul's palace with a command from God: "Go and destroy the Amalekites. Wipe them out — all of them. They hate My people and want to harm them."

Saul marched into the wilderness with a large army and surrounded the Amalekite raiders. The Kenites, a small people who lived among the godless Amalekites but were always good to the Israelites, were allowed to go free. The Amalekites were completely destroyed, although they resisted stubbornly.

Saul was proud of his victory. He saw the beautiful oxen and sleek sheep of the Amalekites. He knew that his men thought it would be a shame to kill all those animals, so he spared them. And he spared Agag, the wild, cruel raider king. He would bring Agag back to Israel as a prisoner, to let his own people see what kind of nation he had defeated in battle.

Saul's army marched back with booty and glory. The jubilation of the people made him feel even prouder.

In the village of Carmel he had a monument erected to himself, so that the people there would never forget their king. But when he reached Gilgal, where he had once received such bad tidings, Samuel confronted him again. This time there was even more disappointment and anger in his face.

Saul cried out to him: "The Lord bless you, Samuel! I have obeyed the Lord's command."

The old man asked sternly: "What is that

bleating of sheep and lowing of cattle that I hear?"

The color drained from Saul's face. He sensed punishment coming. Desperately he groped for an excuse. He tried to blame his men. "Yes, those are some of the finest animals of the Amalekites," he stammered. "We took them back with us to offer them to the Lord your God. All the rest of them we killed."

"Your God," he said — not "my God."

It was a very sad moment. Saul, the courageous warrior, the fearless king, stood exposed as a liar.

"Never mind," said Samuel. "Now I'll tell you what message the Lord has for you, a message he gave me during the night: 'Why didn't you listen to the Lord, Saul? Did you really want to offer a sacrifice? It is better to obey than to offer sacrifices. Because you have rejected the Word of the Lord, He has rejected you as king.'"

There were those somber, threatening words again — the words that made Saul so unhappy. "I have sinned!" he cried out. But it was only the future that made him so afraid. Samuel realized that. Sadly he turned around to leave.

Saul was plunged into complete despair. He knew that God had abandoned him. If God's servant Samuel also walked away from him, all was lost.

"Stay with me!" Saul begged. He grabbed Samuel by the edge of his robe, but the robe tore in his hand. Samuel told him: "That's just how the kingship will be torn away from you."

Then Samuel ordered Saul to bring forth Agag, the king of the Amalekites. Samuel himself put Agag to death.

Samuel went his way mourning for Saul, whom he had loved deeply. The king stayed behind, lonely and embittered.

Saul and Samuel never saw each other again.

131: David's anointing

In the fields near Bethlehem, a young shepherd boy was looking after his father's sheep. In the morning, as the sun was rising above the hills, he would open the door of the sheepfold and call the sheep. He knew them all and had a name for each one. The sheep recognized his voice and followed him willingly.

All day they were together out in the open field, far away from people. When they were thirsty, the shepherd would find a stream or a well, and they would all drink. When the rain pelted down, they would take refuge together in a cave. When evening descended on the lonely countryside, the shepherd would lead his flock through the twilight back to the safety of the sheepfold. Sometimes he would even sleep among the animals entrusted to him.

He was a good shepherd, and the sheep were safe with him. From his belt hung his weapons — a sling and a staff. The sling was a woven double belt with a pocket at the end. From that pocket a stone could be hurled with the force of a bullet. He could hit his target from a couple of hundred paces away.

His staff was a short, heavy cudgel — a fearsome weapon in his powerful hands. He had once used it to beat a bear to death when it tried to steal a lamb from the flock.

One day a lion crept toward the flock through the bushes, waiting for a chance to attack. The shepherd charged the lion fearlessly. He took hold of it and struggled with it until he had killed it. If the need



arose, he would lay down his life for his sheep.

His skin was brown from exposure to the sun and the wind. His body was hardened through hard work. And his heart was satisfied with his free life under God's spacious heaven.

Sometimes, when the sheep were grazing peacefully on a beautiful day or when the mountains were shining in the light of the moon, the shepherd felt so happy that he broke out in song. He would pick up the harp he always carried with him and play. He would sing the traditional songs of his people and other songs as well, songs that had never been sung before, songs that he had composed himself.

Usually there was no one around to hear him. The sheep would move closer to him, standing still with heads raised. And God

listened in heaven.

"The Lord is my shepherd," he would sing. "There is nothing I lack."

That was what made him so happy. The Lord watched over him, just as he in turn watched over his sheep. Therefore he was never afraid, for the Lord would protect him from danger.

That awareness was so glorious that there was nothing more he desired. Life was good to him. He would be happy to remain a poor shepherd all his life, as long as he could always be a sheep of the Shepherd in heaven.

One day when the young shepherd was out in the field with his flock, an old man walked down the road toward Bethlehem. It was Samuel. God had said to him: "I am sending you to Jesse, for I have chosen one of his sons to be the new king. You are to anoint the one I point out to you."

If King Saul had known that, he would have killed Samuel long before he reached Bethlehem. But no one knew it. Samuel had a young cow with him to make it look as though he was only going to Bethlehem to offer a sacrifice.

The elders of Bethlehem were frightened when they saw Samuel coming. Because he was so old, he seldom traveled through the land anymore. Had the people of Bethlehem sinned, and had Samuel come to punish them?

Trembling, they went out to meet him, but he quickly set their minds at ease. He invited them to a feast to be held after the sacrifice.

Jesse and his sons came to the feast too. They entered in order of age. First came Eliab, a handsome man bigger and stronger than any of the others. Samuel looked at him in amazement. He thought: "This must be the one."



The Lord said to him: "I look right into the heart, Samuel. This is not the one."

Then came Jesse's second son, Abinadab, but he wasn't the one either. Then came the third — Shammah. All the others followed. Seven sons passed before Samuel, but the Lord did not select any of them.

"One of the sons of Jesse," God had said.

Samuel asked Jesse: "Are these *all* your sons?"

Jesse answered: "Only the youngest is missing. He's out in the field with the

sheep."

Then Samuel knew that the youngest son of Jesse was the one God had chosen. "Go get him," he said. "We will not sit down to eat before he has joined us."

A servant was sent out to summon the youngest son. Soon a young shepherd walked in, with the scent of the open field on his clothes. He was a good-looking boy with beautiful eyes and a ruddy face. He looked at Samuel calmly.

Samuel was moved, for in his heart he

heard the voice of God speaking to him: "This is the one."

He reached under his long prophet's mantel and took out a flask filled with oil. In the name of the Lord, he anointed the young shepherd kneeling before him.

The young man's name was David, which means *beloved*. He was a man after God's own heart.

Samuel returned to his home, and David went back to his flock in the field. The sheep came up to him and sniffed curiously at his clothes. He sat by his flock lost in thought. It had been such an amazing day! And there were so many strange things that might happen in the future.

The Lord loved David. Of this David was more certain than ever before. He looked up to heaven in gratitude. Then he picked up his harp and sang a song — the most beautiful song he had ever sung. The Spirit of God was at work in his heart.

132: David plays for Saul

The Spirit of the Lord was working in David, but it had left Saul. Saul sat in his palace with a heart full of dark hatred. He was thinking about someone — the man who would succeed him as king. He didn't know who it would be, but he did know that it would not be his son. He also knew that there was nothing he could do about it.

He kept thinking about his unknown successor, and about Samuel, who had abandoned him, and about God, whom he had not been willing to serve. He started feeling sorry for himself. "They are all against me," he thought, "but I won't let them win!"

Saul made wicked plans and buried him-

self even deeper in his morbid thoughts. He became more and more dejected as the days slipped by.

Sometimes he was overcome by his misery and despair. His pain would turn him into a wild man. He would walk around in a rage, cursing and lashing out at anyone who came near him, until no one dared to approach him.

The servants who remembered the days when he was a good and friendly king felt sorry for him. "Our master is sick," they said. "He is sick at heart, for God has abandoned him and an evil spirit has taken over."

They talked it over together. What could they do for their king? Was there a medicine to heal a broken heart?

There was one servant in the palace who had once heard a young shepherd playing the harp near Bethlehem. He remembered clearly how good and happy the music had made him feel.

The servants said to Saul: "O king, you must find someone to play the harp for you. When the evil spirit comes upon you, he will play for you, and you will feel better."

One of them added: "The son of Jesse, who lives in Bethlehem, is very skilled with the harp. He is a pleasant, brave young man."

This demonstration of love on the part of his servants did Saul some good. He sent messengers to Bethlehem. Soon David presented himself at the palace.

Saul did not know that David was the unknown figure who so often disturbed him in his dreams, the man who would one day succeed him as king. He saw only a poor shepherd boy with a simple, homemade harp standing before him.

One day, when Saul seemed ready to tear everything apart in his insane rage, he

heard the gentle sounds of David's song. A shiver ran through his body, and he sat still and listened. He *had* to listen to the quiet song that floated toward him like the sound of golden bells. The song made him think of green hills under a blue sky; it reminded him of everything that was good and safe and beautiful. Soon the king was thinking about the happiness he had enjoyed in earlier years, before he began struggling against the Lord. His devilish hatred and somber despair melted away. He collapsed into his chair. His head sank into his trembling hands. Tears dripped through his fingers.

The sounds of David's song continued to hover in the room — appealing, comforting sounds that caressed Saul's wounded feelings. A quiet, unfathomable sadness filled his heart. The evil spirit was gone.

In Saul's poor, tormented soul, a love began to grow — a love for the poor shepherd boy who had given him relief through his music.



133: Goliath's challenge

It was still in the land of Judah. In the Valley of Elah, the wind sighed softly through the trees scattered here and there. The sunlight reflected off the stones in the dry bed of the brook that wound its way through the valley.

A helmeted head popped up on top of the hill on one side of the valley. A spear flashed in the sun. On the other side of the valley, on another hill, stood a motionless watchman scanning the horizon with one hand shading his eyes and the other hand gripping his sword.

It was wartime in Israel again. Those persistent enemies, the Philistines, had pressed into Israel once more.

The two armies were camped on opposite sides of the valley, hidden behind the hills.

Each army was waiting for the other to attack; neither one wanted to attack first. The army that attacked would be at a disadvantage, for it would have to climb a slope to get at the enemy.

In time the patience of one of the two sides would be exhausted. That was what the armies were waiting for, each one afraid of the power of the other.

One day a frightening creature walked down the hill on which the Philistines were camped. He was a giant — one of the Anakites. He was almost three meters tall. On his head he wore a copper helmet. He wore a scaly suit of armor, and his powerful legs were protected by copper padding. On his shoulder he carried a copper javelin. Gleaming and flashing in the burning sun, this imposing figure tramped down the hill, into the valley, toward the Israelite camp — a bronze tower of a man. His shield-bearer was with him.

The Israelite army waited breathlessly.

All the soldiers heard his thunderous voice as it boomed across the valley.

The giant heaped scorn on the Israelites: "Why are you standing there lined up for battle? Am I not a Philistine, and are you not servants of Saul? Choose a man from your ranks, and let him come to me. If he defeats me, we will be your servants."

Then the giant was silent, but his words continued to echo between the hills. Servants of Saul? How could free Israelites be servants of Saul? Such language was offensive to them; it was a slap in the face. Yet, they did not reply. They shrank back, pale with fear.

Once more they heard the frightening voice of the Philistine. "I, Goliath of Gath — I defy the army of Israel. Send me a man, and we will fight it out."

Then he turned around and went back to the Philistine camp on the hill, laughing as he walked.

The next day he was back, and every day after that. He carried a huge javelin with a heavy metal point and a shaft like a young tree. Each time he entered the valley, he filled the air with his defiant language. His curses hung heavy in the air.

Where were brave Saul and courageous Jonathan? They stood among their trembling men and listened as the Philistine giant heaped scorn upon them and their God every day. They felt powerless before the giant.

With each passing day, fear sapped the strength of the Israelite army. Before long, the Philistines could attack safely. Goliath's challenge went unanswered.

134: David and Goliath

In a field near Bethlehem sat David, surrounded by his sheep. His harp was in his hand. He also had his staff and his sling with him.

When the war began, David was sent back to his father. Jesse needed him, for his three oldest sons were serving in Saul's army.

David went about his work just as he had always done, quietly and patiently. But his heart was no longer in his work. And he didn't play his harp much anymore.

Some four hours to the west lay his people's army, ready to fight the Philistines. But *he* had to stay home with the children and the old women and the weak, old men. It was almost too much for him to take.

One evening Jesse called David. He had an errand for him. David was to go to the army camp to bring bread and grain to his brothers. He was also to give their captain a small present. Then he was to hurry straight home with news of how his brothers were doing.

David's heart beat fast with joy and anticipation. It was too late to leave that evening, but he could hardly wait till morning.

At daybreak he was on his way, and he reached Socoh before noon. Ahead of him he saw the tents and wagons of the Israelite camp.

Just as he arrived, he heard officers shouting orders. The soldiers were forming ranks. David saw his brothers in the ranks. Quickly he gave his things to the keeper of the baggage so that he could follow the army and see where it was going.

When the army stopped at the top of the hill, he approached his brothers. While he

was talking with them, Goliath appeared on the opposite slope, pouring out his godless stream of scorn and contempt on the Israelites.

As David stood among the soldiers of Israel, he was cut to the quick by this stream of abuse. His faith, which was more precious to him than anything else, was being turned into a joke. The God he loved so deeply was being scorned and mocked. Soon David was shaking with wrath and indignation.

Wasn't someone going to step forward to accept Goliath's challenge? David looked at his brothers, and then at the other stern men in Israel's army. How could they listen to such abuse? He saw the fear written on their faces, and he saw how ashamed and embarrassed they felt. He was stunned.

He heard some soldiers behind him muttering about the great reward the king had promised to anyone who could defeat the giant in battle. He turned around. "Just what is the reward?" he asked.

"The king will bestow great wealth upon him," someone said, "and will give him his daughter as wife." The soldiers stared at him. They saw his gleaming eyes and his clenched fists.

"How does that heathen Philistine dare insult the living God?" David cried.

Just then Eliab walked up to David. He had heard David talking with some of the soldiers. He was angry because his youngest brother had seen the shame and cowardice of Israel's army.

"What are you doing here?" he asked. "Why haven't you gone home yet? I know what you're up to. You left your sheep unprotected in the field so that you could come here and watch the battle. Go back to where you belong!"

David shrugged his shoulders and asked:

"What have I done wrong?" Then he walked farther through the ranks.

One of the soldiers had already run to tell the king that there was a young man among the Israelites who was not afraid of the giant. Saul was happy to hear the news and sent for the young man. But he was disappointed when he saw that it was the same shepherd boy who used to play and sing for him.

David said to him calmly: "The king must not let the courage of the soldiers falter. *I shall go out and fight the Philistine!*"

Sadly Saul shook his head. The young man certainly knew how to make music, but fighting — what did he know about fighting? How could he take on Goliath, who had been trained for battle from his youth?

"Impossible," said the king.

David would not take no for an answer. "I killed a lion and a bear when I was watching over the flocks for my father. This Philistine will suffer the same fate at my hands. The Lord, who saved me from the claws of the lion and the bear, will also save me from this Philistine."

David spoke so calmly and with such assurance of faith that Saul was moved. In David's eyes he read the secret of his courage — faith. Saul no longer had such faith, but he knew what power there was in faith.

Finally Saul agreed. He had David put on his own armor, and he placed a copper helmet on his head. He wanted to make David a well-equipped man of war.

David couldn't even walk in Saul's armor. He was not used to such stiff, heavy battle dress. Finally he went out to meet Goliath in the same clothes in which he had arrived at the camp — a simple linen



shepherd's garment.

David walked right through the soldiers who had gathered in front of Saul's tent and started to descend into the valley. The power of God was his armor, and his faith afforded him more protection than any

helmet. In the dry stream bed he picked up five smooth stones and put them in his shepherd's bag. Then, armed only with his sling and his staff, he advanced to meet the giant.

Goliath was amazed and angry when he saw the young shepherd coming. He started to curse again. "Am I a dog," he shouted, "that you come toward me with a stick? Come a little closer, and I'll give your flesh to the birds of the heavens and the beasts of the field to eat!"

He raised his javelin high and pointed it at David. His voice resounded between the hills. His curses hung in the air. But David was not afraid, for he felt God near him.

Calmly and earnestly he answered Goliath: "You come at me with a sword and a spear and a javelin, but I have come in the name of Israel's God, the God you have scorned."

There was a deathly silence in the two armies as David and Goliath drew closer and closer together. As David moved forward, he slipped a stone into his sling. His hand wasn't even shaking. Before the giant could throw his javelin, the stone was flying through the air.

The giant suddenly threw his hands to his forehead. Then he toppled over like a tree. The stone had cracked his forehead. His shield-bearer fled in terror.

David ran over to Goliath. He drew the giant's sword from its sheath and used it to behead him.

The earth began to shake as Israel's army suddenly advanced. The soldiers charged down the hill like an avalanche. They ran across the valley and up the other slope. The Philistines, in a complete panic because of the death of their hero, took to their heels. The Israelites pursued them all the way back to the Philistine cities.

135: Saul turns against David

The news of David's victory over Goliath raced through the land. David was a hero to the people.

He was a hero to the soldiers too. They cheered as he walked through the ranks toward Saul's tent with Goliath's head in his hand. They followed him to see what would happen.

Again David stood before the king, just as calm and humble as before the battle. Like the others, David was deeply grateful for Israel's victory.

Jonathan was at Saul's side. He threw his arms around David and kissed him like a brother. He had come to love the simple shepherd who had so much courage. He gave David some precious gifts — his prince's robe, his sword, his bow, and his beautiful belt. The two young heroes became fast friends.

Saul kept David with him after that. He did not allow David to return to his father's sheep.

The shepherd boy had become an important man in Saul's kingdom. Saul made him a captain in the army.

The people loved David and honored him. They bowed whenever they saw him in the street wearing Jonathan's beautiful prince's robe. The king's own son was David's friend. Now David walked in and out of the palace just as he used to go in and out of his father's sheepfold.

Every day the two of them were together — Saul and David. The somber old king and the joyful young hero. God had forsaken the one, but He loved the other.

David's life had changed completely. Life at the king's court was not as peaceful as life in the fields with the sheep.

Before long there was another war with

the Philistines. The traditional enemy of the Israelites was defeated again.

When Israel's army returned in triumph after the victory, the people stood along the road cheering and singing. Women and girls joined the army parade, singing in rounds. "Saul has slain his *thousands*," one group would sing. "And David his *tens of thousands*," another group would answer.

That chant took the joy of the victory away from Saul. It made him furious. While the whole city celebrated, he sat in his palace, somber, unhappy, disgusted.

"When they sing about David, they talk of tens of thousands," he thought, "but when it comes to me, they only talk about thousands." Finally he could not help but draw the conclusion: "The kingdom must be for him. *David* is the one who will take my place!"

Much as he tried, Saul could not drive this thought from his mind. Up to that point he had loved David, but now he began to hate him. David was his greatest enemy, he decided.

When Saul got up the next morning, he felt tired and sad. His suspicion and unhappiness had made him feel sick.

The evil spirit attacked him again. He carried on like a madman. His servants scurried out of his way.

Soon there was soothing music in the room. David had come in quietly to calm the king with his songs, just as he had done before his victory over Goliath.

This time there was no comfort for Saul in David's music. David's song made him even angrier. Saul jumped up in a rage, grabbed his spear, and threw it at his enemy. The weapon just missed David's head and embedded itself in the wall, with the shaft quivering.

David fled. It was a miracle that he was

still alive. The unhappy king, who had just escaped becoming a murderer, was left alone with his hatred and fear.

136: David and Michal

Saul's fear of David would not go away. He was afraid of the mysterious power that always protected David — against wild animals, against Goliath, against the king's spear. Saul understood what was happening: *the Lord* was protecting David. Saul could not harm David against the Lord's will.

Yet, Saul refused to give up. He thought of a clever plan. He knew that his daughter Michal loved David. He approached David in a friendly manner and said: "I will give you Michal as your wife if you will kill 100 Philistines."

He hoped that David would die trying. But the mysterious power protected David again. He killed 200 Philistines and returned from the campaign unharmed.

Saul had no choice: he had to give Michal to David as his wife. But he still hated David. The more the people showed their love for David, the more Saul turned against him.

Saul began to talk to Jonathan and his servants about killing David. But Jonathan loved David deeply and would not stand by idly while his best friend was murdered. He warned David secretly. "Don't come to the court tomorrow," he said. "I want to talk to my father about you."

Jonathan loved both his friend and his unhappy father. He was eager to have them get along as friends. His love made his words wise and good. "Why would you want to commit such a great sin, Father?" he asked.

“After all, David has done you no harm. He has risked his life for you and for the people. In the old days, you used to be happy because *the Lord* gave you the victory. Why do you now want to shed innocent blood?”

Saul was moved by these loving words from his son. He felt sorry about his wicked plans, and he promised not to harm David.

A happy, grateful Jonathan then brought David back to the king. But the king’s goodwill did not last long.

One day, after David had won another great victory and the people again cheered him on his return, Saul was consumed with jealousy and anger. Once more he threw his spear at David as David was playing the harp for him. David quickly jumped aside, and the weapon wound up stuck in the wall.

David fled to his own house, planning to wait there until the king calmed down. But Michal, his wife, saw soldiers gathering around the house that evening. David was surrounded. In the morning he would be put to death.

In the darkness Michal helped David out the window. She placed an image in his bed, covered it with a blanket, and made a false head of goat’s hair. It looked as though David lay in his bed asleep.

When the soldiers came into the house in the morning to take David away, Michal said: “He can’t go with you. He is ill.” She hoped the king would drop the matter.

Saul sent the soldiers back. “Bring him here on his bed if you have to!” he ordered. “I am determined to put him to death today!”

Then Michal’s trick was discovered. Soon she stood before her angry father, pale and trembling. “Why have you deceived me and let my enemy escape?” he screamed.

Michal lied to try to escape punishment. “I *had* to help him,” she sobbed fearfully. “He threatened to kill me.”

Later she was punished for this lie. Because she had acted as if she no longer loved David, Saul gave her to someone else as wife.

137: David and Jonathan

Not long after David escaped from Saul with Michal’s help, he came to Jonathan in secret. They talked for a long time. Jonathan wanted to make one more attempt to change his father’s mind about David. If he succeeded, David could assume his place in Saul’s court again. But if Saul’s hatred could not be checked, David would have to go into hiding to save his life.

David and Jonathan were very unhappy about the situation. They loved each other deeply and would remain friends all their lives. Jonathan was certain that David, the shepherd, would become king one day.

Jonathan was the king’s son and heir. Yet, he did not become angry at the thought of David ascending to the throne. Jonathan’s love for David was great and pure. There was no ill will toward David in his heart. “David is a better and braver man than I am,” he thought. “He will make a better king than I ever could.”

Jonathan was not afraid to raise the subject with David. “My friend, will you be good to me and my children when you become king someday?”

David promised that he would. He swore by his pure love for Jonathan.

Then they parted. David hid in the field, and Jonathan returned to the palace. In two days he would return to let David

know what Saul had in mind. But he wanted to be careful about their meeting. He did not want anyone to see them together, for that might make matters worse.

Jonathan would take a boy along with him to the place where David was hiding. He would pretend to practice with the bow and arrow, using the boy to retrieve the arrows for him. If Jonathan cried out: "Don't go so far; the arrow is closer by," David would know that there was no danger. But if Jonathan shouted: "The arrow is still far beyond you," David would know that he had to flee.

The next day there was a feast at the palace, but David's place at the table was unoccupied. On the second day of the feast, Saul asked: "Where is the son of Jesse? He's supposed to be here."

There was a deathly silence in the room. Jonathan broke the silence and spoke out bravely: "David came to me with an urgent request. He wanted to go to Bethlehem for a sacrificial feast. I gave him permission."

When Saul realized that David was out of reach again, his wrath erupted against Jonathan. "What kind of son are you?" he screamed. "I know what you're up to — you're helping my enemy. Go get him and bring him to me, for I am determined to put him to death."

When Jonathan persisted in defending his friend David, Saul got so angry that he threw his spear at his own son. That was his response to the love Jonathan had shown him. David would die — and so would anyone who dared to befriend him.

The spear missed Jonathan, who did not respond by drawing his sword, even though he was furious. He stalked out, silent and deeply disappointed.

David waited impatiently out in the field, hidden behind some rocks. Finally he



spotted Jonathan approaching with his bow and arrow. He had a boy with him.

Jonathan let an arrow fly. David saw the boy run into the field chasing the arrow sailing over his head. Now he would find out what had happened between Jonathan and Saul.

He heard Jonathan shout: "The arrow is far beyond you. Hurry up! Don't just stand there!"

That was all David needed to hear. Jonathan's efforts to make peace between David and Saul had failed. David would have to run for his life.

But the two could not bear to part

without talking together once more. Jonathan sent the boy home with the bow and arrow, and David emerged from his hiding place. The two strong warriors, the greatest heroes in the country, threw their arms around each other and cried.

They were so upset that they could hardly talk. They would have to be quick about saying goodbye. But they would always remain friends, even if they never saw each other again.

Jonathan went back to the city, lonely and unhappy. He would no longer see his friend David at the court. And David fled to the hills to begin a new life full of danger.

138: David at Nob

A solitary man moved quickly across the fields. He sought out desolate, forgotten paths where no one would see him. He made a detour around any village he came to. Sometimes he would stand still for a moment at the top of a hill and scan the horizon. Then he would hurry on again.

Whenever he heard voices, he would hide in the bushes and crouch down low until it was quiet. Once it was safe to go on, he would continue his fearful journey.

David was like a deer being pursued by hunters. Nowhere was he safe. Because he had fled in such haste, he had not even taken weapons or food with him. Anyone hiding along the way might spot him and betray him.

David's thoughts raced ahead in search of a solution, but there was no solution to be found. In his anxiety he had forgotten that God was watching over him and would protect him. He felt helpless. Surely

he would fall into death's clutches before long. Unless he used his cunning to save himself, all was lost.

The hero had become a frightened fugitive. In his great fear, he had let go of his faith.

Up ahead, between the hills, lay a village. David saw a dark, rectangular tent. The smoke of a sacrifice rose above the tent. No doubt the village was Nob. The tabernacle had been moved to Nob when Shiloh was destroyed by the Philistines.

Ahimelech was the high priest at Nob. At this point he would not yet know about David's flight. Perhaps the fugitive could find refuge with Ahimelech.

Ahimelech saw David coming. He went out to meet him and greeted him in a friendly manner. But he couldn't help wondering why the king's son-in-law was traveling alone. "Why are you alone?" he asked him.

David was afraid that he might be betrayed. In his fear a lie came to his lips. "The king sent me out on a secret mission," he said. "I left in great haste, without food and without weapons. Give me five loaves of bread, or whatever you can spare. Do you have a spear or sword here for me to take along?"

Ahimelech believed David and gave him the holy showbread on the golden table in the tabernacle. He also brought him a weapon — the huge sword of Goliath, which was kept in the sanctuary.

David was grateful. The bread was nourishing, and he could hardly ask for a better sword.

David continued his journey. Ahimelech watched him disappear in the distance, happy that he had been able to do the king a favor by helping David.

Inside the tabernacle there was someone

else watching David as he departed. It was Doeg the Edomite, a servant of Saul with dark skin and cunning eyes. He said nothing, but he would not forget what he had seen.

139: Saul and the priests of Nob

As David went his way, the bread he had been given by Ahimelech did not make him feel any stronger. Neither did Goliath's sword in hand make him any braver. The darkness in his heart grew deeper.

David was driven on by his fear. In his despair he made a foolish plan.

He would not be safe in Israel, he decided. Therefore, he would have to cross Israel's borders. If he lived among a foreign nation, the king's long arm would not be able to reach him.

He went to Gath, the Philistine city in which Goliath was born. But when the Philistines saw him, they recognized him at once as the Israelite leader who had killed so many of their men.

"Isn't that David?" they shouted. "Isn't he an Israelite prince? Isn't he the one of whom they sang: 'David has killed his tens of thousands?'"

David started mumbling about Saul and about friendship with the Philistines, but they paid no attention. They seized him and dragged him off to face their king.

David was terrified. In his great fear, he seized on the only avenue of escape that he could imagine: he started acting like a madman. He pulled strange faces. He jumped and tumbled all around the room. He let his jaw hang down. He drooled. He scratched away at the doorway like a mad dog.

The Philistines were taken aback. They stared at him in amazement. They had a superstitious fear of madmen.

Achish, their king, cried: "Let him go! Can't you see that the man is insane? Don't I have enough madmen around here? Why do you bring me another one to bother me with his lunacy?"

David was let go. Soon he was back in Israel, hiding in the cave of Adullam. When word got around that he was back, many men came to join him, men who were also afraid of Saul, men who had become fugitives without possessions. There was even a prophet among them — Gad. They all recognized David as their leader. Before long David had 400 men at his command.

David's brothers and his parents joined him too. They knew that Saul, because of his hatred of David, would not spare them. But David's aged father and mother could not be expected to live in a damp cave among all the coarse men who made up David's band. Therefore David brought them to safety in a foreign land — Moab, the land in which Jesse's grandmother Ruth was born.

In the meantime, something terrible happened at Saul's palace: Doeg told the king that he had seen David at Nob. He said that Ahimelech had helped David in his flight.

Saul was beside himself with rage. "Get all the priests of Nob over here!" he shouted.

The priests appeared. There they stood before Saul in their long, white robes — more than 80 of them, all servants of God. They saw the eyes of the king flicker with hatred.

"Why have you joined the son of Jesse in plotting against me?" he screamed. "Why have you betrayed your king?"

They trembled at his wrath, but they did not bow their heads. They knew that they were innocent. Ahimelech answered respectfully: "Which of your servants is as reliable as David? He is your son-in-law and the captain of your guard. I thought I was doing you a favor when I helped him. I knew nothing of the quarrel between you two — nothing at all."

Saul didn't even listen to this explanation. His hatred blinded him. He shouted: "Ahimelech, you must die! All of you must die." He gave his soldiers an order: "Kill the priests of the Lord."

The soldiers didn't move a muscle. They would rather have died themselves than kill the innocent priests of Nob.

Doeg was present too. This godless heathen, this betrayer, drew his sword and killed the priests — 85 of them.

Only one of the priests escaped the slaughter — Abiathar, the son of Ahimelech. He fled to David. When David heard what dreadful results his lie had led to, he said sadly: "It's my fault that those men are dead."

From then on he looked after Abiathar as if he were his own brother. But there was no way to undo what Saul had done. Because David was at fault, this event continued to cause him pain whenever he thought of it.

140: David at Keilah

David continued to move around from place to place, but he was no longer alone. His band had swelled to 600 men, and it was still growing.

After leaving the cave of Adullam, David and his men went to the land of Judah,

where they hid in a forest. Soon they learned that the Philistines had entered the land to plunder it. They were besieging the small city of Keilah, near the border.

Keilah was unprotected, for King Saul no longer thought about the needs of his people. And David, who had so often driven the Philistines back, was no longer a captain in Saul's army. Yet, David was eager to help the poor, oppressed people of Keilah.

He discussed the situation with his men, but they all shook their heads. "Our own lives are in danger," they pointed out. "We're not in a position to help others."

David brought the problem before God. He had learned not to act without consulting the Lord. The Lord said: "Go ahead, I will deliver the Philistines into your hand."

When David's men heard that, they were no longer afraid. Bravely the small army advanced. At Keilah they won a great victory.

David and his men settled down at Keilah. The news of their triumph soon spread throughout the land.

Saul heard about it too. Quietly he mobilized his army. Now he knew where he could capture his enemy! If he got to Keilah quickly, David would have no way of escaping.

Word of Saul's plans reached David's ears before the king could get there. David knew Saul was coming.

David was uneasy. The city was strong, and the king would not have an easy time taking it. The walls and gates could be trusted. But what about the people? Could David trust the grateful citizens of Keilah, the people he had rescued?

David knew where to turn for advice. He asked the Lord: "Will Saul come to Keilah,

as I have heard?"

The Lord replied: "He will come."

David asked: "Will the citizens of Keilah deliver me and my men into the hands of Saul?"

The Lord said: "They will surrender you to Saul."

Then David knew how he would be repaid for saving Keilah. In great haste he departed with his men and went to the Wilderness of Ziph. Saul's wicked plan had failed.

There was no peace for David in the wilderness either. Even there the king persecuted him and constantly sought to trap him. Sometimes, when David was fleeing like a deer pursued by hunters, he felt like giving up.

Then a very special day dawned for David. In the distance he saw a man approaching across the hills, looking this way and that. The man was wearing a prince's robe. It was Jonathan! Jonathan had risked his life to see his friend David again.

There followed a few hours of great joy in David's troubled life. Jonathan strengthened David in his trust in God. "Do not be afraid," he said. "My father may be powerful, but God, who is protecting you, is much more powerful. One day you will be king, my friend, and I shall be chief among your servants."

They did not have much time together. They looked forward to more peaceful days when there would be no one to keep them apart.

They did not know that when they said goodbye this time, it was forever. David and Jonathan never saw each other again.

141: Saul in David's power

Shortly after his final meeting with Jonathan, David's life was in great danger again. The people who lived in the Wilderness of Ziph betrayed him. They told Saul just where he was and explained how to get to his hiding place.

David fled with his men, but Saul was right behind them. Soon Saul's soldiers were all around them. They were surrounded!

It appeared that all was lost. There was no escape possible. David and his men were trapped in a pocket that was steadily growing smaller.

When no one on earth could help David, God intervened. A man came racing through the king's ranks with a message. His clothes were torn, and he was covered with sweat. He cried out: "O king, come quickly with your army! The Philistines have invaded the land!"

Saul had to withdraw with his army immediately. David was safe for the moment.

Finally there came a day when *Saul's* life was in danger. If David had wanted to, he could have taken revenge for all that the king had done to him.

It happened in the Wilderness of Engedi. Saul, with an army of 3000 men, was out looking for his enemy in the hills. David and his men were hiding deep in a cave.

It was the middle of the day. The cave was cool and dark, but the sun was blazing outside. David and his men heard the sound of weapons and soldiers outside the cave. Then a tall man entered the cave. It was Saul! His giant figure blocked out most of the light at the entrance to the cave.

David's men shrank back in fear and surprise. There they sat, deathly still, afraid to breathe, their hearts pounding. Never



before had the danger come so close to them.

The king did not see them. He sat down in the darkness. He spread his robe on the ground and stretched out on it.

It was quiet outside the cave. The soldiers had apparently stopped to rest.

The men crowded around David. "What a great day!" they whispered. "Today God has delivered your enemy into your hand!"

A few of the men already had their swords drawn. "May I, David? May I go and kill him?"

David ordered them back sternly. "Saul is the Lord's anointed," he whispered.

The men were moved by David's show of respect. They said nothing. But they did not understand how David could show such respect to a man who persecuted him so cruelly. Yet, they obeyed him.

Suddenly David stood up. Quietly he advanced on the sleeping king, with his sword in his hand. Now he could put an end to all

the conflict and danger himself. He could become king in Saul's place.

But David did not kill Saul. All he did, with his heart pounding, was to cut off a piece of Saul's robe. He did not seek revenge.

He knew that he would be king one day, but he did not want to become king by the sword.

David's men were dissatisfied, but David himself felt peaceful and happy. He knew that he had acted in accordance with God's wishes.

Silently the men waited until Saul woke up and went outside. David followed him. "My lord the king!" he shouted.

When Saul turned around, David bowed respectfully and said: "Why do you take me for an enemy? I could have killed you in the cave. Here in my hand I have a piece of your robe, which I cut off. But I did not kill you. Why are you persecuting me?"

Saul was moved by David's words. His

hatred melted under the sun of David's love. Tears filled his eyes.

"David, my son!" he cried out. "You are more righteous than I am. You have been good to me, but I have done you much evil. May the Lord reward you!"

He cried. Then he went his way with his army.

He had come to En-gedi bubbling over with hatred, but he left filled with sorrow and shame. Love had overcome the evil in his heart.

142: Nabal

There was a feast in the fields of Maon. Nabal had shorn his sheep, 3000 of them, and the wool was piled up in great heaps. When the shearing was over, he set up long tables on which he put roasted meat, wine, bread, and various delicacies. Nabal and his friends and herdsmen were having a joyful celebration.

There was good reason to celebrate, for it had been a very good year. In previous years, robbers had appeared from the wilderness to steal the sheep. This year, now that David and his men were nearby, the robbers didn't dare make their raids. David and his men had protected the flocks; they were a wall around Nabal's possessions.

Nabal had not lost a single sheep or goat to robbers. That's why the tables were so heavily laden with food and wine. Nabal was prouder than ever before, for things were going very well for him.

Nabal was not only proud, he was also foolish, selfish and crude. He never asked who had bestowed all that wealth upon him. He thought only about himself and

never felt grateful for all he had. He was the master, and he bowed before no one — neither God nor man. That's why everyone called him *Nabal*, which means *fool*.

While he sat at his table eating and drinking and bragging about his wealth, two men approached him politely. They bowed before him and said that they had a message from their master.

Nabal's chest jutted out. Condescendingly he said: "Speak."

The messengers said: "Our master David sends you his greetings. He has heard that you have shorn your sheep and are now holding a celebration. David and his men have protected your sheep. Your men were never harmed or molested or robbed when they were at Carmel. Just ask them. Therefore our master David asks you to share with him and his men by letting them come to the feast."

They waited.

As Nabal thought about this request, he got angrier and angrier. "Who is David?" he asked scornfully. "Who is the son of Jesse? There are lots of servants who run away from their master. Am I supposed to offer my bread and meat and wine to such a man? Go back to your master and tell him that Nabal doesn't want to have anything to do with a servant who runs away from his master."

Nabal had insulted David grievously, but the two messengers said nothing. Silently they turned around and went their way.

When they got back to the camp and reported Nabal's words, David was furious. In his rage he forgot that vengeance does not belong to man.

"Buckle on your swords!" he shouted to his men. Soon an angry band was on the march — 400 armed men determined to pay Nabal back for his insult. Nabal had

repaid good with evil. Now David would have no compassion on him.

143: Abigail

When Nabal insulted David in response to David's request, one of his own servants was there. He was worried about Nabal's recklessness. He went straight to Abigail, Nabal's wife, and told her about it.

Abigail was a beautiful woman, but she was even wiser than she was beautiful. She was disappointed and dismayed at her husband's foolish pride. She understood that David would respond to this affront. Perhaps she could repair the damage her husband had done.

Quickly she gathered an impressive series of gifts for David — 200 loaves of bread, two skins of wine, five slaughtered sheep, five measures of roasted grain, 100 clusters of raisins, and 200 cakes of dried figs. All this food was loaded onto donkeys. She said to her servants: "You go on ahead of me." She followed the procession of gifts on her own donkey, but she did not invite her husband to come along.

Not far from her home she took a path through mountainous territory. She could sense tremors in the ground some distance ahead from hundreds of rapid footsteps. Soon she saw sunlight reflecting off drawn swords. A small army was approaching.

At the head of the army marched a man looking very determined. His sword was in his hand. David was on his way to take revenge on Nabal.

Quickly Abigail jumped off her donkey and threw herself down at David's feet. "Blame *me* for what has happened, my lord," she begged, "but do not take offense

at what this foolish man has done. They call him Nabal, and that's just what he is — a fool. I did not know that you had sent messengers to us. Do not shed innocent blood, my lord. God will punish Nabal. You are to become king one day. When that happens, you must be able to say: 'I have never shed blood without cause.' Therefore forgive this wickedness, my lord."

David looked at the woman on the ground before him. In her beautiful eyes he read the goodness in her pious, noble heart.

His wrath began to subside. New thoughts raced through his mind, and tender feelings welled up within him. He realized that the Lord had sent this woman to him to keep him from sinning.

"If you had not come to me," he said, "Nabal would surely have died. Now I shall turn back. Go home in peace." He accepted the gifts she gave him and went his way.

Nabal did not know what was happening. He was drunk. When Abigail got home, she said nothing to him about his narrow escape.

The next morning, when he was no longer drunk, she told him that he would have been killed if she had not intervened. This frightened Nabal so much that he had a stroke and was paralyzed. Ten days later he was dead. God had punished him for his foolish pride.

Abigail, his widow, lived alone in their large house. But she was not alone for long. David had not forgotten her. He had grown to love her. When he heard the news of Nabal's death, he sent messengers to her to ask her to become his wife.

Nabal wanted nothing to do with a runaway servant, but Abigail was willing to follow David as he wandered through the land, running from the clutches of Saul. She was a great help and comfort to David

in the dangerous life he led. She and David enjoyed many happy years together as man and wife.

144: David spares Saul again

It was the middle of the night. The stars twinkled in the sky, and a warm wind swished through the grass. The silver light of the moon flooded the hillsides.

There was not a sound to be heard. Through that still, shining world, in the shadow of bushes and rocks, walked David, bent over. He was on his way to the hill called Hachilah. Abishai, his cousin was right behind him. They explored the ground with their feet, pausing at each step, making sure not to step on a dead branch or send a loose stone skittering. Sometimes they stopped and held their breath.

Before them, not far away, was Saul's camp. David's spies had told him that Saul was camped at the foot of this hill. David himself had gone out to survey the situation. When he asked who would like to come with him, Abishai was the first to volunteer. Abishai was a brave man. He and his brother Joab were captains in David's band of soldiers.

David was disappointed and weary. Would there never be an end to this life of danger and hiding and flight? In the cave at En-gedi, David had spared Saul's life, and Saul had said he would no longer pursue David. But Saul's repentance soon vanished, to be replaced with the same old hatred.

Once more the Ziphites had betrayed David. They told Saul where David and his men were, and Saul set out after them with

a band of soldiers. What good had it done David to spare Saul's life in the Wilderness of En-gedi?

For a while the two men stood motionless, listening for sounds from the camp. They heard nothing. Inside a hastily built wall of rocks and branches, Saul's entire band lay sleeping. The embers of the dying campfire were still glowing. In the middle of the camp stood the dark tent of the king, clearly visible in the light of the moon. There was no watchman. All the soldiers were asleep — even Abner, the commander. The camp was unguarded, unprotected. There was no other sound than the snores of the soldiers.

Quietly David stole into the camp. Abishai followed him. If one of the soldiers should wake up, it would be all over for them! But no one noticed them. The soldiers slept on.

Soon David and Abishai were in the middle of the camp. They stood before the king's tent. They tiptoed inside.

There lay Saul, asleep. His spear was stuck in the ground at the head of his bed. A water jug encased in a mesh of reeds lay next to his bed. It had slipped from his hands when he fell asleep. His breathing was uneven. Through a crack in the tent, the moonlight shone down on his face, which no longer had the firm lines of youth. Saul had aged rapidly. His dissatisfaction with life could easily be read in the lines on his face. It was a lonely, somber life he led.

David was upset by the sad spectacle of the sleeping king. Saul was his lord and master, even if he insisted on persecuting David. As he looked down on the old man, David knew that he still loved him. Saul was the father of his dear friend Jonathan. And he was much more — he was the Lord's anointed.

Abishai whispered in David's ear: "Today God has delivered your enemy into your hand. Let me pin him to the earth with one thrust of the spear. Just one thrust, and he'll be dead."

There was excitement in his voice as he reached for Saul's spear. Vengeful Abishai did not shrink back from murder.

Calmly David pulled Abishai's arm back. David longed for peace and rest as much as Abishai, but how could there be rest for him if he killed the Lord's anointed? He knew that he would never enjoy any peace if he did such a thing. Saul would no longer pursue him, but the murder would haunt him for the rest of his life. No doubt Saul would be punished for his sins someday — but *not* by David.

David bent over and pulled Saul's spear out of the ground. He also picked up the water jug that lay by Saul's motionless hand. Out of the camp he walked, with Abishai following reluctantly. No one woke up, for God made the eyes of Saul's soldiers heavy.

The top of Hachilah hill was bathed in red light. The stars slowly faded. The birds began to sing. Day was breaking.

Part way up a hill on the far side of the valley stood David. Beneath him lay the camp, barely visible as the sun's first rays chased away the darkness.

David cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted: "Abner! Abner!"

His shouts swept across the valley and bounced back off the hill on the other side.

From the valley below came Abner's voice: "Who is shouting and waking up the king?"

"Abner," David shouted, "what kind of soldier are you? Why didn't you protect the king? Someone came into the camp to kill the king, and you were fast asleep. You



deserve to die, Abner! Look in the king's tent. Where is his spear, and where is his water jug?" He held the spear and water jug up for all the soldiers to see.

There was a babble of voices in the camp. Saul's own heavy voice suddenly broke through: "Is that your voice, my son David?"

David answered: "Yes, my lord the king. Why are you pursuing me? What have I done? Why must I fly from place to place like a wild bird in the mountains? Again I had a chance to kill you, but I didn't. Do you now believe that I am not your enemy?"

Saul listened to David's words. He trembled at the thought that he had been in David's power again. As he saw the figure of David outlined against the early morning light, the hatred and envy vanished from his heart — but only for a moment. He was overcome by a great longing for the days when David lived in peace in the palace and fought in the army at Saul's side.

"I have sinned," Saul confessed. "I have acted like a fool. Come back, my son David, for I will do you no harm."

But David knew better than to come back. He knew that the evil spirit would return to the king.

A man from Saul's army climbed up to David's perch to fetch the king's spear and water jug. David would not descend to the camp. He stood on top of the hill and watched Saul's band of soldiers as it returned to Gibeah. Once more he and his men were safe.

145: Refuge at Ziklag

David stood on a hilltop watching Saul

and his soldiers as they disappeared in the distance. Saul was gone — but not for good. Before long he would send out his men in pursuit of David again. His change of heart never lasted long.

As David thought of what lay ahead, he broke down and cried. He shook with fear. What would happen the next time his life was in danger? He thought to himself: "One of these times I will surely die at Saul's hand."

David had been on the run for nine years. For nine years he had wandered from place to place, and no harm had come to him. He felt he could not go on; he had lost his courage.

Immediately he left the area with his men. He would have to travel far away, to a place where Saul could not follow him.

When he made that decision, he did not consult the Lord. He forgot about God; he thought only of Saul.

David and his men traveled west, toward the land of the Philistines. Long ago, when he was all alone, he had fled to Philistine territory. It almost cost him his life. This time he came with a small, yet strong army of 600 brave men.

Achish, the king of Gath, received David in a friendly manner. They were both enemies of Saul, thought the Philistine king. Together they could do Israel a great deal of harm.

Achish gave David a city to live in — Ziklag, which was near the border of Israel. From Ziklag David and his men made frequent attacks on the Amalekites and other peoples wandering through the wilderness. David's men and their families lived off the loot. They were careful to send part of it as a present to Achish each time.

Whenever Achish asked David whom he had attacked, he would lie. "Judah," he

would say.

This answer made Achish happy, for he realized that if David attacked his own people and became their enemy, he would never be able to return to them. He would have to remain a servant of the Philistines.

David was safe, but he felt miserable. He was not being pursued by Saul, and he did not have to wander from place to place. Yet there was no peace in his heart .

For sixteen months this life of lies and cunning and secret fear continued. Then things became still more difficult for David.

War broke out again between the Philistines and the Israelites. Saul's army was already mobilized. The five Philistine rulers set out to meet Saul in battle, each with his own band of men. Achish said to David: "You and your men will have to come with me as part of my army."

David did not dare refuse. After all, he had made an alliance with Achish.

The women and children were left behind in Ziklag. David and his men marched in the rearguard of Achish's army, unhappy and upset. What were they supposed to do when the battle began? How could they fight against their own people?

David did not dare refuse to fight. If Achish found out that David had been deceiving him all along, it would be the end for David and his men.

When they reached the place where the Philistine armies were assembling, the other Philistine rulers looked at David and his band suspiciously. "What are those Israelites doing here?" they asked Achish angrily. "Are they supposed to join us in battle? Isn't that David, the one who has already killed so many of our men? You know we can't trust David! What if he betrays us in battle and turns against us to

get on good terms with Saul again?"

Achish did his best to defend David, but it didn't help. The other Philistine rulers insisted that David be sent back. Thus David and his men were spared. They did not have to fight against their own people.

146: Victory over the Amalekites

David and his men had been away from home for three days. They were tired and sweaty from their long journey, but their hearts were filled with joy as they approached Ziklag. They had been spared a dangerous choice. Soon they would see their wives and children again. Then they could have a good rest.

As they got closer to the city, they saw smoke billowing into the sky above the hills. The smell of burning wood drifted toward them.

They looked at each other anxiously. A horrible suspicion crept into their hearts. They raced ahead to see where the smoke was coming from. As they reached the top of a hill, they saw that Ziklag had been destroyed. There was nothing left but a smoking heap of ruins.

With tears streaming down their faces, they ran to the city. It was too late to save anything. They called out for their wives and children, but there was no answer. A band of raiders must have come and carried them away or murdered them.

The men huddled together in little groups. They were so shocked and upset that they didn't know what to do. They had lost everything. They cried and tore their clothes in grief.

In their misery they blamed David. Angrily they advanced toward him, fists



clenched. A few of them started picking up stones.

Then something wonderful happened. David had lost everything and his life was in great danger, but his faith suddenly revived. Now that he could no longer help himself, he thought of God.

He fell on his knees in the middle of the ruins. The child who had wandered so far returned to his Father. And the Father took His child by the hand just as if there had been no sin. The Father would protect His child.

David asked the Lord what to do. The Lord told him to pursue the raiders and assured him that he would overtake them.

This message from God took away the bitterness of David's men. They felt tired and defeated, but their faith gave them

new strength. Quickly they marched off into the wilderness. A host of footprints in the loose sand showed them the path the raiders had followed.

When they came to the brook Besor, 200 of the men collapsed, exhausted. David led the others across the ravine. They hurried across the endless plains, with the sun beating down on them from above.

In a desolate area they found a dark-skinned man lying alone in the shade of a small bush. He was dying. But when David and his men gave him something to eat and drink, he revived and was able to tell them his story. He had lain there for three days and three nights. He was an Egyptian, a slave of the Amalekites.

The Amalekites were the ones who had plundered Ziklag and destroyed it. They had taken the women and children along to sell as slaves. The Egyptian had fallen sick along the way, and his hardhearted master had decided to leave him behind to die.

The hardhearted Amalekite was repaid for his cruelty: the Egyptian slave helped David and his men find the Amalekite camp. It was evening when they approached. In the distance they could hear the noise and wild singing of the raiders. The Amalekites were eating and drinking and holding a great celebration because of all the loot they had seized.

In the twilight David and his men surrounded the camp. Itching for battle, they attacked. They did not feel tired anymore. They were fighting for their wives and children, for everything they had.

In an intense battle that lasted until the following evening, the Amalekites were defeated and killed, except for 400 young men who managed to escape on camels.

The children jumped into their fathers'

arms with cries of delight. The women were lying in tents tied up and had to be freed. They were unharmed, and there was not one missing.

It was a glorious reunion. Happy and thankful, David and his followers headed home, carrying with them all they had seized from the Amalekites.

Two hundred of David's men were waiting at the brook Besor, where they had stayed behind. Some of the men who had gone on with David began to argue: "Those who did not take part in the battle should only get their wives and children back. The loot taken from the Amalekites belongs to us alone."

David shook his head. The men who stayed behind had done their best. And it was the Lord who gave them the victory. Therefore they would all share in the loot — even the men who stayed behind.

David also sent part of the loot to his own people, those who were living in the cities of Judah.

147: Saul at Endor

The Philistine armies gathered at Shunem, in the great plain of Jezreel. Saul and his men were camped in the mountainous country of Gilboa, in the hills to the southeast of the Philistines.

Saul had chosen a good location. He could see the enemy approaching on the plain. They would have to leave their horses and chariots behind to get at the Israelite army. The Israelite soldiers could hide behind the rocks as the Philistines approached. Saul was a clever commander.

All the same, he was frightened. He trembled as he thought about the coming

battle. Never before had the Philistines marched on Israel in such numbers. Saul felt all alone, forsaken. There was no one he could turn to for advice; there was no friend who could offer him comfort and encouragement.

In the old days Saul could turn to Samuel to pray for him or offer a sacrifice on his behalf. But Samuel had died unreconciled with the king. Samuel had no way of knowing how much Saul yearned for him. There weren't any priests to consult either. Saul had them put to death because of his hatred and fear of David.

The Lord had forsaken Saul and did not answer when Saul cried out to Him. Saul still had not repented of his disobedience.

Saul was alone with his fears. He paced back and forth in his tent, refusing to eat or drink. His heart was filled with despair; he could not go on this way. He simply had to talk to someone who could tell him what the future would bring. Perhaps a look at the future would give him some new hope and courage. And it didn't matter to Saul who it was that he consulted. If God refused to answer him, he would turn to satan.

Under cover of night, he and a few men crept around the enemy camp. They went to Endor, a small town on the far side of the plain. There, in a cave in the hills, lived an old woman who could foretell the future — or so people said. Apparently she could even call back spirits from the dead and consult them.

Long before, Saul had banished all fortune-tellers from Israel. He had even ordered some of them put to death. This old woman at Endor was the only one left.

The king himself knocked on her door disguised as an ordinary man. An old, gray woman carrying a flickering light opened



the door. Saul said to her: "You can summon the spirits of the dead. Summon the one whose name I give you."

The old woman looked at him suspiciously. "Why do you make such a request?" she answered slowly. "Why are you setting a trap for me? Don't you know what King Saul has commanded? Don't you know that I would be punished if I granted your request?"

Saul swore by the name of the Lord that no harm would come to her. He had only one desire: he wanted to hear the voice of Samuel, the prophet who had anointed him king and had been his wise friend and counselor for so long. Samuel would dispel the fear and anxiety that was eating away at him.

"Summon Samuel for me," Saul begged.

The woman was shocked. She peered at Saul suspiciously and cried: "Why have you deceived me? You are Saul!"

The king swore once more that she had nothing to fear. Then the woman gave in and went to work with her black arts. She went into another cave near the first one. There she burned incense over a fire and chanted some mysterious words.

"What do you see?" the king asked her, waiting tensely.

The old woman answered: "I see an old man coming up, wrapped in a robe."

Saul, who was in the first cave, saw nothing, but he believed her. He bowed low, his heart pounding. Then he heard a hollow, somber voice echoing against the walls of the cave: "Why have you disturbed me?"

Saul raised his hands as if pleading for mercy. "O Samuel," he sobbed, trembling, "I am in great distress. The Philistines have made war on me, and God has turned against me. He doesn't answer me anymore. That's why I called you. I want you to tell me what I must do."

He waited, trembling, his frightened face covered with sweat. The voice answered: "Why do you consult me? The Lord has turned His back on you. All these things have happened to you because you did not listen to the Lord. God will deliver you and your army into the hands of the Philistines. Tomorrow you and your sons will join me."

This fateful message hit the king so hard that he collapsed. There he lay, stretched out on the floor of the cave.

Saul's servants and the old woman carried him to a bed. Even the old woman felt sorry for him. She saw that he was very upset. When she heard that he had not

eaten for a day and a night, she pressed him to eat something to regain his strength.

At first Saul refused, but when his servants joined her in urging him to eat, he gave in. The old woman butchered a calf and baked some cakes. Saul and his servants ate, but he didn't know what he was eating. Unthinkingly he shoveled the food into his mouth. Then, without a word, he went back into the darkness — defeated before the battle began.

148: Saul's last battle

Saul was not the only one up and around that night. While he was making his way along the *eastern* edge of the plain on his way back to the Israelite ranks, the mighty Philistine army advanced across the *western* part of the plain. The Philistines were quietly advancing on the mountainous territory of Gilboa. They waited there until morning, ready to attack the Israelites from the rear.

In the first morning light, the hopeless battle began. Saul and his sons took up positions in the front ranks and fought like heroes. But the Philistines kept driving them back. They were more numerous than the Israelites — and stronger.

Jonathan died fighting, and so did Saul's other sons. Saul himself saw them fall. His heart was broken, but he went right on fighting. His soldiers began to break ranks and flee, but Saul stood his ground. To the very end, his faithful armor-bearer fought next to him.

Finally the last of Saul's soldiers were surrounded by the Philistines. Saul had been wounded, but he continued to fight like a madman.

The circle got smaller and smaller. Philistine arrows whizzed past Saul's head. Spears were thrown at him from all sides.

Saul saw that all was lost. Then, suddenly, he had only one fear — being taken alive by the Philistines. The Philistines would heap scorn and insults on Israel's king before they put him to death.

Saul had already been badly wounded by an arrow. He cried out to his armor-bearer: "Draw your sword and kill me." But the faithful armor-bearer, who had always been obedient, refused.

Then Saul thrust the handle of his sword into the ground. The point of the sword was sticking straight up. He threw himself onto the sword.

That was the last of Saul's great sins. His armor-bearer followed his example. Soon they were both dead.

That evening a solitary looter, an Amalekite snooping around on the battlefield, came across Saul's body and stole his valuables.

The next day the Philistines found the bodies of Saul and his three sons. They cut off Saul's head and took it back to their own country, along with his armor. They hanged his mutilated body on the wall of the town of Beth-shan, flanked by the bodies of Jonathan and his brothers.

That night some men came to Beth-shan to retrieve the bodies of Saul and his sons. They took the bodies back with them.

They were men from Jabesh in Gilead, and they had walked all through the night to claim the bodies of Israel's king and princes. They had once been delivered by Saul, shortly after he was chosen king. Now they risked their lives for him. They mourned Saul's death for seven days. They burned the bodies of Saul and his sons and buried the bones under a tamarisk tree in their town.

149: David's lament

A few days after Saul's death, a messenger arrived in David's camp. It was the Amalekite who had found Saul's body and taken his valuables. The Amalekite had torn his clothes and put ashes on his head as a sign of mourning, but his heart was filled with joy at his good fortune in finding Saul's body. Eagerly he dreamed about the reward David would give him. He had a clever story ready for David. He wanted to make sure that the reward was a large one.

Respectfully he bowed before David. "I have come from Israel's army," he said, panting. He went on to explain that the Israelites had been defeated, that many soldiers had fallen, and that Saul and Jonathan were among the dead.

David's heart sank. He asked: "How do you know that Saul and his son Jonathan are dead?"

The Amalekite had his lies ready. "I happened to be on Mount Gilboa, and there stood Saul, leaning on his spear. The enemy had him surrounded. They were coming closer and closer. When he saw me, he called out to me and said: 'Put me to death, for I am wounded.' I did as he asked. Here are his crown and his bracelets. I have brought them to you, for you are now our lord."

He waited, bowing deeply, looking at David cut of the corner of his eye to see how thankful he would be.

David threw his hands to his head and covered his face. Tears were dripping down his beard. He tore his clothes in mourning and said to the Amalekite: "Do you mean to tell me that you were not afraid to touch the Lord's anointed? Do you mean to say that you killed him?" Immediately he called one of his men and gave him an or-



der: "Put the Amalekite to death."

The messenger lay dead, and David staggered over to his tent. There he collapsed. His heart cried out for Jonathan. He was so upset that day that he did not eat or drink. He mourned the death of Saul and Jonathan.

When it was almost evening, he stood up and picked up his harp. Overwhelmed by pain, he sang a beautiful song of mourning, a lamentation for Saul and Jonathan:

Your glory, O Israel,
lies dead in the hills.
How are the mighty fallen!
O mountains of Gilboa,
let there be no rain or dew upon you.
For the shield of the mighty
has been cast away.
Saul and Jonathan,
so wonderful and dear to me,

were together in life,
 and are together in death.
 They were swifter than eagles,
 stronger than lions.
 How are the mighty fallen,
 in the midst of the battle!
 Jonathan lies dead in the hills.
 I grieve for you, my brother Jonathan.
 Your love to me was wonderful,
 surpassing the love of women.
 How are the mighty fallen,
 the weapons of war cast aside!

150: David and Abner

For years David had wandered through the land from place to place, always on the run, like a deer pursued by hunters. But God had protected and preserved him in an amazing way.

Those difficult years taught David that there was only one power that could give him strength and only one treasure that could bring him true joy — faith. He knew that things would go well as long as he stayed close to the Lord.

The years of turmoil and anguish now lay behind him. Saul was dead. Before long David was anointed as king in Hebron.

The struggle was not completely over yet. David ruled as king only over Judah, one of the twelve tribes. Another king ruled the other tribes — Ish-boseth, a son of Saul. Abner, the commander of Saul's army, had made him king.

There were two kings ruling over one people. Abner and his army marched on the army of David. There was a sorrowful battle between brothers, a long civil war. David's kingdom grew stronger and stronger, while Ish-boseth's kingdom

became weaker and weaker. Only David ruled by the will of God.

One day the two armies were locked in combat at Gibeon, with David's army under the command of Joab. David's men won the battle, and Abner's soldiers took to their heels.

One of the soldiers in David's army was Joab's brother Asahel, who was well known for his speed. Asahel was a fiery young man, and he was just as brave as his brothers Joab and Abishai. He ran across the fields like a gazelle, leaving David's army behind. He was interested in only one fugitive — Abner, the commander himself.

Asahel paid no attention to his friends. He was the only one of David's soldiers running through the enemy ranks, but he was not frightened. He saw Abner up ahead, and he was determined to catch him.

Abner was not afraid of Asahel. If it had been anyone else pursuing him, Abner would have waited and killed him. But he felt sorry for Joab's younger brother. Twice he warned Asahel to leave him alone. "Go away!" he shouted. "Why should you make me kill you?" Asahel wouldn't listen. He kept on running after Abner, his sword in his hand, ready to strike Abner down.

Finally Abner was forced to defend himself. The fight did not last long.

When Joab and his men arrived on the scene, they found the bleeding body of Asahel. Joab swore that he would avenge Asahel's death. But Abner had already escaped with his defeated soldiers.

After the battle at Gibeon, Abner finally realized that God Himself was fighting on David's side. He knew that it was God's will for David to be king over all of Israel. Therefore he held a secret meeting with David in Hebron to make peace.

David received him in a friendly manner and was overjoyed that the fighting could now come to an end. He prepared a meal for Abner and his men and made a covenant with him. Then he let Abner go his way in peace.

Joab was not in Hebron at the time. When he heard that Abner had been in Hebron, he was furious that the man who had killed Asahel was allowed to escape. The king had even placed a meal before him and made a covenant with him! Was David perhaps thinking of making Abner commander in chief of the army in place of Joab once the whole kingdom was united?

In his anger and displeasure, Joab made a wicked plan. He sent a messenger after Abner to bring him back. He did not tell David what he was up to.

Abner returned. He thought that there must be something else that the king wanted to tell him. He found Joab waiting for him at Hebron's gate. In a friendly, open way, Joab reached out to greet Abner. "I have a secret message for you," he said.

Abner went with Joab into a quiet corner where no one could see or hear what was happening. Suddenly there was a sword in Joab's hand. Before Abner could defend himself, Joab cut him down. Joab had avenged the death of his brother Asahel.

There were people who thought that Abner was killed at David's command, as part of an effort by David to weaken Ish-boseth's position. But when Abner was buried, David himself walked behind the coffin to the grave, his clothes torn. David mourned Abner's death deeply. Because of his great sorrow, the people realized that he was not guilty of Abner's murder.

Joab was not punished for Abner's murder. He received his punishment eventually, but it was a long, long time in coming.

151: King of Israel

Not long after Abner's death, two men came to David with a grisly gift — the head of King Ish-boseth.

The two men were Baanah and Rechab. They were captains in Ish-boseth's army. One afternoon, when the king was sleeping, they crept into his room and murdered him in his bed. They assumed that David would reward them for bringing him the head of his rival.

David, who was an honest and righteous man, was disgusted by their deed. He had the two cowardly murderers put to death, just as he condemned the Amalekite to death when he came to David with Saul's crown.

David had ruled Judah as king for seven years. The elders of Israel now came to Hebron and anointed him king over all Israel.

Now that David was king over all the tribes, he did not want to live in Hebron anymore. He wanted to build himself a palace in the middle of the country, in the city of Salem, where Melchizedek had lived.

Salem was a city built on steep hills. On those hills stood the fortress of Jebus, which was occupied by enemies of the Israelites. Those enemies, the Jebusites, were descendants of the original heathen inhabitants of Canaan. No one had ever been able to drive them out.

The Jebusites joked and scoffed as they stood on the walls of their fortress and looked down on David's army surrounding the city. They shouted: "You'll never get inside. Even the blind and the lame could keep you out!"

Joab and his men got into the fortress through a tunnel used to bring water into

the city from a pool outside. The city was opened to David's men, and the overconfident Jebusites were defeated. Jebus belonged to David.

David built his fortress on the ruins of the Jebusite fortress, high above the surrounding land. Hiram, the king of Tyre, heard reports of David's power. He made a covenant with David and sent him workmen and lumber. Around the palace a beautiful city was built, protected by a thick wall. That city was known as the city of David, Jerusalem, the city of peace.

The Lord made David strong and powerful. He blessed him in everything. When the Philistines marched into Israel again with a large army, God gave David the victory. David heard the sound of marching in the tops of the balsam trees. That sound was a sign to him that the Lord was with him.

The Philistines sustained such a defeat that they did not dare come back. Other enemies of the Israelites were also defeated. The land was secure. The people could live in peace and happiness.

In their midst, like a shepherd among his sheep, lived David with his wives and children in his beautiful palace. He even had Michal, Saul's daughter, as his wife again.

God's promises to David had been fulfilled. The shepherd boy had become a king.

152: David and the ark

The Lord had made David king. All his happiness and prosperity, all his power and glory, came from God.

David lived in a beautiful palace, but the

ark of the covenant stood alone in the country, in a farmer's house in a little village. After God brought it back from the land of the Philistines, it was left in Abinadab's house in Kiriath-jearim.

That wasn't right, David thought to himself. The ark should be kept at some central location. Then people from all over the country could come to the ark to worship God. Jerusalem, the city of peace, would become the city of the Lord.

David gave some orders, and thousands of people set out for Kiriath-jearim. Priests carried the ark out of Abinadab's house and placed it on a new wagon, just as the Philistines had done. They wanted to bring the ark to Jerusalem with music and singing.

They were following the example set by the Philistines! They were no wiser than the Philistines, for they forgot that the ark was to be carried by priests and covered by a cloth.

Not even Uzzah, the son of Abinadab, thought about the law. He walked right next to the ark. Ahio, his brother, walked in front of the ark.

At one point the oxen pulling the wagon stumbled. The ark was about to topple off the wagon. Uzzah reached out and took hold of the ark to steady it.

Immediately he fell down dead. Thoughtless Uzzah was punished severely for his failure to show proper respect for the ark.

The procession stood still. The singers and musicians were silent. The joy had vanished. Fear was written on all the faces. Many of the people were trembling.

The priests, their faces pale and their knees knocking, lifted the ark off the wagon and brought it to a nearby house, the house of Obed-edom. David suddenly became

afraid that there was something wrong with his idea of bringing the ark to Jerusalem. The people, silent and sad as if they were at a funeral, went back to the city.

Three months passed. For Obed-edom, who now had the ark at his house, they were the best months of his life. His land yielded amazing harvests, and his cattle became the finest cattle in the land. The Lord was with Obed-edom and blessed him. The news of his prosperity went through the entire land of Israel.

Then David realized that there was nothing wrong with his plan after all. He reassembled the procession, but this time he did not use a wagon to carry the ark. After he offered a sacrifice, he had the priests carry the covered ark respectfully on their shoulders as they walked toward the capital city.

The crowd danced and rejoiced. In their midst was the king, jumping for joy before the ark. He wore a simple white garment; he had taken off his royal robes before God.

Psalms composed by David were sung along the way. The people sang in turns as the procession neared Jerusalem:

Lift up your heads, O gates,
that the King of glory may come in.

Who is He — this King of glory?

The Lord of hosts—
He is the King of glory!

When the ark was placed in the tent prepared for it, more sacrifices were brought. The people celebrated a great feast sponsored by the king.

When David went back to his palace, happy and thankful, his wife Michal con-

fronted him with some angry words. She had seen her husband jumping and dancing before the ark in his simple clothes, and she despised him in her heart. As a proud daughter of King Saul, she was ashamed of him.

“What royal conduct from Israel’s king!” she said sarcastically. “You danced shamelessly among the people and made a fool of yourself before the maidservants.”

David answered: “The next time I will act even less like a king.”

God loved David for this humility and simplicity, and the people respected him even more.

153: The favor of the king

David’s wish had been fulfilled: Jerusalem was the city of the Lord. But David wanted to do more to demonstrate his gratitude to God. As he stood on the roof of his palace and looked over the city with its large, beautiful houses, he saw a small humble tent. It was the tent of the Lord. Then he felt ashamed of his beautiful palace and all his wealth.

He summoned Nathan the prophet. “Look,” he said, “I live in a cedar palace, while the ark of the Lord is housed in a tent. I shall build a temple for the Lord — a greater and more glorious building than any human home.”

Nathan was delighted with David’s plan. The Lord would approve, he thought. Therefore he answered: “Go ahead. Do what is in your heart, for the Lord is with you.”

That night the Lord spoke to Nathan and told him that He did *not* approve of David’s plan. Even though David wanted to build

the temple out of love and gratitude, he would not be allowed to build it, for he was a man of war, a man of blood. All his life David had been involved in struggles. The house of the Lord was to be a house of peace. Hence it could only be built by a prince of peace. David's son would be that prince of peace.

"Does David want to build a house for *Me*?" God asked. "I will build *him* a house, a dynasty. I will establish the throne of David forever."

When Nathan repeated these words to the king, there was great joy and amazement in David's heart. "Forever?" he thought. "Could it be that the Messiah, the Redeemer, will be a descendant of mine?"

He went to the tent of the Lord and prayed before the ark, trembling with joy. Reverently he thanked God for this greatest and most beautiful of promises. "Lord, Lord," he stammered, "who am I that You are so good to me?" He decided to start gathering treasures for the construction of the Lord's house, the house his son would build.

In those days David often thought back over the course of his life. He was always amazed that a shepherd boy had been made king over God's people. He thought of his work in Bethlehem's fields, and of the time when he fled Saul's wrath. That was when Jonathan had befriended him.

If only Jonathan had lived to see David's later happiness and glory! How happy it would have made him! Once Jonathan had said: "*You* will be king one day, my friend, and *I* shall be chief among your servants."

Jonathan had fallen fighting for his country. He was buried in Jabesh. He had become the servant of another King, a greater and mightier King than David.

David thought about Jonathan often. He

also thought about the promise he had once made to Jonathan. One day he summoned his servants and asked: "Is there anyone left of the house of Saul? If so, I would like to show him my favor for the sake of my faithfulness to Jonathan."

David was told that there was a son of Jonathan living in Lo-debar, far away in the hill country. His name was Mephiboseth. After the fateful battle in which Saul and Jonathan died, which took place when Mephiboseth was still a little boy, his nurse had fled, carrying him in her arms. In her haste she had stumbled. Little Mephiboseth broke both his legs and had been a cripple ever since.

David's servants brought Mephiboseth to the king. He hobbled into the king's large throne room on his crutches, pale from all the excitement, and bowed deeply before David.

When David saw Jonathan's son bowing before him, he was deeply moved. He gave him all the fields that had belonged to Saul. He also provided him with servants to till those fields. Mephiboseth himself would live in the palace.

From then on, a small, crippled man ate daily at the king's table. In his happy eyes David saw a reminder of Jonathan.

154: Bathsheba

It was almost evening in Jerusalem. A cool wind was blowing from the west. It swept across the hills and banished the heat of the day.

People were beginning to appear in the streets again. Children were playing in the growing shadows.

David rose from his bed, where he had

taken his afternoon nap. Slowly he walked up to the roof of his palace to enjoy the evening breezes.

Joab had marched off with the army to fight the Ammonites. He was besieging the fortress of Rabbah, but David remained in Jerusalem. David could relax on the roof of his palace while his men fought his battles for him.

The palace roof gave David a beautiful view of the countryside around Jerusalem. He could also look down on the city with its white houses and mansions, its gardens and streets and swaying palm trees.

David had seen these sights so often that they no longer gave him pleasure. He leaned against the railing on the edge of the roof. He was bored. It would have been much better for him if he had gone off to war with his soldiers.

Suddenly a figure in one of the gardens below caught his eye. A woman was bathing by a pond. No one could see her from the street or from the houses. But David could see her from the palace roof.

The woman was stunningly beautiful. The king stared at her. He was interested. He asked one of his servants who she was. Her name was Bathsheba, he was told, and she was the wife of Uriah, the Hittite.

The king was disappointed when he heard that this beautiful woman was married. In his thoughts he had already taken her into his palace as his wife. Now he would have to put such thoughts out of his mind, for she belonged to someone. It would be sinful to even think about it.

But David simply couldn't forget Bathsheba's beauty. That night, when he closed his eyes to go to sleep, he saw her again bathing in her garden. When he finally fell asleep, she appeared in his dreams. When he woke up the next morn-

ing, he was angry and unhappy because he could not have the woman he wanted.

It didn't occur to David that the Lord was watching him carefully. Neither did he remember that he was supposed to struggle against such desires. His unrest and lust had become too much for him. His sinful heart kept whispering to him that he could have Bathsheba if he really wanted her. After all, wasn't he the king of Israel?

That day he had Bathsheba brought to the palace. He spoke to her of his desires, and she did not resist him. Her husband Uriah was a soldier in David's army, and the army was far away. Uriah would never know what happened in the palace.

The king got his way with Bathsheba. In his heart he knew he had done something wicked, but he put all thoughts of guilt out of his mind. All he wanted to think about was Bathsheba and his love for her. Surely she would bring him happiness.

155: Uriah

Bathsheba was still living at home, for she did not want people to know of her relationship to David. One day she sent word to the king that their secret could not be concealed much longer; she was expecting a child. Soon everyone would know what her visits to the palace meant.

David was frightened when he heard the news. He did not think about his sin or about God. He thought only about the people, and what they would say. How scornful they would be when they heard about it! How they would laugh at their pious king who had once been so zealous about bringing the ark to Jerusalem and building a house for the Lord! Their king

had stolen another man's wife!

A horrible anxiety gripped David. How could he make sure that no one found out what had happened between Bathsheba and him? How could he get people to believe that the child was Uriah's?

In his fear David hatched a cunning plan. He would bring Uriah back to Jerusalem so that he would live at home with his wife again for a few days. Then no one would doubt that Uriah was the father of Bathsheba's child.

Uriah was called back to Jerusalem and appeared before the king. David gave him a friendly, generous reception. He asked about Joab and the men in the army and the progress of the campaign. Finally he said: "Now go home, Uriah, and rest a while from the battle."

David's plan didn't work. When Uriah thought about his comrades sleeping on the hard ground in the hills of Ammon, he decided that he would not shame himself by sleeping on a soft bed at home. He did not want to have it any better than they had it. He stretched out at the palace gate among the king's servants and slept there.

When the king found out, he called Uriah and spoke to him, but it did no good. The next day he invited Uriah to dine with him and got him drunk, in the hope that Uriah would no longer know what he was doing and would go home to his wife. It didn't work: again Uriah spent the night at the palace gate among the king's servants.

David was at his wits' end. Now his sin with Bathsheba was sure to come out. The entire country would find out what a wicked king he was. He would simply *have* to do something to escape that shame. He would pay any price. He would even commit a great sin, if need be.

David's first great sin led to a second.

The next morning he wrote a letter to Joab and asked Uriah to deliver it. The letter contained a command: "Place Uriah at the most dangerous point on the battlefield and then pull back from that position so that he will be killed." The king was ready to commit murder.

Faithful Uriah left Jerusalem to rejoin his comrades on the battlefield. In his baggage he carried his own death sentence.

When Joab read the letter, he could not hold back his grim laughter. What a pious king!

Joab had also committed murder once: he had killed Abner, the commander of Ish-boseth's army, to avenge the death of his younger brother Asahel. David had been very indignant and had even talked about punishing Joab. But David was no better, for he was about to kill a completely innocent soldier.

Joab did not understand it, but he did as David commanded. He placed Uriah at a position in the ranks where he would have to fight the enemy's finest soldiers. A number of David's soldiers fell in the battle — including Uriah.

Joab sent a messenger to David to tell him how the battle had gone. "If the king gets angry because we went so close to the city wall in this battle," he instructed the messenger, "tell him that Uriah the Hittite is among the dead."

The interview went just as Joab had foreseen. When the messenger got around to Uriah's death, David said in a friendly way: "Tell Joab that I am not angry about the strategy he chose. You can't fight a battle without expecting a few soldiers to fall." With this response David tried to ease the pain his own conscience was causing him.

When Bathsheba heard that her husband was dead, she mourned him — and then

quickly forgot him. She could not afford to wait long. David took her into the palace and made her his wife officially.

At last the king could relax again. His honor had been saved, and he had gotten his way. Only Joab knew about his terrible secret, and Joab would not tell anyone.

David tried to forget the sinful train of events. Bathsheba was now his wife. It was not long before she bore him a son.

The secret was a heavy burden on David's heart. He no longer dared to think about God, for he knew that what he had done was evil in the eyes of the Lord.

156: Nathan's parable

One day the prophet Nathan appeared before David. The Lord had sent him. The prophet had a difficult, dangerous mission, but he was not afraid.

Bravely he stood before the king and looked at him. There was sadness in his eyes. He began to talk: "I have something to tell you, O king. There were two men living in a certain city. One was rich, and the other was poor. The rich man had many sheep and cattle, but the poor man had only one little lamb that he had bought and raised himself. It grew up in his household along with his children. The man and his children loved the lamb. It ate their bread and drank from their cup. Sometimes it slept on the man's lap. The lamb was just like one of the children in his family."

David listened attentively. He smiled at the thought of the poor man's happiness. He was enjoying the story.

The prophet continued: "One day the rich man had a guest at his house. He had to prepare a meal for the guest, but he had no

meat in the house. He thought it would be a shame to slaughter one of his own sheep or cattle, so he took the poor man's lamb and killed it to prepare a meal for his guest."

David jumped up. He was furious. "As the Lord lives," he cried out, "the man who did that deserves to die!"

Then he shrank back. The prophet was pointing the finger at *him*. Now it was Nathan who looked angry. "That man is you!" he said sternly. "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: 'I made you king of Israel and delivered you from the power of Saul. Everything you have was given to you by Me. And if that wasn't enough, I would gladly have given you more. Why, then, have you shown such contempt for the Word of the Lord? Why have you done what is evil in His eyes? You have stolen the wife of Uriah and have killed him through the sword of the Ammonites!'"

David covered his face with his hands in despair. He crumpled under Nathan's accusation. He was a broken man. Now, for the first time, he saw the full horror of his sin. His heart lay open before God, stained by the sins of adultery and murder. Once he had allowed Uriah to carry his own death sentence, and now he had uttered a death sentence for himself. And a just sentence it was: he deserved to die.

David's spirit was broken, but not because of the punishment that was sure to come. Neither was he especially concerned about what people would say. What pained him above all was that he had disappointed God so horribly, the God who loved him so much.

"I have sinned against the Lord!" he wailed, in deep and earnest repentance.

That repentance was what God was waiting for. Once it came, Nathan had some words of comfort for the king.



God forgave David his sin and even made his punishment lighter. He would not have to die, but there would be a great deal of disappointment and struggle in his life. The sword would never depart from his house. And the child born of his adultery with Bathsheba would be taken away by the Lord.

That night, after Nathan left, David kneeled before the ark of the covenant, weeping and praying. His prayer was a song of penitance that ascended to God:

Have mercy on me, O God,
according to Your steadfast love.
Wash away my transgressions
in Your great mercy.
Wash me thoroughly of my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.
For I know my transgression;
my sin is always before me.
Against You, You only,
have I sinned,
and done what is evil in Your sight.
Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and renew my spirit within me.

Cast me not away from Your presence,
and take not Your Holy Spirit from
me.

By that time the baby was already sick. For seven days it lay in a room in the palace hovering between life and death. For seven days David begged God to spare the child. Then the baby died.

The prayer of the father was *not* answered.

Later David and Bathsheba had another baby boy, whom they named Solomon. That child was raised under Nathan's supervision.

David knew that he could never repair the damage he had done. But Solomon was a living sign that God had forgiven him.

157: Absalom's rebellion

Whenever Absalom rode through Jerusalem in his beautiful prince's garments the people watched in admiration. He rode in a royal chariot and was attended by 50 servants. His head, with its long, anointed locks of hair, seemed to shine in the sun.

Absalom was the oldest son of the king and the most handsome man in all the land. Respectfully the people bowed before him.

Early in the morning, the same prince appeared at the city gate as a simple young man, talking with anyone he came across. His manner was friendly and down-to-earth. If someone bowed before him respectfully or tried to kneel, Absalom would reach out and pull him to his feet. Sometimes he would even throw an arm around his shoulder and kiss him like a good friend.

Absalom was not the kind of man one

would quickly forget — and he knew it. Absalom was out to win popularity among the people.

Whenever someone came to the city to bring a case before the king, Absalom would talk with him and hear him out. "Your cause is just," he would say, "but I don't think the king will help you. If only I were allowed to help! If only *I* were a judge! If only I were *king!*"

The throne was Absalom's highest wish, and he would do anything to get it. That's why he rode around the city in such splendor, showing off his retinue of 50 servants and his majestic head of hair. That's also why he acted so humble and friendly at times. He was stealing the hearts of the people.

Absalom would stop at nothing to get his way. Some years before he had killed his half brother Amnon. David had sent him into exile, but through Joab he was restored.

Absalom's campaign to win favor with the people continued for four years. Then he was ready to make his move. He went to the king with a seemingly humble, pious request. "Let me go to Hebron to offer the Lord a sacrifice," he said.

"Go in peace, my son," replied David, suspecting nothing. He loved Absalom deeply and did not want to think ill of him.

Absalom went to Hebron, where he had many friends. His servants were spread throughout the land with trumpets; they were stationed on hilltops. When they heard the sound of trumpets on a hill by Hebron, they passed the signal on. Soon the sound of the trumpet was heard in every tribe, in every city. It was the signal to rebel against King David.

Messengers ran through the land and shouted: "Absalom is king at Hebron."

Thousands of men came to Hebron from all directions to help their beloved prince in his struggle for power. Even Ahithophel, the craftiest of David's counselors, took Absalom's side. He was a kinsman of Uriah. He hated the king and had long been waiting for an opportunity for revenge. His chance had finally come!

158: David flees

It did not take long for the news to reach Jerusalem. One of David's servants ran into the palace and told David that the whole land was in rebellion against him.

"The sword will never depart from your house," the prophet Nathan had said. Now David began to see what he meant.

Mobs were gathering in the streets, shouting and screaming. Trumpets were blowing. Absalom could not be far away from Jerusalem with his army.

Should David fight against the rebels, against his own son? Would Jerusalem, the city of peace, the city of the Lord, become a battlefield?

David didn't want that. He thought of his sin with Bathsheba and bowed his head.

The people in the city were rejoicing. They were already marching out the city gate to meet Absalom.

The hero who had never turned his back and fled in battle now fled before his own son. He moved quickly through the streets of Jerusalem, surrounded by Joab, his bodyguard, and the soldiers who remained faithful to him.

At the last house in the city, David stopped and let all who were with him pass before him. They hurried by and hardly dared look at the king. Among them were

faithful old warriors who were already with him at the cave of Adullam. They had stayed with him as he wandered through the land keeping one step ahead of Saul. Their ranks had been thinned by the many battles, for they had always been in the forefront of the fighting. Not one of them had chosen for Absalom!

Among the faithful soldiers was a Philistine — Ittai of Gath, who had 600 men under his command. He had entered David's service only recently. He was faithful to the king, even though the king's own people were not.

David addressed him. "Don't you want to turn back?" he asked in amazement.

Ittai answered resolutely: "Wherever my lord the king goes, in death or in life, there his servant shall go."

The priests Zadok and Abiathar also came along, as well as the Levites, who were carrying the ark of the covenant. But David did not want the ark along. He was not as foolish as the sons of Eli, who had dared to take the ark into battle. The ark belonged in Jerusalem. "Bring the ark of the Lord back to the city," David said. "If I find grace in the eyes of the Lord, He will allow me to return and see the ark and its place again. But if not — let Him do with me what seems best in His eyes."

Then David and those who were faithful to him climbed the Mount of Olives, weeping as they walked. The priests went back to the city, but they remained committed to David. They left their sons Ahimaaz and Jonathan outside the city gate near the spring called En-rogel. "Wait here," they told them. "If we have a message for the king, you must deliver it." Ahimaaz and Jonathan hid near the spring.

David had reached the top of the Mount of Olives. There another old friend stepped



forward to meet him — Hushai, one of his counselors.

An old man like Hushai would only be a burden to the king's party if he came along. Therefore he went back to the city to be near Absalom. Then he could warn David when danger threatened.

The king traveled on into the wilderness, his head bowed and covered. He walked barefoot, as a man doing penance. Many of the people with him were sobbing. The king himself was deeply moved.

He knew that this punishment was just. Therefore he was not rebellious in his heart. Yet, it was hard for him to bear.

When his party traveled through a narrow valley along a stream, a man walked along with them on the ridge on the other side of the stream. It was Shimei, a member of the tribe of Benjamin and the family of Saul. He screamed curses at David: "Go away, you no-good murderer! Now it's your turn to be miserable!" He threw stones at David and his servants.

Abishai, walking next to the king, was trembling with rage. "Why do you let this dog curse you?" he asked. "Let me go to the other side of the stream and cut off his head." His sword was already out of its sheath.

David sighed and answered: "Let him go with his curses! If my own son seeks my life, what can you expect from a member of Saul's house? Leave him alone. Perhaps the Lord will take pity on me in my suffering."

Shimei followed them for some time, shouting curses and taunts and throwing dust in the air. But David said nothing.

159: Ahithophel and Hushai

Absalom was in Jerusalem. He entered the palace and seated himself on his father's throne. He placed the crown on his shining head of hair. Now he was king!

His most important servants were with him. Ahithophel was there — and so was Hushai. Hushai was pretending to be a faithful servant of Absalom.

Absalom held a council of war. He wanted to know what he could do to destroy his father's small army.

Ahithophel knew what to do. "Let me choose 12,000 men and pursue David tonight," he said. "I will attack him while he is still weak and powerless. All the people who are with him will flee. When the king is alone, I will kill him."

That was a cunning piece of advice. Absalom nodded approvingly. Hushai's heart began to pound, for he knew that David would be in deep trouble if Absalom acted on this advice. But he did not betray his anxiety.

When the king asked Hushai for his advice, he pretended to think hard. He wanted Absalom to trust his advice. Finally he said, speaking slowly: "Ahithophel is a wise man, but this time he has not given good advice. You know that your father and his men are heroic warriors. Now that they are embittered, they will fight like bears bereft of their young. Don't forget that your father is a clever commander. He won't let his men rest tonight. And he will be careful to keep out of sight. He won't let you overwhelm him with a large army. It would be much wiser to wait for a while until you can assemble a really large army, an army with soldiers as numerous as the grains of sand on the sea shore. When you finally march on David with such an army, you can be sure of victory."

Vain Absalom smiled and nodded when he heard this advice. Riding at the head of such a glorious army sounded wonderful to him. "Hushai's advice is better than Ahithophel's," he said.

A little later Hushai slipped out of the palace and went to see the priests Zadok and Abiathar. "Warn David not to camp overnight in the wilderness," he said. "He must cross the Jordan tonight with all his men."

A servant girl brought the message to Enrogel. She carried a jug on her head to make her look as if she was on her way to fetch water. Once she got there, she passed on the message to Ahimaaz and Jonathan.

One of Absalom's spies saw the two priests' sons running away. Soon the servants of Absalom were after them.

It was a wild chase. With their enemies gaining ground, Ahimaaz and Jonathan cut across the fields and ran into the village of Bahurim. They ducked into the inner courtyard of a house. There they saw an open

well with no water in it. Quickly they climbed inside.

The woman of the house had seen them. Quickly she spread a cloth over the opening of the well and poured grain on the cloth, making it look as though the grain was drying there in the sun. There was nothing to be seen of Ahimaaz and Jonathan.

When the servants of Absalom came to her to ask her if she had seen the fugitives, she misled them and sent them on a wild goose chase. They searched the whole neighborhood, but they found nothing. Disappointed, they returned to Jerusalem.

The messengers were safe. Now they could bring David news of Absalom's plans.

When the king heard the news, he broke camp at once and set off for the Jordan. He and his men found a shallow place and crossed the river. Then they went on to Mahanaim, which was in the mountainous country on the other side of the Jordan. There they would be safe for a while.

In Mahanaim David was met by Barzillai and other old friends. They tended to the



needs of David and his followers. Now David had some time to prepare for the battle.

Hushai's advice had saved the king. Cunning Ahithophel realized that Absalom's cause was hopeless now. He went back to his house, almost insane with rage at having his advice rejected, and killed himself. He had a keen mind, but there was no true wisdom in him. His name means *foolish brother*.

160: Absalom's death

David stood at Mahanaim's city gate. His men marched past him on their way out to battle.

David himself had wanted to go along, but his men begged him to stay behind. His life was worth more than the lives of 10,000 soldiers, they said. If it proved necessary, he could still rush into the battle with the servants who stayed behind.

David was troubled as he watched his faithful soldiers marching out to do battle with his son Absalom. He was worried most of all about Absalom. However many evil deeds Absalom had committed and however much sorrow he had caused his father, David still loved him. He said to Joab, Abishai and Ittai, his three commanders: "Be gentle with the young man Absalom." He meant it. All the men in the army saw for themselves how he begged for mercy for his wicked son.

The battle would be fought in dangerous territory — desolate mountain land with deep gullies and steep cliffs. Thick bushes and thorny trees with tangled branches crowded the paths. Small, deformed oak trees grew on the slopes.

There, in the forest of Ephraim, the two armies clashed. The battle was short but intense. Absalom had a bigger army than David, and he was one of the commanders in his own army. But David's men had years of experience in warfare. They were battle-hardened veterans, and they knew that they were fighting with God's blessing for a good cause. That awareness made them strong.

The great army of Absalom was soon thrown into confusion and began a disorderly retreat. The soldiers broke through the bushes and got tangled up in the branches and vines. Many lost their footing on the slippery rocks and tumbled into a deep ravine. The rough terrain killed more of Absalom's soldiers than the swords of David's men.

Absalom was no hero. When he saw that the battle was lost, he turned his donkey around and fled. In his deathly fear, he made the donkey run down the narrow path at top speed. Once he turned around to see how close his pursuers were. Just then a low-hanging branch of an oak tree caught him in the throat and tore him right out of the saddle. The donkey ran on, leaving Absalom tangled up in the tree. There he hung, suspended above the ground, his neck trapped between stubborn branches.

As he twisted and squirmed, the long, heavy locks of hair became intertwined with the branches. Soon he was hopelessly stuck; he could not work himself free.

One of Joab's soldiers came upon him. Frightened at what he saw, he reported to Joab. "I saw Absalom hanging in an oak tree," he cried out.

"Then why didn't you cut him down to the ground and kill him?" Joab asked. "I would have given you ten pieces of silver and a belt."

The soldier shook his head. "Even if you gave me a thousand pieces of silver," he said indignantly, "I would not harm the king's son. The king told us to spare him."

Joab knew that, but he didn't care. "The king is a fool in his love," he thought. "As long as Absalom is alive, the danger is not over."

He took three darts and stuck them into Absalom's chest. Then his men took the body down from the branches and threw it into a deep ravine. They covered it with a heap of stones. That was the end of the vain, deceitful, disloyal prince.

161: David's restoration

Two messengers ran back to Mahanaim to tell the king about the outcome of the battle. One was Ahimaaz, the son of Zadok. The other was an Ethiopian, a black man.

The Ethiopian left first, but Ahimaaz beat him to Mahanaim. Panting, he bowed before the king, who had been waiting uneasily by the gate. "It went well," he stammered, gasping for breath. "The battle is won."

David hardly seemed to hear him. There was only one question on his mind. "What about the young man Absalom?"

Ahimaaz saw the great fear in the eyes of the king. He did not dare tell the king about Absalom's death. "When Joab sent me away with the message," he said hesitantly, "I saw a great commotion, but I don't know what it was about."

The king said: "Step aside, but wait here." Ahimaaz obeyed. Just then the Ethiopian arrived with the same good news. The king asked him: "What about

the young man Absalom?"

The Ethiopian answered: "May all who rebel against you suffer the same fate as that young man. He is dead!"

The king was deeply shaken by the news. He staggered indoors and began to weep. Crazy with grief, he paced back and forth. "Absalom, my son! Absalom, my son! If only I could have died in your place! O Absalom, my son, my son!"

As the soldiers returned to Mahanaim, they heard David's cries from afar. They entered the city quietly as if they were returning from a defeat instead of a victory.

The king did not come out to greet them. Only when Joab confronted him with strong, almost threatening language did David appear before his soldiers. But he would not be comforted.

Soon the leaders of the tribe of Judah came to David. They escorted him back to Jerusalem as their king. He had left Jerusalem as a fugitive, but he returned in triumph.

Even before David crossed the Jordan on his way back, a man came running up to him and threw himself down at his feet in deadly fear. It was Shimei, who had cursed David and thrown stones at him. Now that David's power was restored, Shimei begged for forgiveness, shaking with fear.

Abishai was itching for revenge. "Shouldn't Shimei be put to death?" he demanded. "After all, he cursed the Lord's anointed!"

David spared Shimei's life. "Today no one will be put to death," he said.

God had been gracious to David. Therefore he wanted to be gracious to others. "You will not die," he said to Shimei.

Soon David was seated on his throne again. Things were back to normal. It

seemed that nothing had changed.

But the handsome prince no longer rode through the streets. In David's heart the lament continued: "Absalom, my son, my son!"

162: David's last days

One day David fell into another sin that caused a great deal of misery, pain and destruction. We do not know exactly when it happened. Perhaps it was before Absalom's rebellion.

David was sitting on his throne thinking about his power. He had triumphed over all his enemies. Never had he suffered a defeat in battle. He had made his kingdom great and glorious, and he had expanded its borders.

Mighty kings sent representatives to Jerusalem to honor David. He had thousands of servants to obey his every wish. A large, powerful army awaited his commands. How many thousands of subjects did David have?

David was bursting with pride. He forgot that all his possessions were given to him by God. With a smile on his face, he dreamed of still more conquests. If he wanted to, he could defeat many more enemies and make his kingdom a true world empire!

He would first need a larger army. He didn't know just how big his army was. He had never taken a census of his people.

Deep in his heart, a voice was warning him. But the dream was too sweet to be forgotten.

He called Joab and his commanders. "Go through all the tribes of Israel," he told them, "and count the people."

Even cold, calculating Joab was shocked

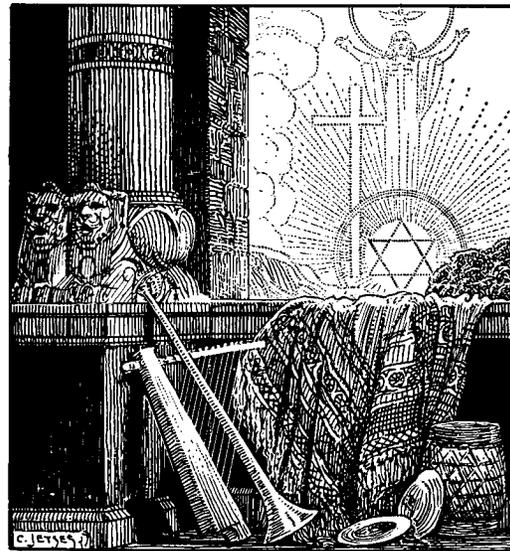
by this plan. He saw the pride in the eyes of the king, and he realized that it was bound to go wrong. God wanted nothing to do with a king who lived for his own glory. He wanted His people to be ruled by a king who humbly inquired about God's will.

Joab spoke up: "O king, I hope you will live to see the day when God makes Israel a hundred times as strong as it is now. But I beg you not to go through with this census."

David did not want anyone contradicting him now that he felt so powerful. His will was law.

Joab and his men started work on the great project, but they counted only the men who could serve in the army. Nine months later Joab appeared before the king and gave him the results: 500,000 potential soldiers in Judah, and 800,000 in the other tribes.

This time the thought of great numbers brought the king no joy. He had awakened from his proud dream, and his conscience was bothering him. The man who ruled God's people as king had become great not



through his own wisdom and courage but through God's grace and favor.

"I have sinned greatly," David thought. He prayed: "O Lord, forgive me my sin. I have acted foolishly."

His repentance had come too late. God was willing to forgive him, but he and his people would be punished.

The people were guilty too. Like their king, they had forgotten that Israel was a *holy* nation, that it was not a nation like other nations. Israel was not destined to become ever greater and mightier. Israel's destiny, as the people of the Lord, was to bring happiness to all the nations of the world.

The prophet Gad was sent to David. Rarely has a human being been forced to make such a horrible choice as David had to make that day. The prophet laid three possible punishments before David — seven years of famine, three months of fleeing before the enemy, or three days of pestilence. It was up to David to choose.

David was very upset, but there was no way out for him. "I am in great distress," he said. "Let us fall into the hands of the Lord, and not into the hands of men, for God's mercy is very great." He chose three days of pestilence.

The pestilence broke out during the harvest season. It spread quickly and did its horrible work mercilessly. Cries of anguish went up all over the land. Soon there were 70,000 dead.

It was the angel of the Lord who spread that sickness at God's command. When he had gone through the whole land, he approached Jerusalem. He stood by the threshing floor of Araunah and extended his hand toward Jerusalem.

An altar had been built on that threshing floor. Rising from that altar was a column

of smoke. Sacrifices were being offered. King David was on his knees by the altar praying for grace.

Then God told the angel: "It is enough. Put away your sword." David's prayer was heard, and the city of the Lord was spared.

On that same hill, long before David offered his sacrifices, Abraham had offered the most difficult sacrifice of his life. That hill was Mount Moriah.

Later a beautiful temple would be built on that hill — the house of God. For centuries the psalms of David would resound there, and sacrifices would be offered for the sins of God's people.

One day the last and mightiest King of David's line would offer the greatest sacrifice of all on a hill not far away. His sacrifice would atone for all our sins.

That was David's great comfort in his last years — his faith in the King who would be one of his descendants, the King who would be his Son and also his Lord. He sang of this King in the beautiful psalms he composed. Those songs were sung by the



singers in the tabernacle and the temple, and they are still being sung in our churches 3000 years later.

David spoke to the people once more when he was very old and weak. He reminded them about the Lord's goodness to him, even when he was a shepherd watching over his father's sheep. He urged the people to remain close to God.

David called the elders of Israel together and had them bring treasures for the temple to be built by his son. He gave Solomon a plan for the temple, a plan he had received from the Lord. He offered Solomon a lot of wise advice, had him anointed king, and yielded the throne to him.

When David was 70 years old, he died and went on to a more glorious kingdom.

163: The wisdom of Solomon

Solomon sat on his father David's throne and ruled over his great kingdom. Now it was *his* responsibility to govern the land and look after all those thousands of people. *He* was the one who would have to help them in their hour of need. They would come to *him* with all their problems.

This thought did not make Solomon proud. And he was not completely happy, for the task God had given him was a heavy burden on his young shoulders.

Solomon was eager to be a good king and a father to his people. He wanted to rule them with love and wisdom. But he knew how difficult that was. He was still so young and inexperienced!

In his unrest he went to Gibeon, where Zadok was priest. Solomon wanted to offer

sacrifices to the Lord there, for he loved God very much.

While he lay sleeping in his tent that night, close to the smoking altar, he heard the voice of God speaking to him: "Solomon, what would you like Me to give you?"

Solomon felt a great calm fill his heart. The Lord knew about his worries, then.

Solomon did not have to think long about God's question. There was only one thing he lacked. Humbly he asked: "Give me an understanding mind to govern Your people justly."

God's answer, which he heard clearly above the quiet night breezes, removed all the anxiety and fear from his heart: "Because you have made this request, I will grant it. I will give you more wisdom and understanding than anyone has ever had before you or will ever have after you. And because you did not ask for wealth or power or a long life, I will make you rich and powerful as well. If you obey My will, I will also give you a long life."

Solomon woke up. He knew he had been dreaming, but he also knew that the dream had come from God. It was a comforting message for him sent from heaven. He could be happy and could stop worrying, for he would receive wisdom from the Lord.

One day two women came to the king, each carrying a baby. One of the babies was dead.

"O my lord, help me!" said one of the women. "I live in the same house as this woman. Not long ago I had a baby boy. Three days later she also had a baby boy. We were sleeping in the same bed, with our babies next to us. One night her child died because she lay on top of it. Then she got up during the night while I was sleeping, took



my living son away from me, and put her dead baby in my arms. When I woke up the next morning, I found a dead baby in my arms. I took a careful look at it and saw that it wasn't my own baby. The living baby belongs to me; the dead one is hers."

The other woman calmly shook her head and said: "Don't believe her, my lord. The dead baby belongs to her; the living one is mine."

"That's not true!" the first woman shouted.

"Yes, it is!" the second one replied.

They both looked the king straight in the eye, calmly and with seemingly honest faces. How would the wise king settle this case?

One woman was telling the truth, and the other was lying. But who was the liar?

It seemed a hopeless riddle. The people watching this scene held their breath.

There was no sign of emotion on the king's face. No one could tell what he was thinking. "Bring me a sword," he commanded.

In a harsh voice with no trace of compassion, he said: "Both women want the living baby. Let them share it. Cut the baby in two and give each woman half."

"That's fair," said one of the women. "Then neither of us will have a baby!"

Solomon's servant had already grabbed the squirming baby, but the other woman threw herself at him to hold him back. "Don't do it!" she cried. "Give her the baby, but please don't kill him!"

Then Solomon knew who the mother of the living baby was. He recognized a true mother's heart in her concern for her baby.

The real mother got her baby back and went home happy, while the other woman was punished for her deceit.

All who heard about this case were filled with respect for the wisdom of the king. The people were fortunate to live under his rule. There were no more wars; there was peace with all the neighboring nations as long as Solomon ruled. The people could go about their work in their fields and vineyards undisturbed. When they sat under the fig trees by their homes, satisfied with life, they thanked God for giving them such a king.

164: The temple

On Mount Moriah, which was at Jerusalem's edge, the white walls of the temple rose slowly and quietly. It was the greatest and most glorious project ever undertaken by King Solomon. He was building a house for God.

No effort was too much and no cost was too great when it came to the house of the Lord. For seven and a half years the work went on. More than 100,000 people were involved.

Solomon had made a covenant with Hiram, the king of Tyre. From Hiram's country came fragrant cedarwood for the temple. Hiram also sent some talented carpenters to help with the building.

With the help of Hiram's servants, some 10,000 men from Israel cut down heavy trees on Mount Lebanon and rolled them to the sea. Other men strapped them together to form rafts and floated them down the coast to the port of Joppa. Another 70,000 men carried them across the hill country of Judah up to Jerusalem.

In the mountains, stone cutters were busy under the supervision of their overseers — 80,000 men. They cut great blocks of stone in the quarries, made them smooth, and dragged them to Jerusalem.

Shining gold was reduced to long, thin plates. Copper was melted in hot ovens and turned into heavy pillars. Men were at work sawing and cutting, polishing and hammering.

All of this took place *outside* the city. No hammers were heard on the holy site where the temple was to stand. Thousands of workmen, making very little noise, smoothed the top of the mountain till it was flat and then made the flat area larger.

It was an immense project. The great stones and all the wood were brought to the site silently. Everything had been made ready: all the workmen on the site did was to fit the stones and blocks together.

First the foundations were laid. The temple rose slowly from those foundations. Summer and winter, under the burning sun and in the pouring rain, the work went on. The temple was seven years in the making. Then it was finally finished.

There it stood, visible from all the hills surrounding the city. It was the highest point in Jerusalem — a palace such as no one had ever seen before. It was a vision of shining beauty within the thick wall that surrounded the city.

The entrance to the temple faced east. When the sun was rising, the outer doors shone. To the left and right of the doors stood two huge bronze pillars named Jachin and Boaz, gleaming in the sun. In front of the pillars was the temple square with the great bronze altar of burnt offering and the bronze sea. The bronze sea was an immense basin resting on twelve bronze oxen, three facing each side of the square, all with

shining heads.

There were two courts surrounding this temple square.

As for the temple itself, it was made up of two rooms, like the tabernacle. But the rooms were twice as long, twice as wide, and twice as high. Passing through the vestibule or entry chamber, the priests entered the Holy Place. They walked across the floor on bare feet, for the floor was covered with gold. The walls were also covered with sheets of gold, but underneath the gold were beautiful wooden carvings of angels, palm trees and flowers.

Always burning in this area was the golden lampstand. Its soft light made the Holy Place shine. Near the lampstand was a golden table, the table of showbread. The golden altar of incense also stood in the Holy Place, in front of the exquisite veil that blocked off the Holy of Holies from the Holy Place.

In the Holy of Holies, which was the holiest room of all, it was always dark. On each side of the room stood a great wooden figure of an angel. The wings of the two angels were spread over the entire room. There was nothing else in the Holy of Holies. The ark was still in the tent David had built for it.

Finally the great day of the temple dedication arrived. Thousands of people had come from all over the country to join in this great feast, which would last for two weeks. In a holy procession, the priests carried the ark of the Lord into the new house. When they placed it very reverently under the wings of the angels in the Holy of Holies, a cloud suddenly filled the house of the Lord. This was a sign that God was willing to dwell in the temple.

Trembling, the people kneeled in the courts outside. After Solomon blessed the

people, he kneeled before the altar, raised his hands, and prayed. He asked the Lord to watch over this house Himself and to listen whenever prayers for help and deliverance were raised in the temple.

Suddenly the sacrifice on the altar broke into flames without anyone touching it. Then all the people knew that the Lord had accepted the house built for Him. He had sent fire from heaven to make the sacrifice burn. That was His answer to Solomon's prayer.

Solomon erected more large and beautiful buildings, including a palace for himself and a palace for one of his wives, who was a daughter of Egypt's king. Jerusalem became a city of palaces.

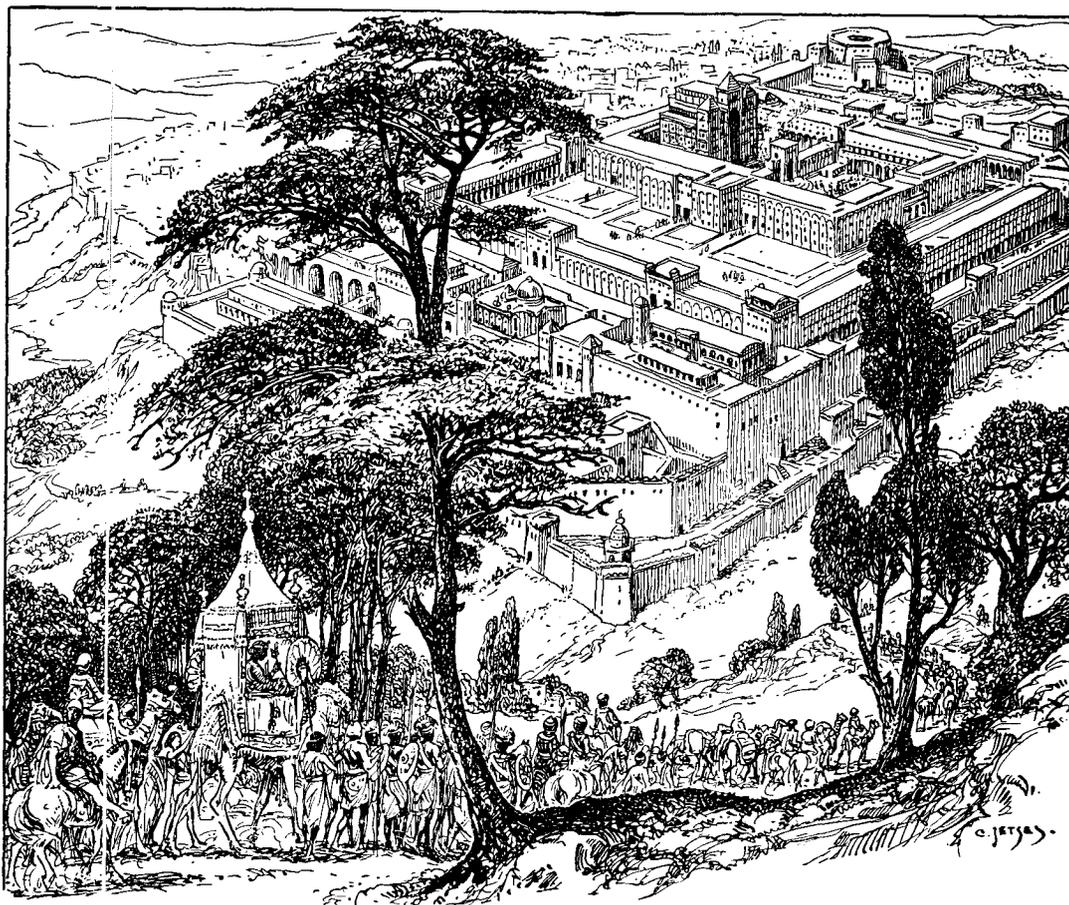
Solomon also built many ships. The ships sailed faraway seas and returned laden with treasures — gold and silver, fragrant spices, and all sorts of strange animals.

Solomon had thousands of horses and chariots. His throne was made of ivory and had golden lions before it. He and his servants drank from golden cups. Solomon was the richest and most powerful ruler in the world. His fame extended to many faraway lands.

165: Solomon's reign

One day a great caravan approached the city of Jerusalem from the south. The camels were laden with spices, gold, and precious stones. Hundreds of armed men guarded the treasures. At the head of the procession rode a beautiful black woman in exquisite, costly garments.

She was the queen of Sheba, the land of spices. In her faraway country she had heard so many wonderful things about



Solomon's great wisdom and immeasurable wealth that she couldn't believe it. She made the long, dangerous journey to see for herself if what she heard was true.

Once she had seen the temple and the palaces and the king's treasures, she cried out: "It is more beautiful than I was told. I wasn't even told the half of it."

She was still more astounded at Solomon's wisdom. When she asked him some very difficult questions and listened to his answers, she was beside herself with amazement. "Happy is the people," she declared, awe-struck, "that has you as king."

She gave gold, fragrant spices and precious stones to Solomon as gifts. And Solomon let her choose whatever she wanted from his treasures.

When she went home again, the most glorious gift she carried with her was a knowledge of God, the Creator of heaven and earth, who could also give her eternal joy.

Solomon was such a glorious king that some people began to wonder whether he might be the great king God had promised to Israel — the King of peace, the Redeemer awaited by the people. But those

who thought that Solomon was indeed the Messiah were in for a bitter disappointment. There was sin dwelling in the heart of this wise king. Because of that sin, his reign, which had begun in such splendid style, ended in sadness and darkness.

Solomon had married many foreign women. They were princesses from heathen lands — Tyre and Moab and Ammon. When they came to Jerusalem to live, they brought their priests and idols with them.

The king tolerated this, for he loved his wives and wanted to be kind and good to them. When they asked for temples for their gods, he consented.

From the temple of the Lord rose the smoke of sacrifices offered to God. But outside Jerusalem, on a mountain near the city, smoke rose from altars dedicated to Astarte, Chemosh, and other idols.

When Solomon was an old man, he sometimes joined his wives at a sacrificial feast on the mountain of shame, where he would bow before foreign gods. He did this only to please his wives. He did not believe in those gods; he knew that they were powerless images of wood and stone. Yet, this was a great sin on his part, for he was no longer completely devoted to the Lord in his heart.

Finally the Lord sent a prophet to the king. Long before, when the temple was just completed, God had warned the king. Now came the punishment.

Solomon had not given his whole heart to the Lord. Therefore he would not be allowed to keep his whole kingdom. Rehoboam, his son, would rule only part of the land as king.

By the time Solomon died, all the pious people of Israel knew that he was *not* the promised Redeemer. Yet he had given the people a great deal of wisdom in the books

he wrote — Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs.

Solomon was not the Redeemer. The Redeemer would be much greater and much more glorious. He would be much wiser and would be without sin, so that He could say: "Behold, there is more than Solomon here!"

Solomon had made the people long even more for the great King who was to come.

166: Ahijah's message

An old man waited on a lonely road. He was wearing a beautiful new robe and a simple garment underneath.

Another man approached from the south, from the hills in the area of Jerusalem. He was much younger and stronger than the old man, who moved forward to greet him. When they were close together, the young man suddenly stood still, for something very strange happened: the old man took off the new robe he was wearing and tore it into twelve pieces.

He said to the young man, who was staring at him in amazement: "Take these ten pieces, Jeroboam. Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: 'I shall tear the kingdom away from Solomon and give you ten tribes, for Solomon has forsaken Me and has bowed down before idols. If you obey Me, your sons will be kings after you.'"

When the prophet walked away, Jeroboam watched him for a long time, shaking his head in amazement. He could hardly believe his ears. But in his hands he held ten pieces of the torn robe — proof that his ears were not playing tricks on him.

He folded the pieces carefully, put them

away, and continued his journey, thinking as he walked. He, Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, was to be king! God Himself had decreed it. That's what Ahijah, the old prophet had said.

King! He said the word out loud, savoring his new treasure once more.

King! That was the most glorious destiny he could imagine. It went beyond his wildest dreams.

Jeroboam's heart was pounding with joy. Things were certainly going well for him. He was the son of a widow in a little town in Ephraim. Years before, when Solomon ordered the construction of a wall around the mountain on which the temple was built, Jeroboam had been one of the workmen — a simple man among the laborers. He had no choice; he was forced to work on this public works project. But Solomon had seen what a good worker Jeroboam was and had made him an overseer. That was a much better job. And now a still more glorious future awaited him: he was to be king over most of the country!

At first Jeroboam's glorious future brought him only pain and anxiety. Word leaked out of what had happened on that lonely road. It almost seemed that the wind had whispered the message to the entire land.

When King Solomon found out, Jeroboam's life was in danger. He had to leave behind everything he loved and flee to Egypt.

He lived there for years as an exile, far away from his people. How he longed for the day when he could return!

Finally a messenger arrived from Ephraim to call Jeroboam home. "The people need you," said the messenger. "The king is dead."

167: Rehoboam

King Solomon was dead, and the people were ready to rebel. Solomon had been a great and wise king, but he was strict and he demanded a great deal of the people. He had imposed heavy burdens on them, for he needed a lot of money for his luxurious court and many workers to build his palaces and temples. He undertook many public works projects.

The people had obeyed as long as Solomon was alive. They yielded to any demand he made of them. But now they wanted a change.

The Israelites gathered in Shechem for a great meeting. Their representatives went to Rehoboam, Solomon's son. One man in the delegation stepped forward and addressed Rehoboam in the name of the others. It was Jeroboam. "Your father made our yoke heavy," he said, in a calm, carefully thought-out manner. "If you make our yoke lighter, we will serve you."

These words came as such a surprise to Rehoboam that he didn't know what to say. "Come back in three days," he finally replied, "and I will give you my answer."

Rehoboam used those three days to seek advice. First he went to the wise old counselors of his father Solomon. They said to him: "Give the people a gentle, friendly answer, and they will always be your servants."

That didn't strike Rehoboam as sensible. He had grown up in the midst of wealth and luxury. His privileged upbringing had made him proud and overbearing.

He rejected this advice and asked the young men with whom he had grown up what he should do. "Don't give in to those complainers!" they said. "Are you going to

let the people tell the king what to do? You should say to them: 'My father made your yoke heavy, but I will make it even heavier. My father punished you with whips, but I will punish you with scorpions!'

Now Rehoboam knew what to say; now he had an answer that suited him.

When the three days were over, Rehoboam stood before the delegation once more, stretched out to his full height. Making no attempt to mask his pride and conceit, he gave them his answer.

"My father made your yoke heavy," he shouted, "but I will make it even heavier. My father punished you with whips, but I will punish you with scorpions!"

The people did not shrink back in fear. They seemed to grow even more bold in their anger and indignation. Some shook their fists at Rehoboam. Soon there was a great uproar.

"To your tents, O Israel!" they began to shout. "What do we care what Rehoboam says? What do we want with him anyway? Let him rule as king over Judah, his own tribe!"

Rehoboam was astounded. The people walked away in angry little groups, and there was nothing he could do to stop them. He stared at them in amazement. Now they would choose someone else as king!

Somehow Rehoboam would have to make them reconsider. After all, he was supposed to be the king of all of Israel!

He sent Adoram after them — of all people! Adoram had imposed heavy burdens on the people as Solomon's taskmaster. Therefore the people hated him.

Adoram did not return alive. He was stoned to death by the rebels. And once they had tasted blood, they were even angrier. They came back and went after Rehoboam, who barely escaped to Jeru-

salem in his chariot.

In Judah, the land that remained faithful to him, the king's spirits revived. He decided that he would force the whole country to accept him as king. He would use the army, if necessary. He called all the men to battle. The men of Judah and Benjamin came, but they were not eager to fight.

The prophet Shemaiah went to the king and forbade him in the name of the Lord to make war on the other tribes. Rehoboam had to let the soldiers go back home.

Only two tribes remained faithful to the king. The reduced kingdom which Rehoboam ruled was known as Judah.

The other ten tribes formed a separate kingdom — the kingdom of Israel. And they chose Jeroboam as their king.

Ahijah's prophecy had come true. The mighty kingdom of David and Solomon had been torn up to form two smaller kingdoms.

168: Jeroboam's sin

Jeroboam was worried. Things were going very well for him. He lived in a beautiful palace he had built in Shechem. Servants scurried here and there to obey his every wish, bringing him anything his heart desired. It was glorious to be king. Still, he was worried.

Remaining king would be difficult, he thought. Some people in his kingdom yearned for the glorious days of David and Solomon, when Israel was still a large and powerful land. Such people would gladly reunite with the other kingdom, Judah.

Whenever it was time for one of the great feasts — the Passover or the Feast of Weeks or the Feast of Tabernacles — the people went in droves to Jerusalem, the city of the Lord. The temple and the ark were in Jerusalem; it was the home of the God whom the people wished to honor with their sacrifices and prayers.

Naturally Jeroboam never went along to Jerusalem. He stayed in his palace as a bitter and worried king in an almost empty kingdom. *His* people and the people of Judah were celebrating a feast together, just as if they were brothers.

If they ever became one people again, they wouldn't need Jeroboam. Therefore he would have to do something to head off that danger.

Jeroboam did not think about God very often. He had almost forgotten the prophet Ahijah's warning that he would remain king only if he served God and obeyed Him. Jeroboam did not love God. He thought only of himself and his kingship.

Jeroboam had two golden calves made. He put one in the north, at Dan, and the other in the south, at Bethel, right along the routes the people took to go to Jerusalem for the feasts. By each golden calf he had a temple built on a hill, and before each one he placed an altar.

When he announced this to the people, he made it all sound pious: "It is too much to ask you to go all the way to Jerusalem for the feasts. After all, God can be worshiped anywhere. Bring your offerings here in our own land and celebrate the feasts here. Let us kneel together before God. His throne is *here*, above these golden calves. The calves are images of His power!"

There were pious people in Israel who refused to obey. And the priests and Levites living in Jeroboam's kingdom would not of-

fer sacrifices at Bethel and Dan. Instead they moved to Judah. But that was no problem to Jeroboam. He could get other men to serve as priests. God had indicated that the tribe of Levi was to offer the sacrifices, but other men could easily take over the role of the Levites. Jeroboam himself could serve as priest if need be. Anyone could become a priest in Jeroboam's temples.

The people in Jeroboam's kingdom streamed to the new temples. Apparently they had not learned much from the mistake at Mount Sinai, where their ancestors had danced before a golden calf. Now they were dancing again.

Jeroboam's clever trick had worked. The king set his mind at ease.

One day a great sacrificial feast was held at Bethel. The king himself stood before the altar to offer the sacrifice. The crowd behind him was kneeling in adoration.

At one point in the service when it was still, imposingly still, a man suddenly pushed his way through the crowd to get to the front. In a harsh, angry voice, he destroyed the solemn atmosphere: "Altar, altar, thus says the Lord: 'One day a king of Judah named Josiah will come here and sacrifice the false priests upon you.'"

The speaker was a simple man in a rough, shabby robe. There was a strange, holy glow in his eyes. He pointed to the altar and cried out: "As a sign that God has spoken, the altar will fall apart."

A shudder went through the crowd. The altar came apart as though it were a mere leaf. The ashes spilled to the ground.

The king paid no attention to the miracle. He saw only one danger — that his people would be driven into Judah's arms after all. He would have to stop this prophet from Judah at once.

He pointed to the prophet and shouted: "Arrest him!" No one obeyed.

Then the king turned pale. He made vain attempts to draw his hand back, but his arm remained outstretched, stiff as a board. God had made his arm useless.

That surprise robbed Jeroboam of all his courage. Like a child he begged the prophet: "Pray for me! Pray for me!" The prophet prayed, and Jeroboam's arm was healed.

But when the king rode back to the palace, his health restored, he was boiling with anger at his defeat. He did not repent. God's warning to Jeroboam had been in vain.

169: God punishes Jeroboam

God had warned Jeroboam about his sins, but the king refused to listen. Therefore God gave him another warning.

Jeroboam had a son named Abijah, a pleasant, happy boy. Jeroboam loved that boy more than anyone else on earth — except himself. He lived for Abijah and strengthened his kingdom for him. Abijah was to succeed him on the throne.

One day Abijah became very, very sick. He lay in a beautiful bedroom in the palace at Shechem. There were doctors all around his bed, looking worried. They muttered and chanted and tried foreign, heathen tricks to drive the sickness away, but it didn't help. The little boy's skinny arms reached out helplessly for relief as the sickness advanced through his body and the fever burned up his strength.

The king watched. He didn't know what to do. The boy would surely die if help did not come quickly. But who could help him

when even the doctors failed?

"God," said a voice in Jeroboam's heart. But Jeroboam did not want to ask any favors of God. Ever since the erection of the golden calves, there had been a wall between God and him. Was he supposed to get rid of the golden calves and let his people go to Judah to worship? That might cost him his crown. And his crown meant even more to him than his son's life.

Should Jeroboam kneel before the golden calf and ask for help? He didn't believe that such prayer would do any good.

Suddenly he thought of the old prophet Ahijah. There was still hope! Ahijah was the prophet who had given him the message that he would become king. He lived in Shiloh, and would be very, very old by now.

Ahijah had once been favorably inclined toward Jeroboam, and he was a man with great power. He had prophesied that Jeroboam would become king, and it came to pass. If he said that the boy would be healed, that would no doubt come to pass too.

Ahijah knew about Jeroboam's sins, but the king figured out a way to get around that problem. He would not go to the prophet himself; he would send his wife, disguised as an ordinary woman from an insignificant little village. When she told the prophet that her sick child was on the brink of death, the prophet would feel sorry for her. And if she gave the prophet a gift, he would surely promise her healing for her son.

Soon a woman dressed in simple clothes left the palace in great haste and started down the road toward Shiloh. She was carrying ten loaves of bread, some raisin cakes, and a jar of honey. No one recognized her.



While she was traveling to Shiloh, old, blind Ah jah heard God's voice speaking to him as he sat in his house: "Ahijah, Jeroboam's wife will soon be at your door to ask you about her son, who is very, very sick. This is what you are to say to her . . ."

Jeroboam's wife did not know that God had spoken to the old prophet. She walked very quickly, as any mother would with a child deathly ill. She arrived in Shiloh and found the prophet's house. She approached the house with heavy footsteps, trying to act the part of a farmer's wife.

From inside the house she heard the weak voice of the prophet. "Come in, wife of Jeroboam! Why do you pretend to be someone you aren't? I have bad news for you!"

There sat Ahijah, old and bent over, his arm outstretched. A skinny finger pointed at the frightened woman. His unseeing eyes were a fearful, threatening sight.

"Go and tell Jeroboam what the Lord says: 'I have made you king, but you have not listened to Me. You have turned your back on Me and made images to bow

before. Therefore you will be punished severely. You will not be king over My people much longer.’”

The prophet’s voice became more gentle as he continued: “Go back to your home. As soon as your feet enter the city, your boy will die. The Lord will take him away because he is the only person in Jeroboam’s house in whom any good can be found.”

The woman ran out of the prophet’s house. She was trembling. As soon as she entered the palace, she was told that little Abijah was dead.

When he was buried, all the people mourned him because he died so young. But Abijah was better off with God than in Jeroboam’s sinful family circle.

Jeroboam still did not repent. This second warning from the Lord was also in vain. Then came the punishment foretold by the old, gray prophet.

First Jeroboam suffered a horrible defeat in a war with Judah. Not long afterward he died. His son Nadab, who was just as godless as Jeroboam, reigned for two years. He and his whole family were killed in a rebellion.

That was the end of Jeroboam’s house, the dynasty he had worked so hard to establish. A stranger, a rebel named Baasha, took over the throne.

Jeroboam was not forgotten, for he was the first king who had made Israel sin. That’s why he is called Jeroboam the sinner.

170: Pious King Asa

Rehoboam was dead. He had wavered as he stood before the men of Israel in Shechem, and he continued to waver all

through his life.

First he obeyed God faithfully for three years. He did not make war on Israel because God forbade it. Things went well for him. Many people from Israel came to live in his kingdom, and his kingdom was strengthened.

Later he forgot God and did just what his proud heart desired, whether good or evil. The people of Judah followed his example.

Things started to go wrong. The king of Egypt came with a great army and plundered Jerusalem.

This made Rehoboam aware of his sins. For a little while he was very humble and obedient, but soon he started living without God again and doing what was evil in the eyes of the Lord. This continued right to the day of his death.

His son Abijam succeeded him as king. Abijam was a great speaker, but what came from his mouth was just talk. He was the king of Judah who defeated Jeroboam in battle. Before the battle began, he climbed a hill and delivered a thundering speech to Jeroboam’s army.

“We serve God!” he cried out. “We have not fallen away from Him, as you have.”

Jeroboam proved almost too clever for Abijam at this point. While Abijam was busy boasting, Jeroboam and some of his men sneaked by him and surrounded the army of Judah before Abijam knew what was happening. Only through God’s help did Abijam emerge victorious that day. But this did not make him truly thankful.

“We serve God!” he had boasted, but in fact he lived the same kind of wicked, indifferent life as his father. It did not bother him in the slightest that his people worshiped idols.

It was a good thing that Abijam died young. He was king for only three years.

Like his father Rehoboam, he did not love the Lord.

Asa, the next king, was entirely different from Abijam. Asa knew that he and his people could be happy only if they served the Lord with upright hearts. He sent his servants all through the land to destroy idols wherever they found them.

The people returned to God. For ten years the land enjoyed peace and prosperity under Asa's rule.

Then a great danger threatened. Out of the wilderness swarmed a great army of raiders. It was led by Zerah the Ethiopian, a rough, cruel man. He had a million men under his command, and also many wagons and camels to carry all the loot.

These raiders made fun of tears and laughed at the sight of blood. They swarmed into Asa's kingdom — stealing farm animals, seizing women and children, murdering, burning, plundering. Wherever they spent a day, fires glowed all through the night.

Screaming fugitives brought word to Jerusalem that the raiders were getting closer and closer. But Asa was ready with his army. Quickly he marched south with his men.

Judah's army was much smaller than the mighty host commanded by Zerah. The approaching battle looked like a struggle between a little boy and a full-grown cruel warrior.

Bravely Asa drew up his men in ranks as the raiders approached. He knew that his army's power did not lay in the number of soldiers at his command or in the weapons they bore. He knelt down in the valley with his men before the battle began.

There was not much time for prayer. Beyond the hills Asa's soldiers could already hear the shouts of the enemy. The ground trembled as they approached.

"Lord," Asa prayed humbly, "You are the only one who can help us in this battle. We are weak, and the enemy is strong. No mortal can do anything against Your will. Help us, O God! It is in Your name that we marched out to battle, for *You* are our God."

That was enough. An amazing peace filled the hearts of Asa's soldiers.

"*You* are our God!" That was the secret of their power.

They saw the enemy storming toward them across the hills in great angry mobs, but they were not afraid. They fought bravely and held off tens of thousands of soldiers. A strange new power filled them. They began to gain ground. Slowly they moved forward, stepping over the dead bodies of their enemies and driving the raiders back. Finally the resistance was broken: the enemy army fled in panic and disorder.

Asa and his men chased them back into the wilderness from which they had emerged.

Finally Asa's army headed for home, exhausted but jubilant. The men threw their arms around each other's shoulders. There were tears of joy in their eyes. Laden with booty, they arrived home. The land was safe.

A prophet came to Asa and said: "Don't be idle now, for the work you undertake will be rewarded. You must serve God even more zealously than before."

There was nothing Asa wanted more. He called the people together and made a covenant with them. The people and the king promised each other that they would seek the Lord with their whole hearts. If anyone was found bowing before an idol, he would be punished severely.

Asa set a fine example. He deposed his



grandmother Maacah from her position as queen mother because she had made a horrible idol. Then he destroyed the idol.

Glorious years followed for Judah. It seemed that the age of Solomon had returned. No enemy dared to attack Judah. The people enjoyed peace and prosperity.

But when Asa got old, he was no longer the fiery, courageous king of earlier years. The faith that had made him so strong grew weak.

Asa had not feared Zerah and his enormous band of raiders. But when Israel, a country no stronger than Judah, threatened his kingdom, he was frightened. He sought help from a foreign king, the king of Syria, and gave him the treasures of the temple as payment. He forgot that there was a much mightier King willing to help, a King who would not demand treasures, a King who wanted nothing more than the love of Asa's heart.

God was deeply offended when Asa turned to the king of Syria. But Asa thought he had made a wise move. When a prophet

talked about punishment, he threw him in prison.

Before long Asa became deathly ill and could no longer walk. He called the doctors, believing that their chants and heathen tricks could heal him. That's how far he had wandered away from God.

Yet, Asa had truly loved God. And the faithful Father no doubt called His wayward child back to Himself.

Asa died. He was buried with great pomp and splendor. The people buried the sins of his old age with him and mourned the passing of the pious young king they had known. They built great bonfires on the hills of Jerusalem as tokens of their mourning.

Jehoshaphat became king in place of his father.

171: Drought

Baal is the lord of the earth. He travels through the heavens on the sun. From that majestic throne he governs the wind and the clouds. He is the one who makes the earth fruitful. There is no mightier god than Baal.

Astarte, the queen of the heavens, is his wife. She lives on the moon. Her charms form the blossoms on the trees and the ears of grain on the thin stalks. She gives the young grapes their juices. No human being can exist apart from her.

This is what the priests were teaching the people of Israel. And the people believed them. They saw altars to Baal being built all over the country. They saw priests dancing around the sacrifices and praying with their arms outstretched to the shining sun. The people joined in, for they no longer

knew what to believe. Although they had not forgotten the Lord completely, they were not serving Him anymore.

King Ahab lived in Samaria, the proud city built by his father, King Omri, on a hill he had bought from Shemer. Jezebel, the princess from Sidon, reigned there as queen. She had brought along priests from her father's kingdom, and now she promoted the worship of Baal. She wanted Baal to become Israel's god. No one who loved the Lord was safe from her wrath.

God's prophets were persecuted and killed, and His altars lay ruined and forsaken. Throughout the entire land, smoke rose from the altars of Baal. Sometimes human sacrifices were offered on those altars.

In Samaria, next to the palace of the king, a great temple was built in honor of the sun god. It appeared that Israel had become a completely heathen country, and that there was no one left who served the Lord.

But in the little village of Tishbe, which was in the hills of Gilead, there was a man who kneeled before God every day. His name was Elijah, which means *Yahweh is God*.

Elijah's life was painful, for he knew how far his people had fallen. Day and night he struggled with this problem, but there was nothing he could do about it. He could not help Israel on his own; all he could do was pray for his people.

"Lord," he prayed, "teach them that Baal is nothing and can do nothing. Teach them that *You* alone are God. Punish them. Maybe they will return to You then. Give them no rain; let there be a drought, Lord! Let the sun they pray to scorch them until they are parched!"

Elijah was an ordinary man no different

from anyone else, but there was great power in his prayer.

The Lord heard his prayer and decided to send Elijah himself to King Ahab to announce the punishment.

Elijah walked into the beautiful palace dressed in his poor, rough garments made of animal skins. He wore a leather belt around his waist. Calmly and proudly he walked between the walls of ivory, just as if he were walking through the mountains.

He stood before the king and his refined servants in their beautiful clothes. Without bowing, he stared at the king with his dark, angry eyes. A surprising stillness fell.

Then his voice echoed through the palace: "In the name of the Lord, the God of Israel, whom I serve, I tell you that there will be neither rain nor dew in Israel until *I* say so."

He turned around and walked away, looking just as proud as when he came in. No one stopped him. His strange words had thrown the king and his men into confusion.

They discussed the matter for a long time. Finally they began to laugh, banishing their fears with jokes. That strange man must be insane. How did he propose to hold back the rain? Only Baal could determine when it would and would not rain.

As the days and weeks crept by, their fear returned, for there was no rain. The sun made its way across the clear blue sky every day and then plunged into the sea like a ball of fire. When the sun rose above the mountains again in the morning, there was still no cloud to be seen. When the rainy season finally arrived, the naked sun rose every day and burned down harder still. Even then there was no rain. And the nights were just as dry as the days; there was no dew.

The grass turned brown, the flowers wilted, and the leaves on the trees turned yellow and fell to the ground. The ground became gray and hard as stone. The dust formed clouds hovering over the burning roads and paths.

Finally everyone realized that Elijah, that strange figure, had spoken the truth. He must be a messenger of God, a mighty prophet.

The king sent his men out to look for Elijah. They would bring him back to the palace, and Ahab would force him to let the rain fall again, threatening him with severe punishment, if necessary.

Ahab's men looked everywhere in Israel. Some of them even went to foreign countries to look. No one had seen a prophet wearing a rough garment made of animal skins and a leather belt.

The sun continued to scorch the earth, torturing it. The heat made the sky look the color of copper. The land became a wilderness. There were no leaves left on the trees. Here and there a man could be seen walking dejectedly across the dry fields. The animals lay on the ground dying. A deathly stillness blanketed the land.

A cawing raven plunged from the sky and settled on a dying cow. It stuck its strong, blue beak into the cow's warm flesh. Soon it was on its way again, flying straight east with a piece of meat in its claws.

Many ravens gathered in the hills near the Jordan. They came from all directions with meat and bits of bread. At the bottom of the ravine flowed a brook that still had some water in it — the brook Cherith. That's where the ravens were going. They dropped their food in front of a cave and flew away.

The cave was occupied by a man wearing

garments made of animal skins and a leather belt — Elijah. The ravens brought him bread and meat each morning and evening. As for water, he drank from the brook.

God Himself had shown Elijah this safe place, where he remained hidden for a long time.

172: Elijah in Zarephath

Elijah could not stay at the brook Cherith forever. One day it dried up. Then he had to leave his hiding place.

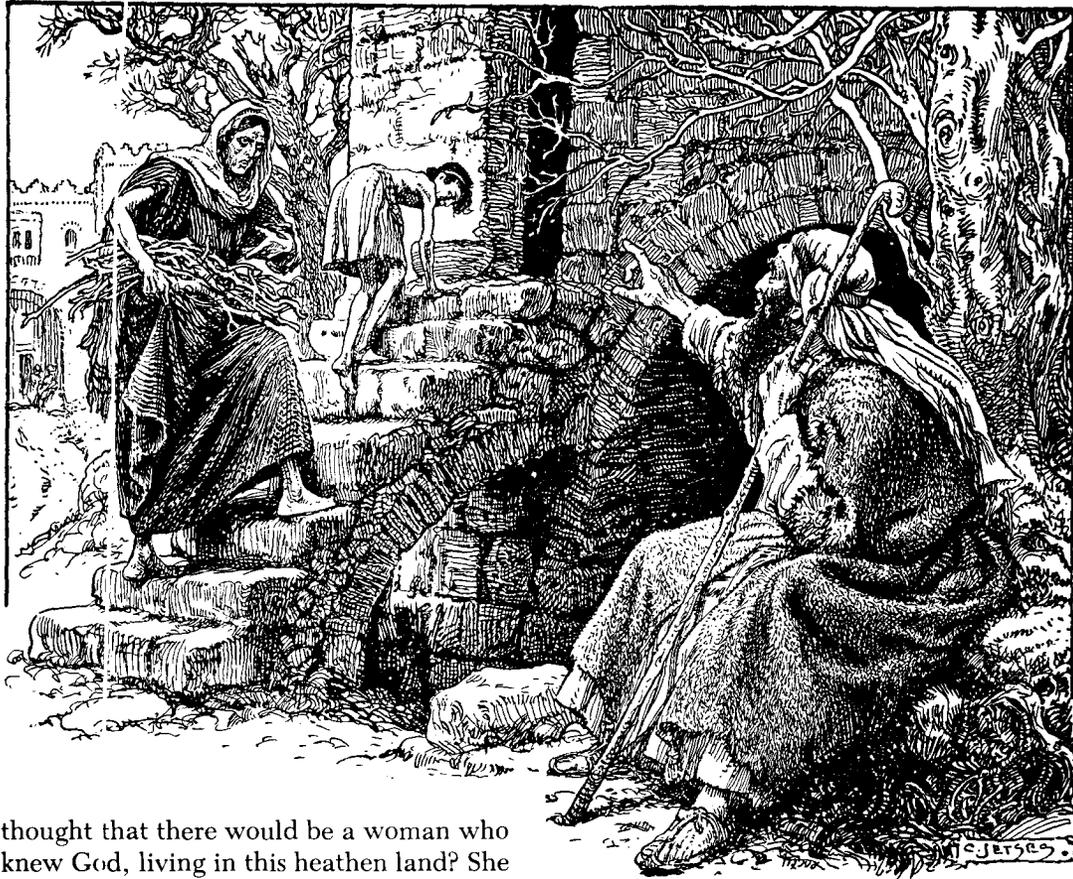
The Lord said to him: "Go to Zarephath, in the area belonging to Sidon, and stay there. I have commanded a widow in Zarephath to look after you."

Elijah was to go to the land of Baal, the land from which Jezebel and her heathen priests had come. He obeyed without fear.

After a long journey he arrived at Zarephath, dead tired. Outside the city gate, a woman with hollow eyes was gathering wood under some bare trees. Elijah spoke to her. "Will you get me some water?" he asked. "I'm very thirsty." When she headed for home to get the water, he called out after her: "Bring me some bread too."

The woman turned around and looked at the stranger sadly. "As the Lord your God lives," she answered, "I have nothing more than a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. Now I have gathered some wood to bake bread one last time. After that my son and I must die."

It was a sad story, but the prophet's eyes were shining. "The Lord *your* God" — that's what she had said. Who would have



thought that there would be a woman who knew God, living in this heathen land? She must be the widow God wanted him to stay with. If so, her sadness would quickly be turned into joy.

"Fear not," said Elijah, "for thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: 'The flour in your jar will not be consumed and the oil in your jug will not run out before the Lord sends rain on the earth again.'"

The woman believed these wonderful words. She went home to bake a small, round cake. She lit a fire under a large, flat stone, took the handful of flour from the jar, and poured out the last oil from the jug. She kneaded the dough. Once the stone was glowing, she laid the dough upon it. Her son, who was as weak as she was, watched her with hungry eyes.

Suddenly the woman threw up her hands in happy surprise. There was flour in her jar again — just as much as before she started baking! And there was still oil in her jug! Quickly she brought the warm cake to Elijah and hurried back home. With trembling hands she baked another cake — and then another.

For the first time in many months, her son ate until he was satisfied. Every day the woman baked more cakes with her handful of flour and her small supply of oil.

All around Zarephath, the earth was parched and glowing. People and animals were dying. But the woman, her son, and

Elijah were never hungry as long as the drought lasted.

They lived with the miracle day after day, month after month. The woman blessed the hour when the prophet entered her house.

One day something frightening happened — something so frightening that the woman *cursed* the day when the prophet entered her house. Her son became very, very ill. Soon he lay dead in her arms.

Why was she being punished so severely? In her despair and sorrow she could think of only one reason. The holy man whom she heard speaking to God so often must have told God about her sins!

She was sitting with the dead child on her lap when Elijah came in. She shook her fist at him. She turned her tear-stained face toward him and glared at him. "What do you have against me, man of God?" she cried out. "Have you come here to take my son away?"

Elijah did not get angry. He saw her great pain, and he felt deeply sorry for her. "Give me your son," he said gently.

Sadly Elijah took the dead boy from her lap and carried him to his room. There he laid him down on the bed. Elijah was just an ordinary man, but a wonderful thought had come up in his mind. God was the one who gave life and took it away. God had taken the life of this child. He could also restore it, if He wanted to.

Elijah knelt before the bed. "Lord, my God," he begged, "let the soul of this child return to him!" He repeated the prayer over and over, keeping all other thoughts from his mind. He made this request just as if God was nearby, as if he was kneeling at God's feet. Then he stretched his own body over the boy's body as if the warmth from his own body could make the boy warm

again too.

Outside the sun continued to beat down mercilessly, as a result of a prayer of Elijah. Inside, in a little room in a widow's house in a heathen land, an even greater wonder occurred as a result of another prayer of Elijah.

The boy began to stir. The heart that had stood still began to beat again. The dead boy opened his eyes.

Elijah was delighted. He brought the boy to his mother and said: "Behold, your son lives!"

The mother took the boy in her trembling arms and held him tight. "Now I know that you are truly a man of God," she sobbed, "and that I can put my trust in God."

Joy streamed back into her household.

173: Elijah returns

The drought continued for three years and six months. By then it almost appeared that there were no living creatures left.

Elijah, living far outside the country in Zarephath, waited in faith for the Lord to give new life.

Finally Elijah was allowed to return to his people and show them God's power. He heard the Lord tell him: "Go and show yourself to Ahab, for I shall give rain on the earth again."

Only one man at the godless court of King Ahab still feared the Lord — Obadiah. He was a quiet, timid man. He would never have dared to do what Elijah had done. Yet, when Jezebel proposed to wipe out the prophets, timid Obadiah risked his life by hiding 100 of these servants of God in a cave. For months he man-

aged to find bread and water for them all and bring it to them in secret.

That was very difficult, for food and water were in short supply by then. Even King Ahab's horses were starving in their royal stables.

The king was distressed that his horses might die of starvation. He had caused the death of many prophets, but the thought of his horses dying was painful to him.

One day Ahab was wandering through the countryside with his servant Obadiah. They were looking for a stream or a well, or perhaps some forgotten patch of grass. They split up: Ahab went in one direction, Obadiah in another.

Obadiah looked everywhere for some sign of water and life. Suddenly he was confronted by the man who had started all this misery — Elijah! He could hardly believe his eyes.

"Is it really you, my lord Elijah?" he cried.

"Yes, it's me," said the prophet. "Now go, Obadiah and tell your master that Elijah is here."

Obadiah was frightened at the thought. Elijah refused to go to the king but expected the king to come to him? Was that the message he was to bring to Ahab? Whenever the king heard Elijah's name, he flew into a rage. And then — what would happen if Elijah suddenly disappeared again and could not be found?

"The king will put me to death," Obadiah protested, but Elijah calmed him. He swore that he would let Ahab see him that same day.

Trembling, Obadiah set out to obey the prophet's command. Soon the king himself stood before Elijah, ready to explode with anger. "Is it really you, Elijah?" he roared. "You are the one responsible for all the

misery in Israel!"

Calmly Elijah answered: "I am not the cause of the trouble. The fault lies with *you* — and your father's house! *You* caused the trouble by ignoring the Lord's commands and running after the Baals."

Elijah told Ahab to call all the people of Israel and the prophets of Jezebel together on Mount Carmel. The king obeyed, taking orders from a simple man in a rough shepherd's robe.

174: Elijah on Mount Carmel

Mount Carmel glowed with the sun's heat. The northern slope was as steep as a wall. Far below, the dry bed of the brook Kishon wound its way through the valley.

The southern slope of the mountain was not steep. Up this slope came thousands of Israelites walking under bare, dead trees. They were heading for a plateau up above.

It was early in the morning, but King Ahab was already there. The priests of Baal were also present in their beautiful garments. Elijah stood before the people, straight and tall in his hairy mantle, and addressed them. "How much longer will you waver before you make up your minds once and for all?" he cried out. "Why do you want to serve two gods? If the Lord is God, follow Him! But if Baal is God, follow him!"

There was no response from the people. Elijah continued: "I stand here alone as a prophet of the Lord. There are 450 prophets of Baal. Both sides will build an altar. We will each sacrifice a young bull on our altar, but we will not bring fire to the altar. Let them pray to Baal for fire, and I will pray to the Lord. The god who answers with fire — let him be God."



The people shouted: "Yes, yes!"

The priests of Baal grew more and more uneasy as they listened to Elijah. In their dark temples they had often made fire fall on an altar. In such temples it was not difficult to deceive people. But here, under the blue sky — how could they do it here?

They did not dare refuse Elijah's challenge. They built their altar and chose a fine young bull for the sacrifice. They killed the bull and laid it on the wood. Then they raised their hands toward the glowing sun. All morning they cried to Baal: "Baal, answer us!"

They danced around the altar in the burning heat. Their voices became hoarse from shouting. Sweat poured down their bodies. The sun climbed higher and higher, but there was no answer.

At noon Elijah began to make fun of them. "Shout louder," he advised. "Perhaps your god is lost in thought. Maybe he's gone on a trip — or he's fallen asleep. Shout louder and wake him up!"

The priests shouted louder. They addressed their cries to the deep blue sky. They cut themselves with swords and spears. The blood rolled down their sweaty bodies. Perhaps that would arouse the compassion of their god.

Their dance grew wilder and wilder. They started jumping on the altar. "Baal, answer us!"

There was no answer. One by one the priests sank to the ground, exhausted.

By this time it was afternoon. Finally Elijah spoke up. "Come closer and watch," he said.

First he repaired the altar of the Lord, which the priests of Baal had knocked down. He built it up carefully, using twelve stones, for the twelve tribes of Israel were supposed to join together as one people in

the service of the Lord. Then he dug a trench around the altar. He arranged the wood on the altar carefully and placed the sacrifice upon it.

"Fill four jugs with water from the well," he said to the people, "and pour the water over the sacrifice and the wood."

They obeyed. He said: "Do it again." They did it a second time. Then he had them do it a third time. By then the altar and everything on it was dripping. Even the trench around the altar was full of water. That way no one could say that Elijah had concealed fire in the altar!

It was three o'clock in the afternoon — time for the evening sacrifice to be offered in the temple in Jerusalem. Elijah stood before the altar and raised his hands toward heaven. There was a deathly silence among the people. All they heard was Elijah's calm, simple prayer: "O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, make it known today that You are the God of Israel and that I am Your servant. Answer me, Lord, answer me."

Suddenly the people shrank back in horror. A blinding white flame fell from above on the altar, consuming the sacrifice and the wood. The heat cracked the stones and swallowed up the water in the trench. But Elijah, the great servant of the Lord, stood unharmed by the flames.

The people threw themselves on their faces and cried: "The Lord — He is God! The Lord — He is God!" A jubilant chant resounded across the mountains: "The Lord — He is God!"

Elijah pointed to the priests of Baal. "Seize those false prophets!" he cried. "Don't let a single one escape!"

Not one escaped. They were all killed by the brook Kishon because they had caused the people of God great misery.



It was done. Baal was defeated. Now all the people would serve the Lord again — or so Elijah thought.

He stood before the king, his eyes shining

with joy. "Go now," he said. "Eat and drink for I hear the rushing sound of a heavy rainstorm."

The king went down the mountain, and the people headed home. Elijah climbed still higher, all the way to the top of the mountain. Only his servant went with him.

The air was clear and dry. The sun hung above the shining sea like a ball of fire.

Elijah knelt down on the rocks, bowing deeply and humbly for prayer. When he was finished praying, he said to his servant: "Go and tell me if there is anything in the sky over the sea."

The servant came back and said: "There is nothing to be seen." Elijah prayed again and sent out his servant again. He did this seven times. The seventh time his servant came back and said: "I see a little cloud as small as a man's hand rising out of the sea."

Then Elijah stood up and said: "Go to Ahab and say: 'Hitch up your chariot and hurry home. Otherwise you will be caught in the storm.'"

Soon the sky was black with clouds. The wind howled. Dust swirled through the air. Through the heavy, oppressive air, the first drops of rain began to fall on the thirsty earth.

Ahab rode across the plain of Jezreel to his palace. Running before the king's chariot with his garments held up by a leather belt was Elijah. He was Ahab's herald. The storm broke even before they reached Jezreel.

175: Elijah flees

A man was walking through the wilderness. He looked old and tired of life as he dragged his feet across the sand listlessly.

He stopped and bent down before a broom tree with small, white flowers. That tree was the only sign of life in the desolate wilderness.

Sighing, he sat down in the shade of the little tree and buried his tired head in his hands. "It is enough," he murmured. "Take my life, Lord, for I am no better than my fathers."

The thoughts running through his mind allowed him no peace. Despite his weariness, they kept racing around the same tiresome circle.

Things could have gone so well. For more than three years — first at the brook Cherith and then at Zarephath — he had yearned for the day when he could return to his people to show them God's power. The altars of Baal would be torn down, the temples would be burned, and the people would be united in serving the Lord. God's Kingdom on earth would come. Elijah, the hero, the great prophet, would bring this about.

When the great day finally arrived, he did show the people God's power, but the very next day a wicked woman smashed his dreams. Ahab had not been able to keep the people from killing the priests of Baal. When Jezebel heard what had happened, she was beside herself with rage. She sent a message to Elijah: "May the gods punish me if I fail to do to you by this time tomorrow what you have done to the priests of Baal."

From that message Elijah realized that Jezebel would continue to fight fiercely for Baal. And Ahab would do whatever she wanted. The people would quickly forget the great adventure on Mount Carmel. They would bow before the altars of Baal again and kiss his image. The situation would go back to what it was. All of Elijah's efforts had been in vain.

Elijah was completely dispirited. He had lost hope, he no longer believed that things would turn out well for the people of Israel. He felt small and weak over against the wrath of the heathen queen. Therefore he fled. He went right through Israel and didn't even feel safe when he reached Judah. But here, in the Wilderness of Beer-sheba, no one would find him. No one would see him here.

Elijah was totally exhausted. He laid his throbbing head on his arms and closed his eyes. He wanted to sleep — and never wake up.

There was no joy left for Elijah. God's Kingdom had been defeated and overthrown. His people were rooted out. The last of God's servants lay exhausted in the wilderness, a broken man ready to die.

After Elijah had slept a little while, someone woke him up by shaking him gently. A voice said to him: "Stand up and eat!"

Slowly he opened his eyes. Right by his head he saw a freshly baked cake. There was also a jug of water standing ready for him. It didn't occur to Elijah just how miraculous this was. He didn't care anymore.

He ate and drank and went back to sleep. He did not want to continue life's trials and hardships.

For the second time someone woke him up. A voice said to him, this time more urgently: "Get up and eat. Otherwise the journey will be too much for you!"

There was an angel standing by Elijah.

Elijah stood up and ate and drank. Then a wonderful power coursed through his body. He walked farther into the wilderness towards the south, somber and dejected. Even after the sun went down in a sea of sand and rocks, he kept on walking. He walked under the stars. He kept walking

even when the sun rose the next morning. For 40 days and 40 nights, the heavenly bread sustained him. In all that time, Elijah did not eat again.

176: Elijah on Mount Horeb

Elijah had been walking and walking, day in and day out. Finally he came to some high, bare mountains. He stopped and gazed at them.

He found a dark cave and went inside to spend the night. He felt better in that cave. He was willing to stay there for the rest of his life, living like a monk, forgotten by his people.

Here, on Mount Horeb, the place where Moses had spoken with God so long before, Elijah heard the voice of God: "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

There was no trace of reproach or anger in that voice. It was the voice of a father who understands his child's feelings and problems.

Elijah poured out his disappointment and sorrow before the Lord: "Lord, I have been very zealous on Your behalf. The Israelites have forsaken Your covenant, thrown down Your altars, and killed Your prophets with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they seek to take my life."

The voice responded: "Step outside. Then I will come to you."

Suddenly there was a powerful wind-storm swirling through the mountains. It split rocks into pieces and sent them rolling down the mountains. Elijah trembled as he saw the rocks smashed to bits. What power! Surely the Lord was coming to him. But the Lord was not in the storm.

Then there was a rumbling deep in the

earth. Elijah held on to a rock so that he would not lose his footing. An earthquake made the mountains shake and quaver. But the Lord was not in the earthquake.

After the earthquake came another storm. Lightning bolts struck the mountain; thunder resounded all around Elijah. Mount Horeb was a glowing flame, like an altar dedicated to a god. But the Lord was not in the fire.

Then it was still. In the deep, holy stillness, Elijah heard the sound of a gentle breeze. He covered his face with his mantle, took a few steps forward, and stood at the entrance of his cave. He felt small and humble. He knew that the Lord would come now.

A voice said to him: "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

Elijah knew what an insignificant, sinful creature he was. He made no attempt to defend himself. Feeling sad and ashamed, he repeated the answer he had given before: "Lord, I have been very zealous on Your behalf. The Israelites have forsaken Your covenant, thrown down Your altars, and killed Your prophets with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they seek to take my life."

Elijah had already received the answer to his complaint while he was standing and waiting for God. God had given him an answer without words, and Elijah had understood it!

It was shortsighted of Elijah to expect all the people to repent and turn to God after only one judgment. When they did not all repent after the first judgment, he had lost hope. But after the windstorm came the earthquake, and after the earthquake came fire. Only after all those judgments did the Lord Himself come in the sound of a still, small voice.

More judgments would strike Israel before the day when all Israel came to fear the Lord. God commanded Elijah to make preparations for future judgments. He was to see to it that Hazael was anointed king over Syria and Jehu king over Israel. Those two would bring judgment on Ahab's evil house.

Elijah was to anoint Elisha as his successor. Elisha would continue the work when Elijah was gone.

God also spoke some words that comforted Elijah greatly: "There are still 7000 in Israel who have not bowed the knee to Baal or kissed him with their mouths."

Elijah started his long journey back to Israel. North he went, through the wilderness.

He had traveled south feeling small and weak, but now he felt strong. He feared no one.

The Kingdom of peace, the Kingdom of God of which he had dreamed, would be established after all. That day was surely coming, even if it took a long time and Elijah himself did not live to see it.

There was no need for him to worry, for that Kingdom would come not through *his* work but through *God's* work. Only when Elijah understood this did he sense how glorious it was to be a servant of God.

177: Naboth's vineyard

It was summer. Ahab had left the capital city of Samaria again and was passing the time at his beautiful summer palace in Jezreel.

He was walking in his garden, the royal park that surrounded the palace. He was full of plans to make his garden even more



beautiful. Over here he would dig a pond. Over there he would add a flower bed. He would bring in beautiful plants from faraway places. And the vegetable garden would have to be moved, for the vegetables looked out of place in such a beautiful park. Where would the king grow his vegetables instead?

He paced back and forth, figuring and measuring. He found himself standing before the boundary stone that marked the edge of his property. Beyond the boundary stone lay another garden — a vineyard on the slope of a hill. In that vineyard Naboth was hard at work with his sons. A little farther on, under the trees, Ahab could see the white walls of a house. It was the home of Naboth, the man who owned this vineyard next to the king's summer palace.

As Ahab stared at Naboth's land, an idea suddenly came to him. If he could somehow take possession of Naboth's vineyard, he could use it for a vegetable garden! Why not? After all, Ahab was the king. And he had plenty of money.

"Naboth!"

The man in the vineyard looked up. He walked over to Ahab and bowed respectfully before him. "What does my lord the king wish?" he asked politely.

"Give me your vineyard," said the king. "I want to use it for a vegetable garden. I will give you a better vineyard in exchange."

Naboth's face fell, so Ahab added: "If you prefer, I will pay you the full price for your vineyard."

Naboth shook his head. He was just a

simple farmer standing before Israel's mighty king, but he looked right at the king with righteous, resolute eyes. He would not give in.

"This land is my inheritance from my fathers," he explained. "My father and my grandfather and my ancestors all the way back to Joshua worked this land and lived on it. My family has held this piece of ground ever since God gave the land of Canaan to our people. The law says that no Israelite may sell his land permanently. The Lord forbid that I should turn the inheritance of my fathers over to you."

Ahab had listened impatiently. He turned around angrily and stalked away. He was not used to being refused. How did this simple farmer dare to frustrate the king's plans with his old-fashioned beliefs?

Ahab was in such a bad mood that he didn't want to look at his beautiful garden anymore. His glorious plans had lost their appeal to him. Sullen and angry, he went home, lay down on his bed, turned his face to the wall, and refused to eat.

His beautiful wife Jezebel came over to his bed and gently laid her hand on his shoulder. "What's the matter?" she asked. "Why are you so unhappy? Why won't you eat?"

When he told her the story, she looked at him scornfully. "Are you supposed to be a king?" she asked, laughing. "Stand up and eat and be happy. *I* will get that vineyard for you."

Ahab saw that she meant it — he knew her well enough for that. What Jezebel desired would surely come to pass. She would get that vineyard for him.

Ahab rose from his bed and began to eat and drink. In his mind he was already busy beautifying his garden.

Jezebel went to her room and wrote a let-

ter to the rulers of Jezreel. She sealed the letter and gave it the royal stamp of approval in soft wax using Ahab's signet ring, just as though Ahab had written the letter himself.

What was in the letter? Jezebel had written: "Let the entire city mourn and fast as if some great sin has been committed. Find two men who are willing to testify for money that Naboth has slandered the names of God and the king. Take Naboth outside the city and stone him."

It was a horribly wicked plan. Only Jezebel could have thought of it. Calm and satisfied, she gave the letter to a messenger and awaited the outcome.

178: Two death sentences

Heralds were running through the street shouting a message. Because a great sin had been committed, all the people were to mourn. There was to be no eating and drinking before the sinner was punished.

The people gathered by the city gate to find out what had happened. There sat the judges with their stern faces. Facing them was a simple farmer who had been torn from his vineyard by angry soldiers — Naboth.

"He has cursed God and the king!" shouted a man who stood before the judges.

"That's right! I heard him!" cried another man. "He said some horrible things!"

However firmly Naboth denied it, however often he wailed that he was innocent, it did him no good. The two false witnesses hired to condemn him were emphatic about his guilt.

The sentence was not long in coming.

The judges, who knew that Naboth was innocent, declared: "He deserves the death sentence. Naboth and all his family must be stoned."

They dragged him outside the city — one of the very few men left in Jezreel who still served God. The false witnesses threw the first stones at him. The godless mob quickly finished off Naboth and his family.

A messenger ran to the palace and bowed before Jezebel. "Naboth has been stoned. He is dead."

Jezebel nodded, feeling satisfied. She went to Ahab. "Arise," she said, "and take possession of the vineyard that Naboth refused to sell you. Now you can have it for nothing, for Naboth and his sons are dead."

Soon Ahab was walking happily through his new garden, making more plans. Here he would make a path, and there he would put in a flower bed. And he would tear down the house.

This time, too, there was someone to spoil his plans — another simple man. But this time the simple man did not bow before him respectfully and act polite. He stood straight and tall before the king, like a judge filled with righteous anger.

Ahab shrank back when he saw that it was Elijah. "Have you found me again, O my enemy?" he asked fearfully.

"Yes, I have found you," said the prophet. Then he threw his harsh message at the king: "Thus says the Lord: 'Have you committed murder? And now you want to steal? You and your family will be wiped out, just as Naboth and his family were destroyed. The dogs that licked the blood of Naboth will also lick your blood. Jezebel will be devoured by the dogs of Jezreel.'"

Shaken, Ahab staggered back to his palace. He tore his clothes and put on mourning garments. He fasted and moved

around like a sleepwalker. The words of Elijah filled him with a deathly fear. But he was not truly penitent.

Jezebel simply laughed at Ahab's fear. She helped him overcome his fear, and soon he was the same proud, godless sinner he had always been.

179: Ahab's prophets

King Ahab had a visitor. He was seated at Samaria's gate with his guest at his right hand.

His visitor was Jehoshaphat, the king of Judah. The two kings sat there like good friends. They were both wearing their royal robes.

Jehoshaphat was a God-fearing man, but he was making an alliance with godless Ahab. Together they would make war on Ben-hadad, the king of Syria. Ben-hadad had conquered cities in Ahab's territory and had promised to give them back, but he had not kept his promise. Ahab would have to take them back by force. The first of those cities was Ramoth in Gilead.

Jehoshaphat felt uneasy about the plan. He wanted to know whether the Lord approved.

Finally Ahab summoned some prophets. But the prophets who appeared were not courageous servants of God; they were prophets who served the calves at Bethel and Dan. The message they brought was not God's Word but what Ahab wanted to hear.

There were 400 false prophets standing before the two kings, bowing deeply. "Should I march out to capture Ramoth in Gilead or not?" the king asked them.

All the prophets answered: "Go ahead,

for the Lord will deliver the city into your hands.”

It was an enthusiastic response. One of the prophets, Zedekiah, fastened iron horns to his head. He danced and jumped around the room like a young bull, charging this way and that. “That’s how the king will push the enemy back,” he cried.

Jehoshaphat was not taken in. “Isn’t there a real prophet somewhere?” he asked.

Ahab’s face fell. There was indeed a real prophet in Israel. His name was Micaiah. Ahab hated him and had him thrown in prison because Micaiah never prophesied anything good about Ahab. Jehoshaphat kept pressing him on this point. Finally Ahab sent one of his men to get Micaiah.

“All the prophets have predicted success,” Micaiah was told by Ahab’s servants. “You should do the same.”

Micaiah saw the sun for the first time after weeks of captivity in a dark cell. He had grown skinny, and his eyes were hollow. But his suffering had not made him afraid of the king. “I will say whatever the Lord tells me to say,” he declared.

Soon he stood before the king as the only true servant of God. He was surrounded by liars. Ahab hardly dared to look at him. He knew better than to expect any favors from Micaiah. Therefore he made sure that Micaiah knew that the man seated next to him was Jehoshaphat, *Judah’s* king. Perhaps Micaiah would be willing to present a favorable prophecy for Jehoshaphat’s sake.

“Micaiah,” Ahab asked, “shall *we* march out to capture Ramoth in Gilead or not?”

Micaiah was silent. He stood completely still, as though listening to something. He stared straight ahead.

Then he said: “I saw all of Israel scattered on the mountains like sheep without a

shepherd.”

By giving the king this answer, Micaiah served him better than the other prophets, but he did not receive his reward. Zedekiah jumped up and hit him in the face.

Ahab had Micaiah brought back to prison. He gave orders that Micaiah was to get almost nothing to eat until the king returned safely from battle.

Before he was led away, Micaiah turned around and taunted the king: “If you do return safely from battle, you will know that the Lord was not speaking through me.”

180: The death of Ahab

Micaiah had given Ahab a stern warning: Israel’s soldiers would be like sheep without a shepherd. But the warning did no good; the two kings went out to battle anyway.

Yet, Ahab was uneasy. “Sheep without a shepherd” — those words kept ringing in his ears. They were still running through his mind as he led his men to the battlefield in his royal chariot. He also thought about another prophecy: “The dogs that licked the blood of Naboth will also lick your blood.”

In his mind he saw both Micaiah and Elijah standing before him, the one looking angry in Naboth’s vineyard, the other a pale, wasted captive. Both had prophesied death for Ahab.

His heart began to sink. Ahab wasn’t ready to die; he wanted to *live*, even though God had already declared twice that he would die.

Ahab was afraid to appear before God. Suddenly he feared the coming battle. In

his anxiety he thought of a clever plan to get around the prophecies of Micaiah and Elijah. He took off his royal robes and dressed like an ordinary soldier. He went out to meet the enemy in an ordinary chariot with no special markings. In the midst of all the Israelite soldiers, no Syrian would know that Ahab was the king.

The king of Syria had already instructed his captains to make King Ahab their primary target. When they got to the battlefield, they couldn't find him. But they did spot King Jehoshaphat riding in his royal chariot and leading his soldiers.

They were about to attack him when they heard him cry out: "Ahead, men of Judah!" Then they realized that he was not Ahab. They turned back. They spread out across the battlefield and looked for Israel's king, but they still couldn't find him.

Ahab was riding in an ordinary chariot. He laughed proudly. Bravely he did battle with the enemy. His fear was gone, for his trick was working!

Sheep without a shepherd? Micaiah, that prophet of doom, could say what he pleased. The king was too clever for God!

A Syrian soldier took an arrow from his quiver and shot it toward the Israelite army without aiming at anyone in particular. He watched the arrow soar through the air and come down in the enemy ranks. Whether it hit anyone he did not know.

King Ahab was standing in his chariot with a big grin on his face. Suddenly he crumpled. A sharp arrow had pierced a seam in his armor when he raised his hand to give the signal for a new charge. His sword fell from his hand. His arm sank to his side, powerless.

"I have been wounded!" he cried. "Turn the chariot around and get me off the battlefield."



That was impossible. There were too many horses and chariots crowding around him.

Ahab *had* to stay where *he* was, for the battle grew more and more intense. If the king fled, the entire army would lose heart.

Ahab clung to his chariot. Writhing with pain, he held his ground, his colorless face turned toward the enemy. Blood flowed down his shining armor and stained the chariot.

When the sun went down and the evening shadows crept across the battlefield, the night of death had already come for Ahab.

His soldiers wandered back to their homes like sheep without a shepherd, just as Micaiah had prophesied. The battle was lost. Israel's king, who had never been a true shepherd to his people, lay in a pool of blood in a chariot that rolled back to Samaria slowly.

When the chariot was washed out by a pond near the palace, it was surrounded by hungry, half-wild dogs. Eagerly they licked up the king's blood. Such was the death of Ahab, the godless king who refused to listen to the Lord's warnings.

181: King Jehoshaphat

When Jehoshaphat was a boy living in King Asa's palace, he often saw his father and mother kneel before God. He learned to kneel too. He loved the Lord and grew up to be a God-fearing man.

When he succeeded his father as king, he tried to be a faithful servant of God. He sent priests through the land to teach the people how to serve God. He appointed judges over the entire land. He commanded them to be honest and just and never to take bribes. "God will be with you if you are just," he explained.

God blessed Jehoshaphat, and Judah became a rich and powerful land. It was so powerful that some neighboring rulers thought to themselves: "I should make friends with Jehoshaphat." They brought him many presents and made treaties with him.

The Philistines and Arabians were friends of Jehoshaphat, but there were also nations that hated him, such as the Moabites and the Ammonites. They, too, were impressed by Jehoshaphat's power. Because of that power, they resolved to strengthen their armies quietly and wait for a good opportunity to attack Judah.

After Jehoshaphat returned from the battle against Syria in which King Ahab of Israel lost his life, they felt they had their chance. They streamed into the land of

Judah by the thousands, plundering and destroying. Wherever they went, they stripped the countryside bare.

Once the enemy reached En-gedi, Jehoshaphat heard what was going on. He was afraid. Fortunately, he knew where to seek help. He called the people together at the temple and led them in a prayer for deliverance. The men were on their knees all around the king, and the women threw their hands up as they begged for help. Even the little children folded their hands and stammered simple prayers.

Suddenly a man in the middle of the crowd stood up. His eyes were shining with joy. "Thus says the Lord," he cried out. "Don't be afraid of this great host, for the battle is not yours but Mine. March out against them tomorrow, and you will see how I give you the victory. You won't even have to fight for it."

It was a strange message, but Jehoshaphat and the people believed it. They thanked God and went home in peace.

The next morning they marched out to meet the enemy. As they moved through the Valley of Tekoa, they were in a festive mood. Singers in colorful robes accompanied the army and sang; "Praise the Lord, for His lovingkindness endures forever."

They were not put to shame in their faith. When they reached the top of the hills behind which the Moabites and Ammonites were camped, they saw tents, camels and great flocks of cattle, but there was no enemy to attack them.

Carefully they moved closer and closer to the enemy camp. To their amazement, they saw dead people piled up on the ground.

Disputes had broken out in the ranks of the enemy. While Jehoshaphat and his men

marched out to battle singing praises to the Lord, the Moabites and Ammonites had started killing each other, until the survivors finally fled in fear.

There was no need for Judah's soldiers to fight. The victory was theirs without a battle. Laden with booty, the people went back home. King Jehoshaphat had been blessed once more because he feared the Lord.

But there were times when King Jehoshaphat acted foolishly. Because of his foolishness, his people were cursed rather than blessed.

He believed that he could serve the Lord even if he kept company with godless people. He had made friends with wicked King Ahab of Israel. He even allowed his son Jehoram to marry Athaliah, the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel.

A daughter of Jezebel came to Jerusalem! This heathen princess brought her images of Baal with her.

Jehoshaphat himself did not live to see how much misery and sorrow this would cost his people. He himself never let go of the Lord. For 25 years he reigned as a pious king, and he died firm in his faith.

Then came a horrible, frightening time. The people were almost led away from God completely to serve the Baals, as the people of Israel were doing.

In large measure, the idolatry was Jehoshaphat's fault. He was the one who had made friends with godless people and welcomed them into his kingdom. Like a careless child, he had chosen to play with fire. His people paid the price.

182: Elijah and Elisha

There were 24 oxen plowing out in the field in pairs, each pair pulling a plow. Behind the last pair of oxen walked Elisha, the son of the farmer who owned the field.

The oxen plowed their furrows from one end of the field to the other. They walked straight ahead without looking to either side. When they got to the end of the field, they turned right around and started plowing a new set of furrows.

The horrible drought that had lasted for three years was over. Fragrant aromas rose from the damp earth. Soon Elisha would begin scattering seeds in the fresh furrows. The seeds would germinate, and plants would spring from the ground bearing a rich harvest.

Elisha took great delight in farming. He loved to work under the open sky, trusting in God.

Elisha didn't know it yet, but he had plowed his last furrow. A man walked across the field from the south, which was the direction of Mount Horeb. He was a powerfully built man with dark, courageous eyes. He went straight to Elisha. Once he was close to him, he took off his mantle and threw it over Elisha's shoulders.

The plow stood still. Like Elisha, it would do no more plowing.

Elisha was frightened. He turned around. The man he saw standing before him was the great prophet Elijah. The prophet was looking at him earnestly, without saying a word.

Then Elisha understood: he was to exchange his farmer's work clothes for a prophet's mantle. God had more glorious work in mind for him.

"Let me go back and kiss my father and

mother," he said to the prophet. "Then I will follow you."

Elisha burned his plow and the rest of his farmer's tools. He wouldn't need them anymore. He slaughtered his oxen and roasted them on a fire; he wouldn't need them either. Then he held a feast for his servants, to say goodbye to them.

Elisha had been their master, but now he became a servant. He followed his master Elijah and did his bidding. He prepared meals for Elijah and did not eat himself until his master was finished. He washed Elijah's feet and listened carefully whenever Elijah sowed the seed of God's Word in the hearts of the Israelites.

Elijah and Elisha were together for years. Elijah taught his young follower a great deal and prepared him for the work he would have to do on his own someday.

When God commanded Elijah to anoint Elisha as his successor, he also gave him two other instructions: Hazael was to be anointed king over Syria, and Jehu king over Israel. If Elijah himself did not carry out these instructions, Elisha would have to see to it.

Elijah was more than a teacher and a master to Elisha; he was a father to him. Yet that father, like any earthly father, could not remain with the young man forever. One day Elijah would be gone and Elisha would be on his own.

183: Elijah's departure

Together they walked through the sunny countryside — Elijah and Elisha. They had made many journeys together, but they would make no more. This was their last one — and they knew it.

Their hearts were full, but they said little to each other. Gilgal lay behind them. There Elijah had already said his goodbyes. Soon he would set out on the great journey from which no one ever returns.

Not even Elisha would be allowed to come along on that journey. Perhaps it would be better, then, if he stayed behind at Gilgal. "Stay here," said Elijah, "for the Lord has sent me on to Bethel."

But on that last day with his master, Elisha refused to obey. He had followed his master for a long, long time, and he would not leave him alone now. Therefore he replied: "As the Lord lives and as you yourself live, I will not forsake you."

Together they went on to Bethel. The prophets who lived there saw them coming. They knew what was going to happen. They whispered to Elisha: "Did you know that the Lord is going to take your master away from you today?"

Sadly he answered: "Yes, I know. Let's not talk about it."

When Bethel lay behind them, Elijah said: "Elisha, you stay here. The Lord has sent me on to Jericho."

But Elisha was determined to accompany his master to the end. Therefore he answered: "As the Lord lives and as you yourself live, I will not forsake you."

At Jericho there were more prophets who knew the secret. Quietly they asked Elisha: "Did you know that the Lord is going to take your master away from you today?"

He answered: "Yes, I know. I don't want to talk about it."

Then Elijah and Elisha left Jericho. The old prophet said: "Stay here, for the Lord has sent me on to the Jordan."

Again Elisha answered: "As the Lord lives and as you yourself live, I will not forsake you."



[C]RTSLS.

They walked on together. Fifty prophets from Jericho followed them, but they stopped when the two men reached the Jordan. They saw Elijah wind his mantle together and strike the water with it. A dry path opened up through the river between two walls of water. Elisha followed his master across the river.

Soon the two men disappeared from view in the hills beyond the Jordan. The prophets had seen the last of their master, but Elisha was still at his side. He walked along silently with a heavy heart.

In the distance he could see the sunshine reflecting off the top of Mount Nebo. It was there that Moses, the great prophet, was taken away by God. Walking within sight of Mount Nebo was an equally great prophet on his last journey.

Elijah was not afraid of the great miracle that would soon take place. Still, it was a comfort to him to have someone at his side during those last hours.

He looked at Elisha in love and said to him: "What shall I do for you before I am taken away?"

Elisha had one request to make. He had been Elijah's son. Now he wanted to claim his inheritance. But he was not thinking about money — which Elijah didn't have anyway. He was thinking about his spirit, his great faith, the wonderful gift that had enabled Elijah to become such a great prophet. Elisha wanted that gift so that he could become a true successor to his master. Therefore he said respectfully: "Let your spirit come over me."

This Elijah could not promise. Only God could grant such a request. Elijah answered: "You have made a difficult request. If you see me when I am taken away, your wish will be granted. If you don't, it will not be granted."

They walked on and kept talking. All at once, the sky grew black with clouds. Lightning flashed. Fire from heaven itself swept past Elisha. His master was gone.

But Elisha could still see him. A fiery chariot pulled by horses of fire rose in the howling wind and carried Elijah away.

Elisha fell to his knees. He threw out his arms and cried out: "My father, my father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!"

Then there was nothing more to see. The wind sighed softly, the storm vanished, and the sun broke through. Elisha was alone in the field. He tore his clothes in mourning.

Elijah's rough mantle, which had fallen from his shoulders, was lying on the ground before him. When he saw that mantle, Elisha knew that his wish had been granted. The inheritance was his.

He picked up the mantle and walked back to the Jordan. He stood before the broad river and struck the water with the mantle, just as Elijah had done. He cried out: "Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?"

Elijah's God was with him. The power that He had bestowed upon Elijah He now gave to Elisha.

The waters of the Jordan parted. The prophets who stood waiting on the other side saw Elisha coming down the shining path and bowed before him. They understood that *he* was now their master.

They thought that Elijah had died like an ordinary human being. They wanted to send out a search party to bring back his body for burial.

Elisha said: "Don't do it." But they continued to press him, and he finally gave in.

Fifty men crossed the Jordan and searched for three days. Then they returned to Elisha, who had remained in Jericho, and told him they had found nothing.

"Didn't I tell you not to go?" Elisha asked.

They finally believed it. Elijah had entered heaven.

184: Miraculous warnings

The prophet Elisha walked across the land just as he used to walk across his own fields, full of faith and trust. He was now engaged in much greater and more glorious work. He was sowing the holy seed of God's Word. And the weeds he was fighting were the weeds of sin.

The field was big, but not very fruitful. There were very few faithful workers. Weeds grew freely, and the forces of wickedness kept sowing more of them.

Elisha went about his work obediently and zealously, even though he saw little fruit. He knew that his work would not be in vain. Wherever he went, he brought blessing for those who wanted to serve God. Never did anyone come to him in vain for help or advice. On the sabbath days and the Feast of the New Moon, he held meetings so that the people could praise God together.

Elisha was not like Elijah. Elijah was a mysterious man who appeared unexpectedly and disappeared suddenly, seldom staying in any one place for long. Elisha lived in a house in Samaria and used Samaria as his base for the trips he made through the land. He lived among the people, and he knew them well.

Yet his faith was just as great as Elijah's faith, and he performed many miracles. The reports of the miracles circulated through the land as warnings from God in that dark age when Israel went astray.

One day Elisha came to Jericho. The water was foul, he was told, and it was

making the land barren. What could the prophet do for the people there?

Elisha took a handful of salt and threw it into the spring, saying: "Thus says the Lord: 'I make the water wholesome.'"

The water became pure at once. The people could drink it again, and the land recovered as quickly as a child healed of a serious illness.

One day Elisha went to Gilgal to visit the prophets there. It was a time of famine. One of the prophets had gone into the fields to seek herbs for the soup, for there was no more grain to eat. He found some round, yellow fruit growing on a winding vine. The fruit would be good to eat, he assumed. He picked as much as he could and cut it up for the soup, not knowing that the fruit was poisonous.

The other prophets realized what had happened when they tasted the soup. "Man of God, there is death in the pot!" they cried.

Elisha asked for some meal and threw it into the pot of soup. Then the soup was good to eat; no one got sick from eating it. Elisha had saved their lives.

One day Elisha arrived in Bethel, where the Israelites had long worshiped the golden calf. Because of that idolatry, Bethel was a thoroughly godless city. The people there hated Elisha because he was a servant of God.

When the boys in Bethel saw the prophet coming, that strange-looking man in his long mantle, they ran alongside him, mocking him and calling him names. They followed him until he was some distance beyond Bethel. "Come on, baldy!" they shouted. "Do something about it — if you dare!"

Finally Elisha had had enough. He turned around and cursed the boys in the

name of the Lord. They laughed at his curse — but not for long. Two bears came out of the woods and killed 42 of them. God did not allow them to make fun of His servant Elisha.

Elisha's miracles were a warning to the people — a warning that God's miraculous power would be used either for them or against them. But Israel was not ready to listen.

185: Miraculous blessings

Elisha's contacts with those who feared the Lord led to blessings. He went around the country helping the poor, often in miraculous ways, showing them God's favor.

One day he helped a needy woman. Her husband, a man who loved the Lord, had died. Now she was poor. She borrowed money, but she could not pay it back. Her two sons would have to be turned over to her creditors as slaves. Then who would support her? She would die of hunger!

When she came to Elisha for help, he asked: "What do you have in the house?"

All she had was a jar of oil. He said: "Go to your neighbors and ask them for empty jugs. Collect as many jugs as you can. Then go into your house and lock the door. Fill all the jugs with oil from your jar."

Fill all those jugs? How could she fill so many jugs with the oil in only one jar? It didn't make sense to her, but she believed and obeyed.

She poured and poured and poured. With trembling hands she held the miraculous jar above the jugs she had collected. Through her tears she could see the golden stream of oil flow and flow. She went from the one jug to the other. Her sons

put the jugs by the wall when they were filled. She did not stop until all the jugs she had borrowed were full.

She said: "Bring me one more jug." But there were no more jugs. The oil stopped flowing.

She had enough. She sold the oil and paid her debts. There was enough left for her to live on with her two sons.

Elisha himself remained a poor man. He never used his miraculous gifts for his own gain. He walked through the land in a worn mantle, helping others. No sorrow was too small, no problem too insignificant for Elisha. He was always ready and willing to help.

One day he was in Jericho again. He accompanied the prophets of Jericho to the bank of the Jordan, where they were cutting down trees. One of the prophets was so poor that he had to borrow an ax to join in the work. Although he was very careful with the ax, the ax head flew off while he was cutting down a tree and sank in the deep water of the Jordan.

The poor man sighed. "That was a borrowed ax!" he moaned.

Elisha asked him where it sank. Then he cut a piece of wood and threw it into the river at the spot the man pointed to. The heavy iron ax head bobbed up to the surface and floated there, shining in the sun.

The man was so amazed that he just stood there staring. Elisha had to tell him to get the ax head back. Now the man could see for himself how miraculously God blesses His people.

A miraculous blessing also came to a certain woman in Shunem. Elisha often passed through Shunem on his travels. Each time the woman invited him into her house for a meal. Finally she and her husband decided to build a small room for

the prophet. Then the man of God could stay there overnight when he passed through Shunem. They furnished the room with a bed, a table, a chair, and a lamp.

The next time Elisha came to Shunem with his servant Gehazi, he was shown the room. He was happy and grateful. He said to the woman: "You have done so much for us! What can we now do for you? Shall I speak to the king or the commander of the army on your behalf?"

His joy at the surprise was enough reward for her. She was well-off financially, and she was happy. Her relatives all lived near her.

There was indeed something missing in her life, but she didn't like to talk about it. Why mention it? She had given up hope long ago. Therefore she told Elisha that there was nothing she wished.

Elisha kept thinking about her. "What could we possibly do for her?" he asked his servant.

Gehazi had understood something of her secret sorrow. "She has no son," he said, "and her husband is old."

Elisha called her to his room once more. She stood in the doorway, saw the prophet's friendly eyes focused on her, and heard him say calmly: "A year from now you will hold a baby boy in your arms."

She did not believe him. "Don't raise any false hopes, my lord," she said.

A year later she really did hold a squirming baby boy in her arms. God had given her a son. Her happiness was complete.

Whenever Elisha visited her, he could hear the happy sound of the child's voice in the house that had once been so still. Within a couple of years, the boy jumped into the prophet's arms each time he came to visit. Elisha took great delight in the joy of the parents.

186: The God of life

The boy born miraculously to the woman in Shunem brought great joy to her life. But one day God took that happiness away and replaced it with pain.

The boy was playing in the field where his father and the servants were harvesting grain. It was very warm, but he did not worry about the heat. His head was bare as he played under the burning sun.

Suddenly he ran to his father holding his head with both hands. "My head! My head!" he moaned.

The father did not take the pain very seriously. A servant brought the boy home, but the father continued with his work.

The mother took the boy on her lap. Soon she realized that all her love and care and concern could not save him. The boy had suffered a sunstroke. His heartbeat grew weaker and weaker. His eyes lost their luster — and then closed. By the time the sun had climbed its highest, the boy lay dead in her arms.

She remained amazingly calm. She carried the dead boy upstairs and laid him on Elisha's bed. Then she closed the door and went to her husband. She did not tell him that the boy was dead; she simply asked for a donkey and a servant, explaining that she was going to Elisha.

"Why are you going to the prophet?" he asked, surprised. "It isn't the sabbath, and it's not time for the Feast of the New Moon."

"Don't worry about it," she replied.

She saddled the donkey and told the servant to hurry the beast along. There was no time to lose! The donkey trotted through the fields, and its rider didn't even feel the heat of the sun.

Her eyes were fixed on the west.

Outlined against the blue sky was Mount Carmel, where Elisha was supposed to be.

Elisha saw the woman coming and sent Gehazi to meet her. "Ask her if everything is all right with her and her family," he instructed Gehazi.

The woman insisted on telling her story to Elisha personally. "Everything is fine," she said to Gehazi, to get rid of him. She kept right on going until she reached Elisha.

She fell to the ground and threw her arms around his feet. She cried out in such pain that it seemed her heart would break.

Gehazi wanted to push her away. He thought her conduct was disrespectful. But Elisha said gently: "Let her be. She is bitterly disappointed, but I don't know why. The Lord has not told me."

She looked at Elisha. Her face was pale. "Did I ask you for a son?" she screamed. "Didn't I ask you not to raise false hopes? Why have I received a child only to lose it again?"

Elisha was as sad and disappointed as she was. But he knew that there was someone who could help. Is anything too wonderful or difficult for the God of life?

Elisha gave his staff to Gehazi and said: "Go to her house quickly. Don't let anyone stop you or slow you down. When you get there, lay my staff on the boy's face."

Gehazi ran on ahead. Elisha and the woman followed.

Gehazi was already growing doubtful. "Does Elisha mean that the child will become alive again? That's impossible!"

Once Gehazi's mind was filled with doubt, it did no good when he laid Elisha's staff on the boy's face. When Elisha arrived, the white little body was still lying on the bed motionless.

Elisha closed the door, kneeled down by



the boy, and prayed. He took the boy in his arms and bent low over him, putting his mouth and eyes and hands directly over the boy's mouth and eyes and hands.

The boy's body started getting warm. Elisha walked back and forth in the room, praying, begging the God of life to revive the boy. Then he stretched out over the boy again.

Was there a small flicker of life in the boy's face? Was there a little color in his cheeks?

Suddenly the boy sneezed. He sneezed again, and again — seven times in all. Two bright eyes opened wide and looked around in amazement.

The boy's mother was called. She saw the boy throw out his arms to her, and she heard Elisha say: "Take up your son."

The woman fell down at Elisha's feet and praised God for His power. Her happiness was greater than ever, for now she knew that she owed her joy completely to God.

The news of this miracle traveled quickly through the land. No one failed to hear about the amazing, glorious deeds of the great prophet. All of Israel was reminded of the power and love of God. But Israel still did not listen.

187: Naaman's leprosy

Gehazi dreamed of wealth and power. He had accompanied Elisha on many journeys through the land, but Elisha's words made no impression on him. He didn't understand the language of Elisha's miracles either. What good were miracles and wise words if they didn't lead to wealth and power?

Gehazi liked to daydream about a house, about land of his own, about cattle and servants. He would be the master, and everyone would bow before him.

Such were Gehazi's hopes and dreams. As long as he did not attain them, he thought, he would never be happy.

Far away in Damascus, the capital city of Syria, lived a man who had everything Gehazi dreamed of and much more besides. Yet, he was not happy.

His name was Naaman, and he was the commander of the Syrian army. He lived in a beautiful palace in the midst of horses and chariots and servants and money.

The people of Syria honored and respected Naaman, for he was a hero who had

saved the country through his bravery. Apart from the king, he was the most important man in the country.

Naaman was unhappy because he had leprosy. The first signs of that dreaded disease already showed on his body, and there was no doctor in the country who could heal him. The gods in the temples did not respond to his sacrifices and prayers — not even Rimmon, the national god of Syria.

Naaman's servants truly felt sorry for him, for he was a kind and friendly master. He was like a father to his servants. But his servants couldn't help him.

Naaman knew that his condition would get worse and worse. Eventually he would die a horrible death.

One day a maidservant in Naaman's household spoke up. She said to her mistress: "If only my master could go to the prophet in Samaria! The prophet would surely heal him of his leprosy."

The maidservant was an Israelite slave. She had been carried away from her own country years before by a band of Syrian raiders. The raiders had given her as a gift to the wife of Naaman, their commander in chief. Since then she had served in Naaman's household. She grew to love her kind master, even though she did not forget her own country.

No one listened to the Israelite maidservant when she talked about the prophet in Samaria, but she kept raising the subject anyway. She talked about all the miracles Elisha had performed. When her words finally reached Naaman's ears, her hopes soared.

Naaman decided to discuss this matter with the king. Because he had nothing to lose, he was soon on his way to Israel in a beautiful chariot, accompanied by many

servants. It was a glittering procession, for Naaman and his men took along gold and silver and beautiful gifts.

Naaman carried a letter from the king of Syria to the king of Israel. In that letter the king had written: "I have sent my servant Naaman to you so that you can heal him from his leprosy."

The king of Syria assumed that everyone in Israel would bow before the power of the king. Even the prophet who performed wonders would be at the king's command!

188: Naaman is healed in the Jordan

Naaman arrived in Samaria, and Israel's king was surprised to receive such an important visitor. When he read the letter from Syria's king, he threw it down in anger and cried out in despair: "Does the king of Syria take me for a god? How could I possibly heal anyone from leprosy? No one can do such a thing! The king of Syria is trying to pick a quarrel with me so that he can march into Israel with his army!"

The king tore his clothes in mourning. He was terrified.

When Elisha heard that the king was in despair, he sent him a message: "Let the Syrian come to me. Then he will know that there is a prophet in Israel!"

Reassuring words!

Naaman was so excited that he trembled as he rode through the city to Elisha's house. "Now it will finally happen," he thought. "The prophet will come outside and stand before me. He will call on the name of Yahweh and rub his hands over the diseased flesh to banish the leprosy."

When his chariot and the rest of his procession reached Elisha's humble house, the only one who came outside was a ser-

vant. The servant said: "Go and bathe seven times in the Jordan. Then your body will be healed, and you will be clean again."

That was all the servant said. He went back inside and closed the door. The prophet himself stayed in the house.

Naaman lost hope and got very angry. Had he made his long journey to receive this kind of treatment? Had he come all this way to bathe in the Jordan with its yellow, muddy water? The rivers of Syria, the Abana and the Pharpar, were much cleaner and purer than any river in Israel!

He brought down the whip on the backs of the horses and raced through the city. Angry and disappointed, he headed home, back to the place of his suffering.

His servants shook their heads sadly. One of them pulled up alongside Naaman's chariot and said: "My father, if the prophet had asked something very difficult of you, you would have believed in him and you would have done as he said. Why not try doing as he says now that he has asked something so simple?"

Naaman slowed down. That gave him something to think about. It was worth trying, he finally decided. He had to cross the Jordan anyway.

Dejectedly he brought his chariot to a halt by the Jordan. He took off his beautiful clothes and waded into the water.

He ducked under the muddy water once, twice, three times, but his leprosy remained. He went under again, and still nothing changed. He kept going. He would go under seven times, just as the servant had told him. Then he would continue his journey home, still as sick as when he arrived in Samaria.

When he was squeezing the water out of his eyes after going under the seventh time,



he heard his servants shouting excitedly. Then he saw it with his own eyes: the leprosy was gone. His skin was as white and pure as that of a baby.

Naaman could not conceal his amazement and delight. Dancing and shouting and laughing like a little boy, he emerged from the water, put on clean clothes, and jumped into his chariot.

"Back to Samaria!" he shouted. "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel."

He went back to Elisha's house and laid his gifts before the prophet — gold and silver and other valuables. "Please accept a gift from your servant," he said gratefully. "Take whatever you want. I can never do enough to repay you!"

Elisha smiled and shook his head. Naaman urged him to accept a gift, but Elisha refused. "I serve God," he said. "It was the Lord who healed you — not me."

"Give me some earth from your yard — as much as two mules can carry," said Naaman. "I will build an altar to Yahweh in my own land, and I will serve no other god but Him. I will only enter the temple of Rimmon when I must accompany the king. I hope that Yahweh will forgive me for that."

Elisha was glad to let Naaman have some soil. Naaman's servants loaded the soil on the mules. Then they packed their treasures and set out for Syria, with a song in their hearts.

It was wonderful that Naaman wanted some Israelite soil. But the most wonderful thing of all was that the *soul* of this heathen Syrian was also healed when his leprosy was washed away.

189: Gehazi's sin

Gehazi watched as Naaman and his procession disappeared in the distance. He was amazed. He had followed the events with greedy eyes and a pounding heart. His beautiful dream of wealth and power had been so close! A sack of silver would have enabled him to fulfill all his wishes.

Elisha didn't want Naaman's treasures. He said he wasn't permitted to accept such gifts.

Elisha was in the house again, while Gehazi stood outside staring, not quite believing his own eyes. "There goes my one chance for happiness!" he said to himself angrily. "Should I just stand here and watch? As the Lord lives, I will run after

Naaman and accept one of those gifts he was so eager to give us.”

Naaman heard someone calling him as he rode along in his chariot. When he turned around, he saw Elisha’s servant approaching. Immediately he stopped the procession and jumped out of the chariot. “Is there anything wrong?” he asked.

“Everything is fine,” Gehazi panted. “But just after you left, my master received some visitors — two young men from the hill country of Ephraim. He would like to give gifts to the young men, but he has nothing. Therefore he sent me to ask you for a sack of silver and two outer garments to give to the guests.”

Naaman believed the lie. He was happy that he could do something for Elisha after all. He gave Gehazi *two* sacks of silver along with the outer garments. He even sent two servants back with him to help him carry it all.

Before he reached the city, Gehazi took over the whole burden himself and dismissed the two servants. He hid everything in his house. His heart pounded with joy as he ran his fingers over the costly outer garments and listened to the sound of the coins. He had acquired more money in one day than a man would normally earn in his entire lifetime.

Soon Gehazi’s beautiful dream would become a reality. He would be a rich lord with servants of his own. That foolish prophet would have to find himself another servant.

When he got back to Elisha’s house, he pretended that nothing had happened and tried to look innocent. He saw the earnest eyes of his master focusing on him sternly. “Where have you been, Gehazi?” asked the prophet.

Gehazi was frightened at this question,

but he did not lose his composure. “Your servant hasn’t been anywhere,” he said, lying.

Elisha responded sadly: “Gehazi, Gehazi, wasn’t I with you in the spirit when Naaman turned around and climbed down from his chariot to meet you? Was it a time to accept silver and clothes and land and slaves? Because of your sin and deceit, you will also receive from Naaman his leprosy.”

Gehazi turned white as a sheet — and not just from fear. That horrible sickness was already doing its destructive work.

At last he was free to buy a house and live like a wealthy lord. He was rich, and people would have to look up to him. But how could he be happy now that he was afflicted by that dreaded disease?

The story of this miracle, too, spread through the land. Yet the people didn’t understand. There were many lepers in Israel those days, but they were not healed. Only Naaman the Syrian was healed. The lepers in Israel had no faith. That’s why a heathen like Naaman was healed instead.

No doubt the servant girl in Naaman’s house was rewarded when her master came home. The most beautiful thing of all was that God had used her to be a blessing in a foreign land.

190: An army of angels

The king of Syria was angry. He was at war with Israel, and part of his army had planned a raid in enemy territory. The place and time were kept secret. But when the raiders reached their intended target, they found the king of Israel waiting for them with his army.

Perhaps it was just a coincidence. A little later Syria's king made another battle plan. This time he would attack somewhere else. And he would be even more careful not to let the secret out. But once more he found himself facing Israel's king, just as if the Israelites knew about the Syrian plans in advance.

It happened again, and again, and again. Whenever the Syrians set foot in enemy territory, they found themselves facing Israel's army.

The king of Syria finally concluded that there was a traitor in his inner circle. One of his men must be an Israelite spy.

He called his commanders together. "One of us is in contact with the king of Israel!" he shouted. "Who is it? Does anyone here know?"

No one said a word. Calmly and earnestly, the commanders looked the king in the eye. At last one of them stepped forward. "My lord the king," he said, "there is no traitor among us. Elisha, the prophet in Israel, tells the king of Israel everything you say — even what you say in your bedroom."

"Then he is our most dangerous enemy," said the king. "We must capture him."

He sent out spies to track Elisha down. When he heard that Elisha was in the little city of Dothan, he sent an army there to capture him.

The Syrian soldiers arrived at night and surrounded the city. When Elisha got up the next morning, the slopes of the surrounding hills were covered with chariots and horses and hundreds of Syrian soldiers.

It was a frightening sight. Soon the whole city of Dothan was in an uproar. People were wringing their hands in fear. Elisha's servant was pale with terror and trembled as he followed his master. He

realized that the soldiers had come for Elisha. He knew that his master had been frustrating the efforts of the Syrians through his miraculous power.

"O my lord, what are we to do?" he moaned.

Elisha just smiled. "Don't be afraid," he answered. "The ones on our side are more numerous than the ones on their side."

The ones on our side? The city of Dothan was small and did not have many brave men. The servant didn't understand. He continued to tremble in fear.

Then Elisha prayed: "Lord, open his eyes so that he sees."

Suddenly the young servant saw another army, an army that stood between the Syrians and the city. This second army was even more frightening in appearance, for it was made up of thousands of angels shining like fire. Each angel had a flaming sword in his hand to hold back the enemy. The Lord had sent an army of angels to protect Elisha.

The young servant's fear vanished. He followed his master as he went to meet the enemy. He didn't even tremble when the enemy soldiers came toward them, for he saw the angels all around. He heard Elisha pray: "Lord, strike these soldiers with blindness." He saw Elisha raise his hands and make the enemy stop.

Then events took an amazing turn. Elisha said to the Syrian soldiers: "This is not the way, and this is not the city. Follow me, and I will bring you to the man you seek."

His words had a strange, mysterious power over the Syrians. They obeyed. They walked along behind him as if they were in a trance, but they did not realize where they were going. All they saw was an old man and a young man. They walked along

behind the two, heading south. They followed a certain road a long way and then walked through a gate that closed behind them. Only then were their eyes opened again.

Their hearts sank when they saw that they were in the middle of Samaria. They had been lured into the trap like unsuspecting mice. They were in the power of Israel's army.

Israel's king was overwhelmed with joy and amazement. "Shall I kill them, my father?" he shouted to Elisha. "Shall I kill them right now?"

That was not what Elisha had in mind. He had not brought Syria's soldiers to Samaria to have them killed in cold blood. Sternly he answered: "You may *not* kill them. Is that what you do with prisoners — kill them? Give them bread and water. Let them eat and drink and return to their master."

The king did not dare resist Elisha. He had a great meal prepared for the Syrians. Silent and embarrassed, the Syrians ate and drank. Then they went home, ashamed of the defeat they had suffered but grateful for Elisha's generosity.

After that no more bands of Syrian raiders came to Israel in search of plunder.

191: Undeserved deliverance

Many years later, war broke out between Syria and Israel. Samaria was besieged. For months no one was allowed in or out of the city. The food supplies dwindled.

Over the steep walls that no Syrian could climb came another enemy, a much more dangerous enemy. This enemy had the Israelites completely in his grasp. His name

was Hunger, and he would kill off the people of Samaria one by one if there was no deliverance.

Walking skeletons wandered through the city looking for food, but there was no food to be found. Even a donkey's head sold for 80 pieces of silver. The people would eat anything — even the dung of pigeons. They were insane with hunger.

Around the city stood the tents and wagons of the enemy. The tantalizing aroma of the meat being cooked in the enemy camp wafted into the city every day.

The king could no longer bear to watch the suffering of his people. At first he had hoped that Elisha would help. But why didn't the prophet do something if he could? Elisha was hungry himself. In his despair the king blamed everything on the prophet. He swore that he would have the prophet put to death.

Taking armed servants with him, the king went to the prophet's home. "Look what disaster the Lord has sent upon us!" he shouted, furious. "Why should I put my hope in the Lord?"

The hollow eyes of the old prophet began to shine. He lifted his thin arm and pointed to heaven with a bony finger. Calmly he said to the king: "Thus says the Lord: 'Tomorrow at this time there will be an abundance of food in the city. A measure of meal will cost one shekel, and two measures of barley will cost one shekel at Samaria's gate.'"

The king's men were speechless with amazement. A captain standing next to the king laughed off the prophecy. "Even if the Lord made windows in heaven," he declared, "that would be impossible."

Elisha looked at him earnestly. "You will see it with your own eyes," he said calmly, "but you will not eat of it."

That evening there were four lepers sitting outside Samaria's gate. They were not allowed in the city. In addition to the pain and misery of leprosy, they bore the punishment of hunger. Now they were at the point of death.

This dark evening their misery overcame them. They said to each other: "If we go into the city, we will die of hunger with all the others. If we stay here, we will also die. Let's go to the Syrian camp. It's our last chance. Maybe the Syrians will have pity on us. Otherwise we will surely die. Even death at the hands of the Syrians would be better than this lingering death."

Slowly they stumbled through the darkness toward the enemy camp. They didn't hear a sound as they approached. They could see the dark outlines of the tents and the burning embers of dying campfires, but they saw no sentries or anyone else moving around.

They were surprised, but they kept moving ahead cautiously, getting closer and closer to the Syrian camp. Finally they reached the first row of tents. There was no one in the tents. All they found was a solitary, forsaken donkey. Clothes and weapons were scattered around the camp, but there was not a sound to be heard. For some unknown reason, the enemy was gone!

The Syrians had heard horrible, frightening sounds — sounds of chariots, weapons, battle cries, the neighing of horses. The sounds had come floating across the hill in the evening twilight. What could those sounds mean? A great army must be approaching!

In their fright, the Syrians concluded that Israel's king had enlisted the help of neighboring nations. They panicked. They ran for their lives and left everything

behind. They fled from the sounds that the Lord had made them hear!

The lepers did not know why the Syrians were gone. They found food in the tents and started devouring it like animals. They found silver and gold and clothing. They scooped up treasures and took them away to hide them. Then they came back for more.

Finally they sat in a little circle under the stars, with joy in their hearts and food in their stomachs. Now that they had banished their hunger, they began to think of others.

"What we are doing is not right," they said. "This is a day of great joy, but we have said nothing to the people of Samaria. We may not keep silent until morning. Let's go to the palace and tell the king that the Syrians are gone."

The king refused to believe them. He was worried. "Listen," he said to his servants, "I'll tell you what the Syrians are up to. They know that we are starving in the city. They have hidden in the field in order to lure us out of the city so that they can sneak in. It's a trick!"

He sent some of his men in two chariots to look around in the countryside. They followed the tracks of the Syrians, who were heading for the Jordan as fast as they could. All along the way they found clothing and weapons that the Syrian soldiers had cast aside so they could run faster.

When the king heard this report, he threw the gates of the city wide open. The starving people spilled out of the city jubilantly. They rushed to the Syrian camp to get at the abandoned food.

A captain posted at the gate by the king to keep order was trampled to death by the eager crowd. It was the same captain who

had laughed at Elisha's prophecy in unbelief! But before he died, he saw someone who had returned from the Syrian camp selling a measure of meal for a shekel and two measures of barley for a shekel — just as Elisha had said he would.

192: Jehu is anointed king

Israel was at war with Syria again, but King Jehoram, the son of Ahab, was not with the army. Because he was ill, he stayed home in Jezreel. Jehu was commander in chief of the army.

The army was in good hands with Jehu. Jehu was a lot like Joab, David's commander in chief — just as courageous and even more destructive.

Jehu had defeated the enemy at Ramoth, where Ahab had died in battle. He besieged the city and captured it. He never considered relenting or easing the pressure. Anyone who did not give in to Jehu would be destroyed.

The soldiers loved Jehu. The captains in the army esteemed him as their friend and commander.

One day the captains were in a house within the walls of Ramoth. They were talking and laughing and telling crude jokes. Suddenly the door was thrown open. In the doorway stood a strange young man in a prophet's mantle.

The officers were surprised at his entrance. They stopped talking. The young prophet looked at Jehu calmly. "I have a message for you, Commander," he said.

"For whom is the message intended?" Jehu asked.

"For you, Commander," the prophet answered.

Jehu stood up and went into another room with the prophet. The prophet had been sent by Elisha to carry out a command that God had given Elijah at Mount Horeb.

It was a wonderful message that Jehu received. The young prophet took a flask of oil and poured it over Jehu's head. "Thus says the Lord: 'I anoint you king over Israel. You shall punish Ahab's family and his wife Jezebel for their godlessness.'"

At once the prophet went his way. Jehu was left alone, surprised by this sudden turn of events. He wiped the sweet-smelling oil from his face and smiled, for he now saw a beautiful future unfolding before him. He could not conceal his excitement as he rejoined his friends.

Nothing was safe from their jokes and curiosity. "What did that madman want with you, Jehu?" they asked.

Jehu hesitated. He wasn't sure whether to tell them or not. "What difference does it make?" he answered. "You know how such people talk."

The officers could smell the oil in Jehu's hair, and they could see how his eyes were shining. They sensed that something special had happened. Their curiosity was aroused, and they kept pressing him. "Come on, Jehu, tell us! Don't stand there lying to us!"

Finally Jehu could hide his secret no longer. "What the prophet told me is this," he responded. "Thus says the Lord: 'I will anoint you king over Israel.'"

Jubilantly the officers jumped up. One of them blew the trumpet and called the soldiers together. Others spread their garments at Jehu's feet and on some steps as tokens of their esteem. Together they shouted: "Jehu is king!" All through the spirited ranks of the soldiers, Jehu was

hailed as king.

Jehu kept a cool head in all the excitement. He knew perfectly well that he was not king yet.

"No one is to leave Ramoth and go to Jezreel," he commanded. "We don't want the king to hear what has happened."

He picked out some of his bravest soldiers and had them hitch horses to their chariots. These soldiers would accompany him on a wild dash to Jezreel. He himself would bring Jehoram the news that someone else was to be king.

193: Judgment on Ahab's house

The watchtower of the palace in Jezreel towered high above the houses. A watchman surveyed the sunny countryside.

Far away he saw a small cloud of dust approaching the city. He called out: "I see a band of men approaching."

King Jehoram heard him. He was ill, and King Ahaziah of Judah was visiting him. Ahaziah was his nephew; he was a son of Jehoram's sister Athaliah.

The king sent a man on horseback to meet the band of soldiers approaching. "Ask them whether they have come in peace," he instructed the messenger.

When the messenger reached Jehu and asked his question, Jehu shouted back: "What does peace matter to you? Turn your horse around and follow me!"

Jehu's words sounded like the snarl of an angry bear. The messenger did not dare refuse. Soon he was riding among Jehu's men.

The watchman in the tower called down to the king: "The messenger has spoken to the band of soldiers, but he is not coming back."

The king was puzzled, so he sent out another horseman. The second horseman received the same answer as the first and also joined Jehu's men. The watchman shouted: "The second messenger isn't coming back either! And I can tell that it's Jehu from the way the lead chariot is racing along. No one else drives like Jehu!"

When he heard that, Jehoram jumped up. He was frightened. Why would Jehu, his commander in chief, leave the army and come to Jezreel? There must be something wrong!

"Get my chariot ready!" Jehoram barked.

"Mine too!" Ahaziah cried.

The two kings rode out to meet Jehu, each in his own chariot. Jehu was very close to the city by now. They met at Naboth's vineyard, which was next to the palace.

"Have you come in peace, Jehu?" the king asked. Inwardly he was trembling when he saw the angry eyes of his army commander.

"How can there be any peace as long as your mother Jezebel continues with her idolatry?" Jehu snarled. He rode straight toward the king. Jehoram turned his chariot around and fled, crying: "It's treason, Ahaziah!"

Jehu let an arrow fly with full force. The arrow struck Jehoram in the back and penetrated to his heart. Jehoram let go of the reins and collapsed in his chariot. His horses stood still.

"Throw his body on Naboth's land, the land that his mother stole," Jehu commanded.

King Ahaziah of Judah escaped, even though he was wounded. He died before he reached Megiddo, which was not far away.

By the time Jehu reached the palace gate, there was a vulture hovering above

Naboth's vineyard.

The watchman on the tower saw what happened to Jehoram and passed the news to Jezebel. Jezebel was an old woman by now, but she was just as godless, corrupt and wicked as before. She feared nothing and no one.

Quickly she went to her room and put on makeup, trying to restore some color to her wrinkled face. She dressed herself in her most beautiful clothes and placed a crown on her head.

Adorned with all the majesty she could muster, she stood before an open window in the watchtower and waited for Jehu to enter at the gate. That rebel had killed her son, but *she* was not afraid of him. "Have you come in peace, you murderer of your master?" she asked Jehu.

Jehu stopped his chariot and looked up at Jezebel. "Who is on my side?" he shouted. A few servants standing behind Jezebel signaled to him. "Throw her out the window!" he commanded them.

The woman who had scorned the God of heaven and earth was thrown out the window to her death. Her wicked, corrupt heart would beat no more.

Jehu and his men rode right over her body as they crossed the square on the way to the palace. In the great throne room where Jehoram used to sit as king, Jehu now enjoyed a meal with his men.

When Jehu had had enough to eat and leaned back in his chair feeling satisfied, he thought of Jezebel again. He sent some servants outside. "Bury that accursed woman," he said, "for she is a daughter of a king."

Shortly the servants were back inside. "It's too late," they said. "There's nothing left of her except a few bones." The Word of God spoken through Elijah had been



fulfilled: the dogs of Jezreel had eaten Jezebel.

The entire country recognized Jehu as king. No one could stand in the face of his power and cunning. He put all the priests of Baal to death, and he destroyed their altars and their beautiful temple.

But that was as far as his obedience went. He did nothing about the calves at Bethel and Dan. He did not want his people going to Jerusalem to worship the Lord.

When his obedience ended, so did his divine protection. King Hazael of Syria, whom Elisha anointed as king in obedience to the Lord's command to Elijah at Mount Horeb, conquered a good deal of Jehu's

kingdom. Jehu's power shrank steadily.

Jehu did not love the Lord the way David had. Like King Jehoram, he served himself, and the calves at Bethel and Dan. Therefore his dynasty came to the same sorry end as Jeroboam's dynasty.

194: Queen Athaliah

A rumor raced through the streets of Jerusalem. People spilled out of the houses and gathered in the streets, asking each other excitedly if it was true.

"King Ahaziah is dead," they were told. "Jehu murdered him at Jezreel. The king of Israel is dead too — and so is Jezebel. The service of Baal has been wiped out completely in Israel."

"Who will become king of Judah now?" people started to ask. "There is no successor ready to take over, for Ahaziah's children are still so small. And what will Athaliah do?" The reports and questions passed from person to person.

"Queen Athaliah, the mother of Judah's king, was a daughter of Ahab and Jezebel. She had come to Judah many years before. Pious King Jehoshaphat had taken her along as a wife for his son.

That was the greatest mistake he ever made. All the blessing he had brought his country was turned into a curse through this mistake, for that beautiful young woman had an exceedingly wicked heart. She had brought her image of Baal along when she came to Judah. After Jehoshaphat's death, she corrupted her husband until he was as wicked as she was.

When her husband died and her son Ahaziah became king, it was really Athaliah who was in control. Her son did whatever she asked.

Now Ahaziah was dead, and so were Jehoram and Jezebel. Athaliah had lost her son, her brother and her mother in one day. Jehu had wiped out her family.

Athaliah herself was safe from Jehu as long as she stayed in Judah. Crazy with anger, she decided to take revenge in Judah for what had happened in Israel.

If the altars of Baal were destroyed in Israel, they would be used even more in the land of Judah! If the house of Ahab was wiped out in Israel, the house of David would be wiped out in Judah! God had promised that a son of David would rule forever, but Athaliah would see to it that that promise could not be kept.

Athaliah was a true daughter of Jezebel. She feared nothing, and she was capable of anything. To wipe out the house of David, she had to kill her own grandchildren, for she had married into the house of David.

There was no one who intervened to save David's house. Only one child escaped death. His name was Joash, and he was only a baby.

The little baby boy did not know what great danger he faced. He kept right on sleeping when Jehosheba, his aunt, picked up his cradle and carried it quickly through the halls of the palace. She could not take him out of the palace, for soldiers guarded the gates and doors.

She hid the baby in a corner of the palace, in a small, dark room where the beds were stored. Athaliah would never look for him there. For the present, he was safe. His nurse, the woman who had always taken care of him, stayed with him. That night when it was dark, he was brought over to the temple.

Athaliah, the heathen queen, seated herself on the throne of David. She took great delight in the thought that there would

never again be a king of the house of David. Now she would be able to rule as queen as long as she lived. She was a stern and cruel ruler. And Baal became the official god in the land of Judah.

195: The high priest's plot

Little Joash, the hidden prince of David's house, grew and thrived. The temple was his whole world; he was never allowed out of it. The risk was too great that Queen Athaliah would find out about him and put him to death.

Joash had no little friends to play with. The only people he saw were grown men in white clothes. The most important of them was his uncle Jehoiada, the wise old high priest. There was also his aunt, faithful Jehosheba. Together they cared for him. Jehoiada told Joash beautiful stories about God, and Jehosheba taught him how to pray.

Behind the thick wall of the temple, Joash was safe under the protection of Jehoiada and Jehosheba. For six years he remained completely hidden.

Finally Jehoiada decided that it was time to make Joash king. All through the land, the people were dissatisfied with Queen Athaliah. She had made herself widely hated, and many longed for her death.

Jehoiada assembled the captains of the guard, the captains of the army, and the leaders of the people in the temple. He told them that there was still a surviving son of Ahaziah, a descendant of David. Then he brought Joash out for them to see.

The captains and leaders were delighted at this news. They made an agreement with Jehoiada to do whatever was necessary to

make Joash king.

They would have to plan very carefully, to make sure that Athaliah did not find out what was going on. On a certain sabbath they gathered in the forecourt of the temple. Armed soldiers guarded the gates. Little Joash stood by the temple door. A beautiful robe was hung around his shoulders, and anointing oil was poured over his head. Then a crown was placed on his head. In his hand he held a scroll that Jehoiada had given him. The scroll contained the law of the God that the young king would serve.

There stood the young king, next to the old high priest. All who were present clapped their hands and cried out: "Long live the king!"

The noise penetrated to the palace, where Athaliah heard it. She was amazed as she listened. She had no idea what the shouting was about.

She called for her servants, but no one appeared. The palace was empty. Even the guards who were supposed to protect her had abandoned her.

Finally Athaliah herself rushed out of the palace to find out what was happening. When she reached the door of the temple, she saw a young boy standing there. He had a crown on his head, and he was surrounded by army commanders and priests clutching weapons. Suddenly she understood.

"Treason! Treason!" she screamed. She ran back to the palace for help, but no one there would obey her anymore. Soon she was seized and put to death.

Joash was led to the palace in a splendid procession. He ruled as king in the very palace where he had narrowly escaped death six years before.

Outside the palace the commotion continued. Mattan, the priest of Baal, was put

to death in his heathen temple. The idols were smashed and the altars destroyed.

The land was at rest for the first time in years. All of Judah was happy and thankful for this deliverance from godless Athaliah.

196: The reign of Joash

Athaliah was dead. Joash, a descendant of David, ruled in Jerusalem. It was a time of prosperity for Judah.

Because Joash was so young, the wise high priest Jehoiada served as regent until he was grown up. When Joash became a man and took over from Jehoiada, things continued to go well. He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord as long as Jehoiada was alive.

Joash put an offering box at the temple gate so that the people could make contributions for the renewal of the temple, which had fared poorly under Athaliah. The people brought their gifts with joy, and the house of God was restored. Once again the temple was a splendid sight in the city of the Lord. Every day the smoke of sacrifices rose to the heavens.

Jehoiada grew older and weaker. One day he died. He was buried in the graves of the kings because he had done so much for the land. That was the greatest honor that the people of Judah could pay him.

When Jehoiada was gone, King Joash had no wise counselor to lean on. And advice was one thing he needed, for his will was weak. He could not govern the land all by himself.

Joash had had no friends his own age when he was a boy. The people around him had all been grownups whom he had to obey. He had never learned to do things on his own.

Now that he was a man, he did not know how to act on his own. He always needed someone to advise him, someone he could obey.

At that point the leaders of Judah became his counselors. Just as Joash had once done everything Jehoiada told him, he now did whatever those leaders wished.

Soon Judah was filled with idols again. Every village and town had its own altar and its own idol. The people forsook the Lord once more.

Prophets came to warn the king, but he did not listen to them. His counselors, the leaders of Judah, told him to ignore the prophets.

Zechariah, the son of Jehoiada, had succeeded Jehoiada as high priest. He spoke out boldly to the people. "Why do you transgress the commandments of the Lord?" he asked. "Because you have forsaken the Lord, He has forsaken you!"

The king and his counselors started plotting against Zechariah. Finally ungrateful Joash murdered the son of the man who had saved his life!

Zechariah was stoned in the outer court of the temple. When he collapsed, he pointed to the blue sky above. Dying, he cried out: "May the Lord see it and avenge it!"

The Lord did avenge Zechariah's murder. Shortly after his death, Syria's King Hazael defeated Judah's army in battle. The entire land was plundered. All the elders and leaders, including the wicked counselors of Joash, were killed.

Joash himself lay ill in his palace. Two of his servants, who hated him because he had killed Zechariah, murdered him in his bed.

That was the sorry end of the reign of Joash, a reign that had begun so gloriously. Joash never did learn to be independent. At heart he remained a child — but not a child of God.

197: Jonah flees

Jonah the prophet heard the Word of the Lord. "Go to the great city of Nineveh," God commanded him. "Cry out against the wickedness there, for Nineveh's sins have come up before Me."

Jonah didn't like the idea. In his heart he began to resist.

Jonah was well aware that Nineveh was a godless city, but he secretly delighted in the fact. Let those pagans sin, he thought. They would surely perish in their wickedness — not just Nineveh but the whole land of Assyria, of which Nineveh was the capital city. How Israel would rejoice when Assyria suffered the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah!

The Assyrians were enemies of Israel. If they remained powerful, they would march on Israel one day and conquer it — Jonah was sure of it. And things were going so well with Israel. There was another Jeroboam on the throne — Jeroboam II, who made Israel strong and expanded her territory. But Israel would not remain strong if those dangerous Assyrians made war on her.

Jonah hated those pagans! Did God expect him to warn Nineveh so that the city would *not* be destroyed?

"I won't do it!" he said to himself. "This time I know better than God."

Jonah did undertake a journey, but he went in the wrong direction. He was supposed to go east, but he went west instead. He fled in great haste, turning his back on the assignment God had given him. He wanted to go to a place where God would never find him. Fear and anxiety drove him on.

When Jonah reached the coast, he found a ship in the harbor at Joppa. The ship was

ready to leave. It was sailing for Tarshish, a faraway land. The farther away, the better, Jonah thought.

Jonah climbed aboard hastily and paid his fare. The anchors were hoisted and the ship sailed away.

Jonah did not feel safe in the clear light of the sun; he did not dare look up at the blue sky. He went to a room in the lower deck of the ship. Sighing, he stretched out in a dark corner.

He wanted to forget that he was running away from God. Only sleep could take away his fear and his somber thoughts and give him rest.

Jonah had not escaped God's all-seeing eye. God saw him out there — a little man on the boundless sea.

He issued a command to the clouds. Heavy, black clouds gathered in a great mass above the ship and darkened the sky. Then God summoned a howling wind and sent it after Jonah. The wind whipped up the waves until they became raging mountains of water.

The ship creaked and groaned as it was tossed to and fro. The sailors tried to keep the ship steady, but they couldn't. They threw their costly cargo into the raging waters to make the ship lighter, but it did no good. Finally each sailor called out to his own god — the one to Baal, the other to Dagon. Even their prayers brought no relief.

Jonah still lay below, sleeping through all the commotion. At last the captain of the ship woke him up. "How can you sleep so soundly?" he cried. "Get up, and help us pray! You must worship some god. Pray to your god. Maybe he will answer, and we will be saved."

Jonah did indeed worship a god — the God of Israel. When he stood on the upper



deck, a small, trembling man facing the awesome power of the storm, he knew that God had found him. There was no way Jonah could escape God's long arm.

Sadly he watched as the sailors scrambled to save the ship. One of them shouted above the howling wind to another: "Perhaps the gods are angry at someone on this ship. Perhaps someone has committed a great sin. Let's cast lots to find out who it is."

The sailors agreed that this was a good idea. They went ahead, and the lot pointed to Jonah!

"What have you done?" they demanded. "Who are you, and where do you come from?"

Jonah told them the whole story. "My God is the God of the heavens," he said,

"the God who made the sea and the dry land. This great storm has come upon you because of me. Throw me into the sea, and the sea will stop raging against you."

Jonah meant what he said. He knew that he deserved to be thrown overboard. He had earned the death sentence by his disobedience.

The sailors refused. They fought the storm with fresh energy, hoping to steer their ship to land, but it could not be done. The raging sea grew wilder and wilder. At any moment the ship could be smashed to bits.

Finally they took Jonah and threw him into the swirling sea, praying aloud for forgiveness as they did so. Immediately he disappeared under the heaving waves.

The storm calmed down at once, like a

voracious animal satisfied with a piece of meat. The sea became smooth, and the sun broke through the clouds and smiled down on the sailors once again.

The sailors fell to their knees in fear and gratitude. They offered a sacrifice to Jonah's God and worshiped Him. As they sailed on, they mourned the death of the man who had given his life to save theirs.

198: Repentance in Nineveh

Jonah had disappeared under the waves. That was the last the sailors saw of him. They had given him up for dead, but he wasn't dead yet! God saved him!

God saw Jonah sinking into the sea as the waters closed above his head. He called a great fish, a sea monster, from the depths. That fish swallowed Jonah whole.

For three days and three nights, Jonah was in the belly of the fish. From the dark depths of the sea, his prayer ascended to God.

It was a humble, repentant prayer. Jonah's pride and disobedience had vanished. When the fish spit him out on dry land at God's command, Jonah felt as though he had risen from the dead. He saw the sun again and breathed fresh air. In great gratitude he worshiped God and praised Him for His amazing love.

Then the Word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach the message that I shall give you."

This time Jonah obeyed. God made him obey.

Jonah made the great journey willingly and arrived at the city's immense gates. The message he was to proclaim was this: "For-

ty more days, and Nineveh will be overthrown!"

That message was a source of joy to unforgiving Jonah. Assyria, that great enemy of Israel, would be destroyed!

Jonah walked through the streets of that immense city and pushed his way through the crowds — hundreds and thousands of people. Everywhere he made the same somber message heard: "Forty more days, and Nineveh will be overthrown!"

Jonah's words of judgment echoed in the ears of the people like the tolling of a bell. Time was running out. The people were dismayed as they listened to that strange prophet from Israel. No one dared to doubt the truth of his horrible warning. The people knew perfectly well why punishment was about to strike them.

The fear of death took hold of them. They forgot their work. They tore their clothes to show how sorry and upset they were.

When the prophet's message reached the king, he took off his beautiful royal robe and put on mourning garments. He sent his heralds through the streets with a decree: "No one — neither man nor animal — may eat or drink. All must repent of their sins and cry out to God for grace. Perhaps He will have mercy on us and turn aside His burning wrath so that we are not destroyed."

The people of Nineveh obeyed. The whole city repented. Their prayers rose to heaven like the smoke of an immense burnt offering. The cattle lowed hungrily in their stalls; the children cried and cried; the men beat their breasts in repentance; the women begged for mercy.

When God saw these signs of repentance, He had mercy on the people of Nineveh. He decided *not* to send the punishment He had announced.

199: A lesson for Jonah

When Jonah was finished preaching to Nineveh, he went to a hill outside the city and built himself a little hut. There he waited eagerly for Nineveh's judgment. He wanted to see it with his own eyes!

In his mind's eye, Jonah saw fire raining down from heaven on those pagan Assyrians. Perhaps the earth would be torn open. Then the entire accursed city would be swallowed up like a toy city erected by boys.

Jonah waited. The 40 days were over, but the sun still shone down on Nineveh every day. Finally he realized that God had had mercy on Nineveh. There would be no judgment.

The prophet who had experienced God's patient love in such an amazing way in his own life was bitterly disappointed that God had decided to spare the pagan Assyrians. Now the Assyrians might become a whip in God's hand to punish the people of Israel!

Jonah was angry. He cried out to God: "Lord, isn't this just what I feared before I came to Nineveh? That's why I wanted to flee to Tarshish, for I know that You are a merciful God. Now, Lord, take my life. I would rather die than go on living."

Jonah heard God's voice asking him patiently: "Is it right for you to be so angry, Jonah?"

Jonah thought he knew better than God. He thought that the Lord was the God of Israel but not the God of the other nations. Therefore God must love Israel alone and hate all of Israel's enemies. Because God now showed that he did *not* hate Nineveh, Jonah lay moaning on the ground, disappointed and angry at God.

Just then a small plant that had sprung from a tender seed pushed its head above

the ground. It was an amazing plant, for it grew rapidly before Jonah's eyes. It sprouted leaves, and in a few hours it became a tree with many branches. It provided Jonah with shade in the heat of the day. Jonah was delighted.

Early the next morning, God sent a worm to eat its way through the tree's root. A hot east wind dried up the leaves, and the tree withered.

Once more the burning sun beat down on Jonah's head. The heat was almost too much for him.

Now Jonah had something else to be angry about. Again he sulked, and again he heard God's patient voice addressing him: "Is it right for you to be so angry about the death of that amazing tree?"

Jonah answered boldly: "Of course I have a right to be angry! Why did that tree have to die?"

This gave God an opportunity to show His servant just how narrow-minded he was, how wrong he was to think of God's love in such limited terms. God said to him: "You wanted to spare that miraculous tree which grew up without any help from you in one night and also died suddenly. Then why shouldn't I spare Nineveh, that great city with more than 120,000 people who don't know their right hand from their left hand, and also many cattle?"

Many cattle? Those moving words echoed in Jonah's heart as he traveled back to his own land in shame. God loved even the animals! His mercy extended to such pagans as the Assyrians!

One day — although Jonah had no way of knowing this — God would show His love for the world in an even more glorious way. His Son would still the storm of His wrath. Just as Jonah spent three days in the belly of the sea monster, the Son of man

would be in the grave, in the heart of the earth, for three days. And just as Jonah was restored to the land of the living, God's Son would rise from the dead to become our Savior.

200: Amos warns Israel

Israel was enjoying a time of great prosperity. Jeroboam II was a mighty king. Under his rule, the land grew in power and wealth. For a while things had looked very dark for Israel, but now the sun of Israel's good fortune shone down from above.

The wealthy people and the leaders of Israel had few cares as they lay on their beds and couches inlaid with ivory. They rubbed costly, sweet-smelling oil on themselves and made music in their spacious houses. They drank wine from expensive glasses until their servants had to drag them to bed. When they woke up the next day, they started all over.

"We're doing just fine!" they laughed. "Let the poor suffer hunger and moan out in the streets. It's not our job to look after them. As long as we have our wealth, there's nothing to worry about."

That was the attitude throughout the entire land of Israel. Drunkenness was no longer a sin. Lying and cursing were commonplace. And if you could steal without getting caught, why not? People were out to get rich, using force, cunning, or any other method.

Of course there had to be some room for religion. After all, Israel was the people of God. After a week of sin, the people would put on pious faces and march off to Bethel and the other holy places to sing psalms and recite prayers and celebrate sacrificial

feasts. But when they were back home, it was business as usual again. Sin was the order of the day.

"We're doing just fine!" the Israelites said. "We are the people of God. When the day of the Lord comes, our land will become even richer and more powerful."

A poor sheep breeder named Amos appeared in Israel one day to warn the people. He lived in Tekoa, which was in the land of Judah, and he had left his flocks behind. He was just a simple, uneducated man, but God's Spirit made him wise. God Himself had taught Amos what to say.

The prophet from Judah stood before the wealthy people of Israel in his rough, simple garments. He announced the Lord's judgment in cutting language: "Woe to you who are at ease on the mountain of Samaria! Your palaces will be destroyed, and you will all go into exile. The day of the Lord will mean darkness for you — not light. You may be carefree now, but when the Lord goes through your midst, you will moan and wail and cry."

He went to Bethel and appeared bravely before the proud priests and the hypocrites offering their sacrifices. "You are on the path to ruin!" he cried. "Israel is no longer God's people. God would rather have no people at all than a sinful people like you! Thus says the Lord: 'I *hate* your feasts, and I cannot stand your solemn assemblies. I don't want to hear the racket of your songs. When you offered sacrifices to Me in the wilderness, did you also carry idols around? I will send you into exile beyond Damascus.'

Amos went all through the land of Israel and warned the people: "The end is coming! There is only one way left to escape it. Thus says the Lord: 'Seek *Me*, and live. Hate evil and love good.' Then the

Lord may yet be gracious to you.”

The people refused to listen to Amos. Instead they made fun of him. “Go back to Judah!” they shouted. “Preach to your own people.”

The high priest at Bethel contacted the king and made accusations against Amos. Then Amos had to leave. His warning to Israel had fallen on deaf ears.

201: The fall of Israel

Amos was not the only prophet who warned the people of Israel about their sins. Another prophet appeared on the scene and continued the work — Hosea.

Hosea was a man who suffered an enormous amount of sorrow in his own life. His wife, whom he loved deeply, was unfaithful and ran away from him. When she came back, he accepted her in love and forgave everything, but she was unfaithful to him again and finally left him to raise their children alone.

His son he called *Lo-ammi*, that is, *not my people*. His daughter was *Lo-ruhamah*, that is, *no mercy*. Hosea gave these names to his children as a warning to the people of Israel, who were being unfaithful to God just as Hosea’s wife was unfaithful to her husband. The results would be the same. God would have no mercy on the Israelites. They would not be His people.

Israel had been unfaithful to the Lord many times. Each time the Lord had taken Israel back in love. But soon it would be too late. Unless Israel repented, judgment would strike, just as Amos had prophesied. Long ago the Israelites had been slaves in Egypt. Now they would be slaves again — this time in Assyria.

That’s what Hosea told the people. He

begged them to repent and turn to the Lord, but they refused to listen.

Israel was even worse than Nineveh. When Jonah announced the judgment to come, Nineveh repented and God had mercy on the sinful city. But Israel did not repent.

Finally judgment struck. God had threatened judgment for a long time, and His prophets had warned the people repeatedly. Now God’s patience was exhausted.

Jeroboam II died. His son, who became king after him, was quickly chased away and killed. His murderer was the new king.

This murder was the beginning of a time of great unrest and confusion in Israel. Again and again there were disputes over the throne. The Assyrians saw their chance. They took advantage of the weakness and conquered much of Israel’s territory.

King Hoshea of Israel finally bowed before the Assyrians and bought them off with great gifts. The prophet Hosea had announced Israel’s fall, but King Hoshea believed that deliverance was still possible. He would save himself through cunning, he decided. He had promised to be faithful to Assyria, but in secret he made a treaty with Egypt.

When the Assyrians found out, it was the end for Israel. The entire land was conquered and plundered. Samaria was captured after a siege that lasted three years. The palaces were destroyed. The leaders of Israel and the wealthy people, those who thought only of themselves, were carried off into exile as slaves.

Most of Israel went into exile. Half-naked, chained together, forced to carry booty for the Assyrians, the Israelites were dragged off to the faraway land of the enemy.

That was the day of the Lord — the day of which they had such great expectations! The prophet Amos had warned them earnestly about that day — and rightly so. It turned out to be darkness — not light!

For years the land was desolate and forsaken. Only a few frightened Israelites were left living among the ruins. They built themselves modest houses and began to work the fields again.

In time the king of Assyria sent new inhabitants to Israel from all parts of his empire. Each group had its own language and its own god. These groups joined with the few Israelites that were left and formed a new heathen nation. This nation rebuilt Samaria and came to be called the Samaritans.

Although a priest in Bethel taught the Samaritans about the service of the Lord, they also served other gods. The land of Israel became a heathen land.

As for the Israelites, the nation that used to live in Israel, the nation that could have been prosperous and happy as the people of God — thousands of them died on that long, horrible journey to faraway Assyria. The survivors were scattered across the territory of the Assyrians and were never heard from again. That was the end of the kingdom of the ten tribes.

202: Isaiah

In the land of Judah lived a young man who loved the Lord. Idolatry and sin flourished all around him, but *he* remained faithful to God. Every day he saw how completely his people had forgotten the Lord. This caused him great pain.

One day, as he was kneeling in prayer, he



received a wonderful vision. He saw the heavens open. Before him stood the throne of God. It was shining, brighter than the sun. Above the throne, bathed in blinding light, was the Lord Himself. Holy angels with six wings surrounded Him. With two wings they covered their faces before God's blinding majesty. With two wings they covered their feet as tokens of respect. They used the remaining two wings to fly.

The angels called out to each other with

beautiful, melodious voices: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts. The whole earth is full of His glory."

Isaiah fell to the ground and trembled in fear and reverence. He sensed that he would have to die. "Woe is me," he cried, "for I must surely perish. I am a man of unclean lips, and I live in the midst of a sinful people. Yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!"

An angel descended to him with a glowing coal which he had taken from the altar with tongs. He pressed the glowing coal against Isaiah's lips. This did not cause Isaiah any pain. The angel said: "Now your guilt is taken away, and your sin is forgiven."

Your sin is forgiven! These glorious words filled Isaiah's soul. Joy and gratitude welled up within him.

At that moment he heard the voice of the Lord asking: "Whom shall I send to My people?"

Isaiah did not hesitate. He held out his hands and said reverently: "Here I am. Send me!"

The Lord said: "Go to My people and bring them the message I give you."

That's how Isaiah was called to be a prophet. God chose Isaiah as His messenger.

It was difficult work that God entrusted to Isaiah. He told the prophet in advance that the people would *not* repent. Most of the people would *hear* his words, but they would not understand them. They would *see* God's wonders, but they would not recognize them. They would be deaf and blind to God's love because their hearts had become hard and insensitive through sin.

However zealously Isaiah warned the people of Judah, they would still follow the people of Israel into exile because of their

horrible sins. Isaiah knew this; the Lord had told him in advance.

Isaiah also knew something else that gave him hope and courage for his difficult work: he knew that there would be an important difference between the history of the little kingdom of Judah and the history of the kingdom of the ten tribes. The ten tribes would be lost as a people and would be scattered in a foreign land; the northern kingdom of the ten tribes had no future. But Judah would *not* be completely lost: a small part of Judah would return from exile and never let go of God. The entire people would go into exile, but a small part would come back and live in the land again.

There was a future for Isaiah's people, a more glorious future than for any other people! From Isaiah's people would come the Messiah, the one who would deliver His people from their sins.

Faith in the Messiah's coming gave the prophet strength to continue his work. Because Isaiah knew about the glorious future awaiting God's people, it caused him great pain when the people of Judah were deaf to what they heard and blind to what they saw. He watched them as they headed for judgment, but their stubbornness did not make him lose hope and courage. He knew that the future was secure in the holy hands of God. That's why he named his son *Shear-jashub*, which means *a remnant will return*.

For the sake of that remnant, the group that would repent and return to the Lord, Isaiah preached tirelessly. For 60 years he continued his work, during the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah.

203: Judah's kings

The history of the people of Judah was a sorry spectacle. The people acted like a flock of sheep without a shepherd to guide them.

Their king was supposed to be their shepherd. If only he would listen to the voice of God and follow the proper path, the sheep would follow. But if he forsook the proper path and wandered into the darkness, the whole nation would lose its way.

Rehoboam, Judah's first king, was an unsteady man who did not love the Lord with an upright heart. Almost all the kings who followed him had the same weakness: they wavered. In the early years of their kingship, they usually tried to serve the Lord. But if things went well for them, they forgot who was responsible for their prosperity. They became proud of their own power and thought only of themselves. Then they led the people into sin.

That was the path Joash followed. He became king when he was only a boy holding the law of God in his little hands. By the time his reign was over, he was guilty of the murder of the prophet Zechariah, the son of his benefactor Jehoiada. Zechariah had aroused the king's wrath by speaking out about his sins.

Amaziah, who succeeded his father Joash as king, followed the same route. At first he served the Lord, but not with his whole heart. God blessed him in his battle against the Edomites, and he won a glorious victory. This foolish king then brought the idols of the enemy he had just defeated into his own country and bowed down before them. That was the end of his good fortune. He was defeated by the northern kingdom of Israel and murdered by his own servants

as he tried to flee.

Uzziah, his successor, also followed this pattern. Judah grew strong and powerful under his rule because he listened to God at first. Yet, prosperity again led the king and the nation to be unfaithful to the Lord.

In his pride Uzziah assumed that he could do as he pleased. On one of the feast days, he put on a beautiful garment and marched proudly into the temple's Holy Place, which only the priests were allowed to enter. He wanted to burn incense on the altar.

The priests tried to hold him back. The high priest ordered him to leave the Holy Place at once. But Uzziah would not obey; he responded with an angry refusal.

Then the priests saw something horrible happen. Attached to the high priest's turban was a gold plate inscribed: "Holy to the Lord." On the forehead of Uzziah, who also wanted to be a priest, they could see the first signs of a horrible sickness — leprosy! God had stricken Uzziah with leprosy to punish him for his sin.

The king fled from the temple. He was a leper to the day of his death. Therefore he had to live a life of isolation.

In the year that Isaiah was called to be a prophet, Uzziah's suffering finally came to an end: he died. His son Jotham, who had ruled as regent in place of his ailing father, became king.

Finally there was a good shepherd in Israel, but the sheep were no longer willing to follow. Jotham did not waver back and forth. Although he served the Lord uprightly all his life, the people were too deeply mired in sin to follow his example. They wandered farther and farther away from the Lord.

When Jotham died, he was succeeded by the most wicked, godless king Judah had

ever had. His name was Ahaz, and he led the people straight for destruction.

Ahaz was even more wicked than Israel's King Ahab. Ahab at least showed a little respect for Elijah's words, but Ahaz had no respect at all for God. He allowed the gold and silver to be stripped from the temple. He had the holy objects in the temple ground up. He had the altar taken out, and he nailed the doors of the temple shut so that no one could serve God there. But on the street corners of Jerusalem and throughout the land stood altars to Baal and Molech. Human sacrifices were offered in the valley of Hinnom, near Jerusalem! Ahaz even sacrificed one of his own children to Molech, the god of fire.

There was no way to bring this king to his senses. God sent enemies who devastated the land, but Ahaz did not repent. He sent Isaiah to warn him, but the king refused to listen. Ahaz simply assumed that he didn't need God. He preferred to call on the mighty king of Assyria for help.

The king of Assyria came as requested, and he chased Judah's enemies away. But in the process he conquered all of Judah himself. Ahaz was allowed to remain king, but only as a servant of the Assyrians.

Even this punishment taught Ahaz nothing. He became still more wicked and indifferent to God, and the people followed his example.

Deep darkness covered the land. Judah had become a heathen country.

204: Prophecies about the Messiah

The prophet Isaiah knew that there were still people in Judah who secretly served the Lord. He did not stop preaching. In

beautiful, pure language, he kept calling the people back to the Lord and warning of the punishment that was sure to come.

"The ox knows its owner," he cried out, "and the donkey recognizes its master's manger, but Israel does not understand. Woe to this sinful people!"

He used beautiful images to teach the people how wicked they had become and how severely they would be punished. He compared the people of God to a vineyard planted by God. "My friend had a vineyard on a fruitful hill," he said. "He dug up the ground and cleared away the stones. He planted it with the choicest vines. He built a watchtower in the vineyard and cut out a winepress. He expected the vineyard to produce good grapes, but it yielded bad grapes. Now then, inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between God and His vineyard. What else could God possibly have done for His vineyard? Why did it bring forth bad grapes when He had every reason to expect good grapes?"

"Thus says the Lord," Isaiah continued, "I want you to know what I shall do with My vineyard. I will break down the wall that surrounds it so that it will be destroyed and trampled underfoot. I will make the vineyard a wilderness and let the weeds take over. I will command the clouds not to let any rain fall on the vineyard."

"That vineyard of the Lord is the house of Israel," explained Isaiah, "and the men of Judah are the plants in which He takes pleasure. He was expecting good government, but He got blood government! He was expecting dedication to the law, but He got violation of the law!"

Whenever Isaiah talked about the Messiah, his words became a song. Then he no longer saw sin and indifference all around him; instead he saw the glorious



Kingdom of peace in which the Messiah would be King. He sang: “Unto us a Child is born; unto us a Son is given. And the government shall be upon His shoulders. And He shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

Isaiah was filled with longing for the coming Redeemer. The older he became, the more clearly he saw Him.

He knew that the Redeemer would be born of the line of Jesse and David. He would be born at a time when everyone assumed that David’s line had vanished. “A shoot shall come forth from the stump of Jesse!” sang Isaiah.

He saw that the Redeemer would comfort His people and bear all their sins: “Comfort, comfort My people, says your God. Speak to Jerusalem’s heart. Cry out to her that her time of suffering is over, that her iniquity is covered, that she has received double from the hand of the Lord for all her sins.”

Isaiah also realized that the Messiah would suffer heavily for the sins of His people and would die for them. He sang a beautiful song about this: “He has borne *our* infirmities and carried *our* sorrows. He was pierced for *our* transgressions, and bruised for *our* iniquities. The punishment that gives us peace was laid on Him. By *His* stripes we are healed.”

“All of us, like sheep, have gone astray,” Isaiah went on. “We have all followed our own way. But the Lord has laid upon Him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed and afflicted, yet He did not open His mouth. Like a lamb led to the slaughter and a sheep dumb before its shearers, He did not open His mouth.”

These were the songs Isaiah sang in the midst of the sin and misery of his dark age. That’s how a bird high in a tree sometimes sings when it’s dark and everyone is asleep. The bird sings because he is the first one to see the dawning of a new day on the far horizon.

Micah, another prophet who lived in Isaiah’s time, knew that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. “And you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,” he prophesied, “you may be small among the clans of Judah, but from you shall come forth the one who is to be the Ruler of Israel.”

The few faithful believers left in Judah listened carefully to God’s prophets. They did not despair, even though they realized that God’s people would reach glory only by following a path of great suffering. They believed that the shining Morning Star would make its appearance in a dark night of sin. They fixed their hopes on the Messiah, the sun of righteousness who would drive away the darkness.

205: Hezekiah's reformation

His father was King Ahaz of Judah, the murderer who had sacrificed one of his own children to an idol. Almost all the people around him as he grew up were wicked and godless. Yet young prince Hezekiah loved the Lord — a believing heart surrounded by corrupt souls, a beautiful, tender flower in a field full of ugly weeds. It was truly a divine miracle!

The situation in Judah looked grim. Enemies had destroyed and plundered the land. The Assyrians, whom King Ahaz called in for help, chased the enemies away, but then they conquered Judah themselves. They forced the kingdom of Judah to pay tribute to the Assyrian king in Nineveh every year.

Hezekiah understood that these calamities were punishment for the sins of his father and of the whole people. The land was full of idols, but the Lord's temple was closed. It appeared that there was no one left to serve the Lord.

Hezekiah was powerless while his father Ahaz reigned. He was only the crown prince. But he did serve the Lord personally and prayed for deliverance.

When Hezekiah was 25 years old, his father died. A God-fearing young man then became king over a godless country.

He knew that there was only one way to save his people — a reformation, a return to God. That was the goal to which he devoted his life.

Reform seemed impossible, for the people had wandered very far away indeed. But Hezekiah set about his great task passionately. The love in his heart drove him on.

He had the doors of the temple opened. He called the priests and Levites together

and ordered them to purify the temple. They were to remove the corruption introduced by Ahaz and put everything back in order. It took them weeks. Load after load of smashed idols and other impurities was dragged away to the brook Kidron outside the city.

After that the smoke of the first offerings rose from the purified temple — a great sin offering for the guilt of the people. The singers sang their song of praise. The people kneeled in adoration in the outer court. Even the king kneeled down among the people. There was great joy in his heart.

It was too late in the year for the Passover. But Hezekiah, who was burning with zeal for the Lord, sent messengers everywhere, throughout Israel as well as Judah, and called the people together in Jerusalem. "Let us all come together to celebrate the Passover a month after the usual time," he decreed. "Let us repent, for God is gracious and merciful. He will not turn His face away from us if we return to Him."

There were many who made fun of the messengers. But there were also many who obeyed. From all directions the people streamed toward Jerusalem. A large, happy crowd celebrated the great feast of deliverance.

The Passover feast lasted for seven days. When the seven days were over, the people had not yet had enough of holy joy, so the feast went on for another seven days. Thus this Passover lasted twice as long as usual. There was great joy in Jerusalem, for such a thing had not been seen there since the days of Solomon.

Finally the people said their goodbyes and went home, happy and thankful that a new day was dawning. They knew that their prayers had been answered and that

God wished to dwell in their midst again.

"Axes chopped down the sacred poles before which the people had kneeled so often. The high places on which sacrifices had been offered were leveled. The altars to the idols were smashed. Even the bronze serpent that Moses had made in the wilderness was destroyed, for the people had worshiped it as if it were a god.

Prosperity returned to Judah in the wake of Hezekiah's reformation. Israel was destroyed and plundered bare by the Assyrians; the kingdom of the ten tribes was gone. Yet, Judah began to flourish again. The Philistines were defeated so completely that they no longer entered the country every year for purposes of plunder. Judah grew stronger year by year.

Hezekiah had one great wish: he wanted to free God's people completely of foreign domination. Therefore he stopped sending Assyria the yearly tribute imposed during the time of Ahaz.

He understood that the Assyrians would march on Jerusalem to punish him. He hoped to defeat them, for the nations around Judah were also beginning to rebel against Assyria. Above all, he counted on God's help.

206: Hezekiah's illness and recovery

Hezekiah was in the midst of his plans and activities when he fell ill. He had hoped to reform Judah completely and free the country from Assyrian domination, but now he was afflicted by a deadly disease — a great sore that simply would not go away. His strength ebbed quickly.

He saw the sun shining brightly through the window of his palace. He saw it

gleaming on the sundial that the Assyrians had built. He saw the shadow cast by the pillar move steadily, creeping ahead to mark the passing of the hours.

He thought of all that he still wanted to do for his country and his people. In despair he watched the hours slip by unused. He had to lie on his bed, idle, weak as a child, waiting for either recovery or death.

Then he saw the door of his bedroom open. In walked the prophet Isaiah. He looked at the king earnestly. There was sadness in his voice as he spoke: "Thus says the Lord: 'Set your house in order and say goodbye to your family, for you shall die.'"

You shall die! Those horrible words kept ringing in Hezekiah's ears after Isaiah left. Hezekiah would die — when he had such wonderful plans for Judah!

The king was wringing his hands in despair. He couldn't face it or accept it. It was too soon! He was not afraid of death, but what about the work he had undertaken, the work freeing his people from foreign domination and bringing them back to God? That life's work was far from done! How could the Lord take him away at such a time?

Sin and godlessness were not yet rooted out — far from it! Soon the king of Assyria would march on Israel. And Hezekiah didn't even have a son to succeed him on the throne.

The king turned his face to the wall and wept, giving free rein to his feelings. "O Lord," he prayed, "spare me! Remember that I have always done my best to serve You uprightly."

His prayer ascended to the throne of God. Isaiah was still on the temple grounds when the Word of the Lord came to him once more. "Go back to Hezekiah, the

ruler of My people, with a message," he was told.

Soon Isaiah stood before the king again: "Thus says the Lord, the God of your father David: 'I have heard your prayer, and I have seen your tears. Behold, I will heal you. On the third day you shall rise and go to the house of the Lord. I will add fifteen years to your life, and I will save this city from the power of Assyria's king.'"

This answer to prayer was almost too much for Hezekiah. He had set his mind on dying, but now the prophet told him that he would *live*.

He looked at Isaiah with tears in his eyes. He couldn't quite believe it, however much he wanted to believe. "Give me a sign that this will surely be," he begged.

The prophet looked out the window and asked patiently: "Take your choice. Do you want the shadow on the sundial to go forward ten paces or back ten paces?"

"Let it go back," Hezekiah answered. "It goes forward every day."

After the prophet prayed, the king saw to his great joy and amazement that the shadow on the sundial was moving backwards. It was noon but the retreating shadow suggested that it was early morning. The sun shone directly on the dark shadow without dispelling it.

When Hezekiah saw that miracle, he believed in the miracle of his healing. Isaiah ordered that a cake of figs be placed on the king's sore, and Hezekiah was healed. Three days later, just as Isaiah had prophesied, the grateful king climbed the hill to the temple and bowed down before God.

207: Hezekiah's foolish pride

The news of Hezekiah's miraculous recovery spread through the entire country. It was discussed eagerly at the markets and the city gates. The news even accompanied the caravans traveling across Judah's borders to faraway lands.

Soon emissaries arrived in Judah from Babylon. They brought Hezekiah gifts and a letter from their king. The Babylonian king congratulated Hezekiah on his recovery.

With mouths wide open, the people of Jerusalem stared at the distinguished emissaries and their gifts. Hezekiah received them with joy and pride in his heart.

"Isn't that something!" he thought. "Even this powerful king ruling a faraway land has heard of me and wishes to make friends with me! Since he is also an enemy of the Assyrians, he may want to make an alliance with me to combat Assyria."

Hezekiah forgot that the Lord had already assured him that *He* would deliver Judah from Assyria. He should have trusted in the Lord alone. Instead he showed the emissaries his treasures and his stores of weapons. He tried to make them think that it would be worthwhile for the Babylonians to make an alliance with Judah's mighty king.

Once the emissaries were on their way to Babylon again, Isaiah came to Hezekiah and asked: "What did those men say, and where did they come from?"

Hezekiah answered: "They came from a faraway land, from Babylon."

Isaiah asked: "What did they see in your palace?"

He replied openly: "They saw everything in my palace. I showed them all my

treasures.”

The prophet said sadly: “Hear the Word of the Lord: ‘Behold, the day shall come when everything in your palace is carried away to Babylon. Your sons will be carried away to become servants in the palace of Babylon’s king.’”

Hezekiah bowed his head in sorrow. Now he understood how sinful it was for him to forget about God. He realized that he had been foolish to show off his treasures and make those foreigners desire them. Still, he had one comfort: as long as he lived, there would be peace and security for Judah.

Even that comfort soon seemed in doubt. The mighty king of Babylon, to whom Hezekiah had looked in such deep respect, was completely defeated by the Assyrians. The Assyrians then marched on Hezekiah’s kingdom. All the small nations around Judah, on whom Hezekiah had relied for support, were conquered. Judah was overrun by the enemy. Only Jerusalem remained free.

There, behind the heavy gates and the walls that had been strengthened hastily, the people were safe for the present. But they were locked up like birds in a cage. Anyone who wanted to leave the city was driven back by the enemy. There was plenty of water in Jerusalem, but how long would the food hold out?

Hezekiah was terrified. He sent a message to mighty King Sennacherib, who had set up his tents near Lachish. He begged him to lift the siege and leave Judah alone, promising to give Sennacherib whatever he wanted.

Sennacherib demanded so much money that Hezekiah had to gather all the gold and silver in the temple and the palace. He even cut the overlaid gold from the temple

doors and the overlaid silver from the pillars set up by Solomon. Gone were the treasures of which Hezekiah had been so proud!

Even this desperate measure did not save Judah. Sennacherib accepted the treasures, but he did not leave Judah alone, as he had promised. He wanted more than Hezekiah’s gold — he wanted the whole city of Jerusalem! He would not leave Jerusalem in the hands of a king who refused to subject himself completely to Assyria.

Hezekiah was in a fix — because of his foolish pride!

208: God’s answer to Sennacherib

Sennacherib was determined to capture Jerusalem. He sent his most important servants to march on the city with a strong army. The field marshal was in charge.

This commander stood before Jerusalem’s gate at the head of his army of thousands of heavily armed Assyrians. He looked proud enough to be the king himself. Hezekiah had sent some of his servants to hear the Assyrian commander’s message. The commander faced those servants and the people gathered on the walls of the city. He stared at them scornfully.

“Listen,” he shouted, using the language of the people of Judah, “this is what the great king, the king of Assyria, says to you: ‘What are you counting on while you’re locked within Jerusalem’s walls? Why don’t you give up? In whom do you trust, that you think you can rebel against *me*? Do you suppose that Egypt will come and help you? Egypt is a broken reed that will pierce the hand of anyone who leans on it. Do you put your trust in your own army? I will give

you 2000 horses if you can supply riders for them! Are you going to tell me that you put your trust in Yahweh? Yahweh will help *us* — and not you!”

The people on the wall trembled at this bold, proud language. Hezekiah's servants were uneasy. “Speak to us in your own language,” they said to the Assyrian commander. “We understand it. Don't let the people on the walls hear what you are saying!”

This gave the commander even more reason to address himself directly to the people. “Don't let Hezekiah deceive you,” he shouted. “He cannot deliver you from our power. Surrender the city, and we will treat you well. Hezekiah is misleading you when he tells you that Yahweh will save you.”

The people were silent. They said nothing in return, for the king had commanded them not to answer. Hezekiah's servants returned to him trembling, with torn clothes.

Hezekiah also trembled and tore his clothes when he heard the message. He knew that the Lord was the only one who could save the city in this hour of supreme peril.

He went to the temple in his mourning clothes and fell down before the Lord. He begged for forgiveness for trusting in treasures and people. He pleaded with the Lord to save Judah.

The king sent officials to Isaiah to ask him to pray for the country. The officials returned with a glorious message: “Thus says the Lord: ‘Do not fear the words which this servant of Assyria's king has used to slander Me. The king of Assyria will return to his own land. I will cut him down with the sword when he is back in his own country.’”

The gates of the city remained locked to the Assyrians, but Sennacherib did not give up. He sent Hezekiah a letter. This letter contained even more proud, godless talk than the speech made by the commander at Jerusalem's gate. The letter was so full of blasphemy that Hezekiah hardly knew what to do with it.

“Don't let your God, in whom you trust, deceive you!” the letter said. “Have other gods been able to save their lands? How is Yahweh any different?”

Hezekiah took the letter to the temple and spread it out before him as he kneeled in prayer. The letter cried out to heaven. God Himself would have to read it and send the proud king of Assyria an answer.

Then Isaiah sent an even more glorious message to Hezekiah. Proud Sennacherib thought that he was the king of the world, that he was a god. But he was really no more than an animal in the power of his keeper. The Lord had allowed him great success with his armies because He wanted certain nations to be punished for their sins. Now that Sennacherib had risen up against God Himself and dared to slander His name, he would be led around like a wild animal on a chain. “He will not get into the city,” Isaiah declared. “He will not even shoot an arrow into the city.”

That night the angel of the Lord descended from heaven and went through the Assyrian camp, bringing God's answer to Sennacherib's letter. By morning, the ground was covered with dead soldiers — thousands and thousands of them. There was not much left of the shining Assyrian army.

The proud Assyrian king fled from that horrible place in terror and went back to his own country. A few years later, as he was kneeling before the idol he worshiped,

his own sons murdered him.

In life Sennacherib had despised God. Now his own children despised him. The nations cheered at the news of his murder. That was the end of God's proud enemy.

Hezekiah lived on in peace and safety until the fifteen years God had promised him were over. When he died, the whole land of Judah mourned the passing of this pious king, for he died as a child of God.

209: King Manasseh

Pious King Hezekiah was dead — and it appeared that the fear of the Lord had died along with him. He had tried to lead the people of Judah along the right path, but most of them followed only unwillingly, looking back longingly at the sinful pleasures of earlier years. Their *hearts* were far away from God.

When Hezekiah's son Manasseh became king, he went back to the old path that led away from God. The people followed eagerly. Now they could again enjoy sin undisturbed.

Manasseh looked like his grandfather, godless Ahaz, but he was an even worse sinner. Judah and the temple were full of idols again. In the Valley of Hinnom, near Jerusalem, the cry of children being sacrificed in the flames was heard once more. Like Ahaz before him, Manasseh offered one of his own children as a sacrifice. The blood of those who were faithful to the Lord flowed through Jerusalem's streets. Isaiah may have been one of the victims.

The Lord was patient with Manasseh for a long time. For almost 50 years He kept warning him. Finally the punishment came.

The Assyrians had conquered Judah again during Manasseh's reign. Now they marched on Jerusalem with an army and captured Manasseh. They dragged him away bound by two bronze chains — the same king who had caused God's prophets such pain. He was brought to Babylon, where the king of Assyria was at the time, and was locked in a prison.

When Manasseh was alone day after day with his sorrowful memories, light broke through the darkness of his prison cell. He thought about God and about his pious father Hezekiah. He thought about his own child, whom he had murdered, and about the other innocent blood he had shed. As the sins of his long, godless life passed clearly in review, he cried out in repentance and pain. Weeping, he begged for forgiveness.

Then God showed once again that no one is too sinful to be forgiven. The angels rejoiced at this sinner who repented, and God relented. The Father in heaven took His lost child by the hand and forgave him.

Manasseh was happier in prison than he had been as king in his own palace. Later the king of Assyria freed him, and he returned to Jerusalem, where he was allowed to reign again. This time he served God as king.

In the last years of his life, however, he could not undo all the damage he had done in half a century of wickedness. Those he had murdered did not return to life. And the people who had followed him into sin refused to be led back to God.

Manasseh had been saved at the eleventh hour, but it was too late to save the nation. The people moved ahead toward destruction and ruin, like a blinded horse in full gallop.

When Manasseh died, his wicked son

Amon became king. In a few short years, Amon destroyed what Manasseh had managed to restore.

210: King Josiah

There was one more king in Judah who tried to save the people from destruction. His name was Josiah, and he was Amon's son.

Josiah trusted in the Lord in a childlike way. He was the last pious king to rule over Judah. He was zealous and faithful like Hezekiah, and courageous and God-fearing like David.

Once more the idols were smashed, the altars destroyed, and the temple purified. Once more the Passover feast was restored to its place in the nation's life. The altar in Bethel was finally eliminated, as a prophet had foretold so long before.

One day when the workmen were busy restoring the temple walls, the priest Hilkiah found a book of the law of Moses. That book had been lost and forgotten many years before.

He gave it to Shaphan, the king's scribe. Shaphan brought it to King Josiah and read it to him. The book spoke of the great blessings God would give His people if they served Him zealously. It also told of horrible punishments that would come if they forgot the Lord.

Josiah tore his clothes in sorrow, for now he finally understood just how far the people had wandered away from God. He sent his servants to the prophetess Huldah to ask her: if all the words in the book would come true.

The somber answer was: "Go back to Josiah and give him this message from the



Lord: 'Because the people have forgotten Me, I will bring down calamities upon this place and its inhabitants — all that is written in the book which the king of Judah has read. But Josiah himself will die in peace. Because he has loved Me, he will not live to see this misfortune.'

Josiah no longer had any reason to hope that he could save his people. Still, he continued to serve the Lord.

God blessed him and made him prosperous and allowed him to rule in peace. The Assyrians did not cause him any problems. Their great empire was conquered and their mighty capital city of Nineveh was destroyed. Never would they return to frighten Israel.

The people of Judah rejoiced. They

thought that they would be free of foreign domination forever.

But Jeremiah, a prophet sent by God, went through the land and cried out that another enemy would come, an even more powerful and cruel enemy. This new enemy would bring about the destruction of the people of Judah. The people did not believe Jeremiah.

Josiah did not live long enough to see that day. He died in battle against Egypt, and the people mourned him. They did not understand why Josiah should have to die after serving the Lord so faithfully.

The believers understood. God had taken Josiah away to spare him the horrible things that were about to happen.

211: Jeremiah's calling

Jeremiah was a young man living with his father, the priest Hilkiah, in the village of Anathoth, which was not far from Jerusalem. Almost all of Judah had forsaken the Lord, but the Lord still wanted to warn His people once more.

He looked for someone to be His servant. He wanted someone who could make the light of His Word shine in the darkness of Judah.

God can see into any human heart. He knows what lives in the hearts of the rich and the poor, the great and the small. He chose Jeremiah because there was love for the Lord in his young heart.

Jeremiah was frightened when he heard the voice of the Lord telling him that he was to become God's prophet. "Lord, Lord," he said anxiously, "I cannot speak. I am too young."

God replied: "Don't say that, Jeremiah,

for you shall speak the words I give you. Fear not, for I will be with you to protect you. You will always be safe and invincible, like a fortified city, like a bronze wall."

There stood Jeremiah with his life ahead of him. Few people have ever faced such a difficult task. Others would go on living happily, unconcerned about sin, for they did not know what was coming. But Jeremiah knew. His eyes had been opened by God. As he looked into the future, he saw war, famine, enemies, imprisonment, misery — nothing but misfortune.

That was the message Jeremiah was supposed to bring — a message of doom! There was almost no light in his message, for there was nothing but sin in the land.

How angry the people would be when they heard his message! How they would hate Jeremiah, the prophet of doom who foretold nothing but misery!

Bravely Jeremiah began his dangerous work. He went through Anathoth and Jerusalem, prophesying about the coming of a great enemy from the north, an enemy who would carry the people of Judah away to his own land.

His young eyes were full of sorrow. His voice was somber: "Alas! Alas! The whole land will be destroyed!"

When Jeremiah started his preaching, Josiah was still king and things were going well in Judah. But Josiah died in battle. His son Jehoahaz succeeded him but was carried away to Egypt as a prisoner after reigning for three months.

Jehoiakim, another son of Josiah, now came to the throne. During his reign the enemy from the north appeared, just as Jeremiah had foretold. The Chaldeans came, and the first exiles, including some princes, were dragged away to Babylon. One of the princes was named Daniel.

Jehoiakim, the godless king, was spared. He became a vassal of Babylon. He and his counselors hoped for revenge and for freedom for Judah. The people offered sacrifices in the temple and pretended to be very zealous in their desire to serve the Lord. The Lord would protect them, they thought. That they lied and stole and committed other horrible sins outside the temple didn't seem to matter. They would simply bring offerings to cover those sins.

Jeremiah, who was a grown man by then, told them otherwise. "Why do you offer sacrifices now?" he cried out. "Straighten out your lives! Then the Lord will be your God again. And don't be so sure that the temple of the Lord will never be destroyed. Go to Shiloh once and see what happened there! Shiloh was a holy place too, the site of the tabernacle, but what is left of it now? The temple will likewise be destroyed!"

The priests and the people listened to hear what Jeremiah had to say, but when he declared that the temple would be destroyed, they flew at him in a rage to murder him. The rulers of Judah and the king's counselors heard the noise and intervened quickly.

Jeremiah was saved, but his preaching had been in vain. Now he knew how difficult his calling was.

212: Jeremiah's message

The people rejected Jeremiah's preaching, but that didn't stop him. He went right on speaking out.

One day he walked through the city with a jug in his hand. He threw it down at the feet of the priests and leaders. It broke into

little pieces. Then they heard his voice, harsh and threatening: "Thus says the Lord: 'I will break this city and this people to pieces, just as one breaks a potter's vessel into so many pieces that it cannot be repaired, for My people refuse to listen to My Word.'"

This message, too, fell on deaf ears. Jeremiah was whipped and put in jail. The preacher of doom would have to learn to hold his tongue.

Jeremiah refused to remain silent. The next morning, when he was freed, he started preaching again.

Jeremiah also tried to open the eyes of the people in another way. He was no longer allowed to enter the temple, but the people there would hear his words anyway! His faithful friend Baruch, who was a prominent citizen, took down his words on a scroll and read them in the house of the Lord.

The princes of Judah heard the words of Jeremiah and summoned Baruch. They sent the scroll containing Jeremiah's words to the king. Among the princes were some good men who advised Baruch to flee quickly and go into hiding with Jeremiah.

Jehoiakim, the king, was sitting by a fire in the winter palace. It was a cold day. He had the words of Jeremiah read aloud. Whenever three or four columns were finished, the king would cut them off and throw them into the fire. At last the whole scroll was consumed by the flames.

"Arrest that Baruch," he commanded, "and also Jeremiah, the prophet who prophesies nothing but doom."

The king's servants searched the entire city, but they could not find the two men. The Lord kept them hidden.

Jeremiah did not give up. Immediately he dictated another scroll to Baruch. This

time he used even more cutting, threatening language.

Yet, although his warnings were in vain, he continued faithfully with the work God had given him to do.

Soon after this, Nebuchadnezzar, the mighty king of Babylon, marched on Judah because Jehoiakim rebelled. Jehoiakim died when the city was besieged, and his son Jehoiachin surrendered after three months and begged for mercy.

Jehoiachin, his wife, his mother, and thousands of others were carried off to Babylon — the second deportation. They were driven along unmercifully in great herds down dusty roads. They trudged on day after day under the hot sun, groaning under the load of the loot seized by their enemies, including the treasures of their own temple. Many died along the way of exhaustion, hunger and thirst.

The survivors became exiles in Babylon. There they yearned for their own city and their own people, but it was too late.

213: An alliance with Egypt

When Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem and deported many of its people, Jeremiah stayed behind, and so did some others. Now his life was even more difficult than before.

The punishment he had foretold for so long had actually come. The foolish people cursed him and blamed him for it. They were even less willing to listen to him. “Why should we serve the Lord?” they asked. “He didn’t protect us when Nebuchadnezzar came.”

The people were living under the rule of Judah’s last king — Zedekiah. Zedekiah

was also a son of Josiah, but he was not the man his father was. Josiah loved the Lord, but Zedekiah turned his back on Him. Josiah was an unshakable rock, but Zedekiah was a frail reed that bent with any wind.

Zedekiah did whatever his godless advisors wanted. In his foolishness he hastened the judgment on his people. He had sworn to be faithful to the king of Babylon, but in secret he made an alliance with Egypt, hoping to free Judah of Babylonian control through Egypt’s help.

Jeremiah warned Zedekiah, but he would not listen. One day the prophet put a heavy wooden yoke on his own neck, the kind of yoke that oxen used to wear. He walked through the city with this yoke to make it clear to the people that Judah would have to continue wearing Babylon’s yoke.

He went into the temple wearing the yoke. In the temple was another man who called himself a prophet — Hananiah. Hananiah tore the yoke from Jeremiah’s shoulders and broke it. “That’s what the Lord will do to Babylon’s yoke!” he declared.

The Lord put an answer in Jeremiah’s mouth: “Thus says the Lord: ‘You have broken a wooden yoke, but I will make an iron yoke to take its place. And you, Hananiah — you have not been sent by the Lord. Because you have made the people trust in lies, you will be dead before this year is over!’”

Two months later, Hananiah was dead. Then all the people could see that Jeremiah had spoken the Word of the Lord. But they still didn’t listen!

Not long afterward, Nebuchadnezzar’s army appeared before the city of Jerusalem for the third time. The country was

devastated and plundered. Jerusalem held out, but it was surrounded. Pharaoh, Judah's ally, was nowhere in sight!

In great fear, the king sent emissaries to Jeremiah and asked him to pray for deliverance. Jeremiah's answer did not give the king any hope. The enemy would take the city and burn it, he declared. His advice was to flee from the city, for God was with the enemy.

Again the people did not believe him. Instead they looked to Egypt for deliverance.

214: Jeremiah in prison

The picture looked grim for Judah. Nebuchadnezzar's army was camped outside Jerusalem, and there was no sign of relief from Egypt.

Then, one day, the whole city of Jerusalem rejoiced. The enemy withdrew to the south to meet a great army approaching from Egypt. Egypt had come through at last! Now Nebuchadnezzar would be defeated, and the city would be spared!

Jeremiah knew that the enemy would soon be back. Therefore he decided to leave Jerusalem and go to the village of Anathoth. But he was arrested at the city gate by the commander of the guard. "Traitor!" the commander shouted. "What are you planning to do — go to the Babylonian camp to tell our enemies about conditions in Jerusalem?"

Jeremiah declared that he had no such intention, but he was dragged away. He was brought before Jerusalem's rulers, who quickly passed judgment on him. After he was whipped, he was locked up in the house of Jonathan the scribe, which had been turned into a makeshift prison.

There he sat in his pain, robbed of his freedom, his back covered with blood. For all he knew, he would die in prison. That was the reward his people gave him for his love and faithfulness.

Jeremiah was locked up in that dark prison for a long time. Hardly a ray of sunlight penetrated to his cell. Was the city being besieged? Was it already in the hands of the Babylonians? Jeremiah didn't know. All he knew was that God was with him and would watch over him.

One day, after months of imprisonment, the door of his cell swung open. He stumbled outside, pale and thin. He was taken to the palace by one of the king's servants.

Zedekiah had summoned the prophet to ask him a question. Pharaoh had been defeated, and the king of Babylon was besieging the city again. The king brought Jeremiah into his palace in secret and asked: "Is there any word from the Lord?"

Again Jeremiah, that great servant of God, showed how courageous he was. His imprisonment had ruined his health and robbed him of his strength, but his faith and courage remained unshaken. Speaking in his usual bold way, he answered: "Yes, there is. You will fall into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar."

Then he made a request of the king: "Please don't send me back to the house of the scribe Jonathan, for I might die there."

The king took pity on Jeremiah and had him imprisoned in a different building instead, a building with a courtyard. There he was treated better and could get a little exercise every day by taking a walk. He was given bread to eat — until there was no more bread. Then Jeremiah and all the people went hungry.

The siege had lasted more than a year, and Jerusalem was in desperate straits.

People who had once been wealthy now lay in the streets, half-crazed by hunger. They became delirious with joy whenever they found a moldy crust of bread. The city's leading ladies, who used to go through the streets in costly clothes and a cloud of incense, thinking only of themselves and their pleasures, now clawed through heaps of rubbish in hopes of finding something, anything to eat. The children cried out constantly for bread.

Still, the rulers did not believe that all was lost. They refused to face the fact that the Lord might allow His holy temple to fall into the hands of the enemy.

That temple was no longer holy. The people had profaned it with their sins, and the Lord had forsaken it long ago. He did not want to be the God of Judah anymore.

Only Jeremiah knew that there was no way out. As he stood in the inner courtyard, he cried out to the people beyond the walls and told them to flee to the enemy. Then their lives would at least be spared. Anyone who remained in the city would be subject to hunger, the sword and pestilence.

The officers heard Jeremiah's words and went to the king in a rage. "Let this man be put to death," they argued, "for his words undermine the morale of our soldiers and of the whole population."

Zedekiah, that weakling, gave in. "I'm not in a position to stop you," he said helplessly.

Jeremiah was thrown into a pit in the inner court where he had walked every day for exercise. There was no water in the pit, but there was lots of slime. The officers watched him sink slowly into the slimy mud. Surely he would soon be dead.

The Lord intervened to save His servant. When Jeremiah was completely forsaken by

his own people, a foreigner, a black man named Ebed-melech, took pity on him. This Ethiopian went to the king, who was at one of the city gates, and told him what had happened, asking permission to rescue Jeremiah.

The king, who always gave in when people pressed him, gave his consent. He even provided three men to help Ebed-melech.

It was not easy to rescue Jeremiah, for he had already sunk a long way into the mud. Ebed-melech lowered thick ropes and bits of torn clothing into the pit. "Put the rags between your armpits and the ropes, Jeremiah," he called out.

Jeremiah did as he was told. With great effort, the four men pulled him out of the pit. He was safe again!

215: Judah's fall

After Jeremiah was pulled out of the pit, the king summoned him once more to ask his advice.

"The only chance you have," the prophet told him, "is to surrender. Then your life will be spared, and the city will *not* be burned."

Zedekiah was no leader. He was afraid that the officers and princes would laugh at him if he surrendered. He thought only of himself; he did not think of the people, who had already suffered so much and were crazed with hunger. The gates of the city remained closed.

The siege lasted eighteen months. Then the horrible end finally came.

Nebuchadnezzar's army broke through the wall and poured into the city. Zedekiah tried to flee during the night, but he was



arrested at Jericho and dragged before the cruel Babylonian king.

The princes of Judah, including his own sons, were murdered before his eyes. That was the last sight Zedekiah was allowed to see: his own eyes were gouged out. Bound with bronze chains, he was dragged along to Babylon.

In the city of Jerusalem, that sinful city where God's Word had been rejected time and again, the blood flowed freely. The houses were burned, and the walls were pulled down. The beautiful temple went up

in flames. There was nothing left of Jerusalem but a glowing heap of ruins. For the last time, a herd of thousands of people was assembled to be driven to Babylon.

Jeremiah was in that herd. But when Babylon's king found out that Jeremiah had advocated surrender all along, he let him go free. Jeremiah could either come to Babylon, where he would be rewarded, or stay behind.

He chose to stay behind. He could not tear himself away from his country, even though it was ruined. The Babylonians

gave him some food and a gift and let him go.

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem!" wailed his aching heart. Foxes and jackals ran across the site where sacrifices had once been offered to God. Vultures circled above the ruins looking for dead bodies.

Jeremiah wandered sadly through the land and sang a lament about the misery of the people. Yet he knew that a new day would dawn after this dark night.

Jeremiah was not the only one left behind in Judah; there were others. But the few remaining Jews did not feel safe there anymore. They migrated to Egypt, against Jeremiah's advice, and took the prophet with them.

In Egypt Jeremiah continued to live and work among his people. And Egypt was where he died.

Jeremiah had started preaching even before he was a man, and he did not stop preaching until death sealed his lips. He had lived a difficult life full of sorrow.

When Jeremiah proclaimed the Word of the Lord, there was almost no one who listened and did as he said. But the exiles in the faraway land of Babylon now thought back to his words and fixed their hopes on the deliverance of which he had spoken in his prophecies.

216: God's people in exile

God's people were in exile. They often gathered along the rivers of Babylon and moaned about their fate. In the evenings, when the day's hard work was done, they would look wistfully toward the sun as it sank slowly below the western horizon.

Far away to the west lay their own land,

the land where they could have lived free and happy lives. There lay the ruins of their beautiful city. Whenever they thought of Jerusalem, they became homesick.

"Sing us one of the songs of Zion," the Babylonians would ask them.

"How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" they would reply. Then they would sigh to themselves: "If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither!"

They sat like birds crowded together in a cage. They couldn't sing anymore. They felt like hanging their harps in the willow trees.

But there was still comfort for them. God had not forsaken His people. Prophets had been sent along into exile. The prophets could sing because they saw beyond the sadness of the present.

One of those prophets, Ezekiel, sang of the strange and beautiful visions God had given him. He sang of the day of deliverance that would dawn after 70 years of exile. He sang of dead, dry bones that were turned into living human beings by the Spirit of God. He sang of a stream of life that would spring from the mountain of the temple and turn even the Dead Sea into a fertile plain.

The exiles did not always understand Ezekiel, but it became clear to them that God's people would not be buried in exile forever. One day His people would rise again and return to their own land. Then a new and very beautiful time would begin. Those who believed this message dried their tears as they waited and hoped.

Another prophet in exile was Daniel. He was one of the first to be deported to Babylon. In Jerusalem he had been a prince, but in Babylon he was only a slave at first.

King Nebuchadnezzar had the leading

young men from the conquered nations brought to his palace to serve him. This haughty king swelled with pride at the thought of having princes as servants in his palace.

Daniel and his three friends Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah were brought to the court. There they would undergo a three-year training period. Then they would become servants of the king.

The young men were given different names. Daniel became Beltshazzar, and the three friends were renamed Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. They were given lessons in various sciences and in the language of Babylon. They were fed food from the king's own table. The king's steward was responsible for looking after them.

Daniel and his three friends were pious young men determined to serve God even in exile. There were certain foods on the king's table that they would not eat because those foods were forbidden in the laws of Moses. "Please give us vegetables and water instead," they asked.

The king's steward did not want to make things difficult for them, but he could not agree to their request. "I'm afraid that the king would complain that you don't look as healthy as the other young men," he replied. "Then he would punish me."

Finally he agreed to try it for ten days. Each day he brought vegetables and water to Daniel and his three friends. When the ten days were over, they looked even healthier and stronger than the young men who had eaten the king's food.

The steward was content. They were welcome to their simple diet. And God blessed the four young men who insisted on being faithful to His laws.

When the three-year training period was

over and all the young men were brought before the king, Daniel and his three friends demonstrated more wisdom and insight than any of the others. Therefore they were chosen for the king's service.

217: Nebuchadnezzar's dream

Serving the king of Babylon was dangerous, for the proud tyrant Nebuchadnezzar did as he pleased with his servants. To him they were no more valuable than animals. Their lives were always in peril.

One night he had an amazing dream that upset him so much that he couldn't get back to sleep. He knew that the dream meant something, and he lay awake wondering about it until morning. Then he summoned his scholars, magicians and soothsayers. These men claimed to know the will of the gods. They could foretell the future from the course of the stars.

They came in great haste and bowed before the king. The king said to them: "I had a dream, and now I want you to tell me its meaning."

Respectfully the wise men and magicians responded: "O king, live forever! Tell your servants the dream, and we will give you the interpretation."

This the king refused to do. He did not trust his scholars and magicians. It was all too easy for them to make up an interpretation. The king had no way of knowing whether it was indeed the correct interpretation. If they were really magicians and knew the will of the gods, they should also be able to find out what he had dreamed. Therefore he said: "You're stalling for time. You must tell me *both* the

dream and the interpretation. If you succeed, I will give you many gifts. But if you fail, you will all be torn limb from limb, and your houses will be turned into piles of rubble."

The scholars and magicians turned pale with fright. They knew that they could not tell the king what he had dreamed. Trembling before their cruel master, they stammered: "Never has a king, however great and powerful, made such a demand of his wise men. No person on earth could do what you demand."

This made the king furious. He issued an order that all the wise men of Babylon were to be put to death.

Daniel soon heard what had happened. He realized that he and his three friends were also in danger of losing their lives. They, too, were wise men.

As the king's officers set out to arrest all the wise men, Daniel hurried over to the palace to ask that the sentence be delayed. Perhaps *he* could give the king his answer.

Then Daniel called his three friends Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego together. "Let us pray for wisdom," he said. "Only God knows the king's secret."

That night God revealed the king's dream to Daniel and also let him know what it meant. The four friends were safe, and Daniel praised God in gratitude.

Early the next morning Daniel went to the commander of the king's guard and said: "Do not put the wise men to death. Take me to the king, and I will give the king his dream and its interpretation."

Quickly he was led into the king's presence. "Can you really tell me what I dreamed?" asked Nebuchadnezzar, amazed.

Humbly Daniel shook his head. "No one can do what you have demanded, O king,"

he said. "I am no wiser than the others. But there is a God in heaven, and He has revealed the secret to me."

"This is your dream, O king," he continued. "There was a statue — a huge, frightening statue. Its head was made of pure gold, its chest and arms of silver, its belly of bronze, its legs of iron, and its feet of iron mixed with clay. A stone cut by no human hand came rolling toward the statue and smashed those feet of iron and clay. The iron, bronze, silver, and gold were also smashed. It all became like chaff, and the wind blew it away. There was no trace of the statue left. But the stone became bigger and bigger. It turned into a mountain that filled the entire earth."

Nebuchadnezzar was astounded, for that was precisely what he had dreamed. He was filled with respect for Daniel's wisdom.

"This is the interpretation of the dream," Daniel went on. "You, O king, are the golden head; God has given you a mighty kingdom. After your time there will be another kingdom, a kingdom not quite as powerful. That kingdom is the chest made of silver. Then there will be a third kingdom to rule over the entire earth — the kingdom of bronze. Then there will be a fourth kingdom, as hard as iron. But just as iron smashes everything, these kingdoms will be smashed. The statue's feet were made of iron mixed with clay. This means that the last kingdom will be a divided kingdom; it will be partly hard and partly fragile. In the end the God of heaven will establish a kingdom Himself. His kingdom will overcome all earthly powers and endure forever."

Daniel stopped. There was not a sound to be heard in the throne room. Nebuchadnezzar came down from his throne and bowed before his servant. The king who



ruled over half the earth bowed before a poor Jewish exile!

Nebuchadnezzar cried out: "Truly your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings! He is the God who reveals mysteries."

The king showered gifts upon Daniel. From that day on, Daniel was the most important man in the kingdom next to the king. At Daniel's request, his three friends were made governors.

The four did not forget that they owed this honor to God. They continued to serve Him.

218: The fiery furnace

King Nebuchadnezzar could not forget Daniel's words: *he* was the golden head of the statue. *He*, Nebuchadnezzar, was the mightiest king on all the earth, mightier than any king to come after him.

As he thought this over, he was awestruck at his own glory and fame. He, the king who had such power over humanity — wasn't he really a god?

Finally he became so proud that he thought: "I will show everyone that I am the golden head of the world. Everyone will kneel before my power!"

He had a golden statue made and set it up on the plain of Dura, near Babylon. It was an immense statue, about 30 meters high.

Nebuchadnezzar had the most important people assemble from all over his empire — governors, counselors, judges, and officials. There were thousands of them standing on the plain of Dura before the golden statue. A herald cried out with a loud voice: "This is the command of the king: as soon as you hear the music, throw yourself to the ground and worship the golden statue that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. Anyone who does not kneel before the statue will be thrown into the fiery furnace immediately."

There was a deathly silence. That fiery furnace was not far away; the assembled officials could hear the crackling sound of wood being burned. The king sat proudly on a costly throne, saying nothing. The golden statue shone in the sun.

Suddenly there was a sound of horns. Flutes, harps and all sorts of other musical instruments joined in. The assembled multitude fell to the ground. All the people bowed down and worshiped the golden

statue because it tickled the king's fancy — all but three young men who stood straight up just as if they hadn't heard the command.

Who were those fools? Who would dare to resist the will of Nebuchadnezzar?

The three young men were Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, the friends of Daniel. Their names were immediately given to the king. Angrily he commanded that they be brought before him.

They bowed before the king and looked at him calmly, seemingly unaware that they were playing with their lives. In threatening tones the king asked: "Was it on purpose, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, that you did not honor my gods and refused to worship the golden statue? If you will join the others in worshipping the statue, no harm will come to you. But if you refuse, you will immediately be thrown into the burning fiery furnace. What god could possibly save you?"

They stood before him looking proud and resolute. They seemed to be drawing on some secret source of strength. Calmly they responded: "We do not regard it as necessary to give you an answer. If the God whom we worship is able to save us, then He will save us. But if not, O king, we still will not worship your gods or bow before your golden statue."

The king almost exploded with rage. How did they dare speak to him in such an insolent way? How could they imagine that there was anyone more powerful than he?

Nebuchadnezzar gave a command: the furnace was to be made seven times hotter than usual. The strongest men in the army were ordered to bind the three young men and throw them into the flames. Nebuchadnezzar left his throne and went over to the furnace to enjoy the spectacle of agony.

The furnace was white-hot when Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were bound. The king drove his servants ahead with curses and threats. They feared him even more than they feared the raging fire in the furnace.

The fire seized them when they picked up the three victims and threw them into the furnace. The king's men were burned alive right in front of their cruel master. Yet they had done their duty as servants.

It was over. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were in the furnace. Surely they were dead by now.

Proud King Nebuchadnezzar, who feared no one and nothing, began to shake in terror. He cried out to his counselors: "Didn't we bind *three* men and throw them into the fire?"

"Certainly, O king," they answered.

"But now there are *four*!" the king cried. "I see four men walking around freely in the fire. The fire isn't harming them. And the fourth man — it's not a man, it's an angel!"

He went closer to the furnace, his eyes wide open in amazement. "Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, you sons of the Most High God," he called out, "come out of the furnace!"

The three men obeyed. The fourth, the angel, had disappeared.

Nebuchadnezzar and his men crowded around the three friends. They saw to their amazement that the fire had no power over the men's bodies. Their hair was not singed, and their clothes were untouched by the flames. There wasn't even any smell of fire about them!

The king cried out: "Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego! He has sent His angel and freed His servants, who trusted in Him. Therefore I shall issue



a decree that anyone who is disrespectful toward the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego will be torn limb from limb.”

219: Nebuchadnezzar's punishment

After the startling story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the fiery furnace, King Nebuchadnezzar lost interest in his golden statue. The statue was no longer a source of pride to him, for he had learned that there was someone more powerful than Babylon's king — the God of the three young men.

Yet, Nebuchadnezzar became even more

cruel, and his pride continued to swell. Thousands of people ran to carry out his wishes and trembled whenever he addressed them. They spoke to him in flattering terms and addressed him by beautiful titles.

“King of kings,” they said reverently. “Lord of the world,” they stammered. They kneeled down every time he rode by in his majestic splendor.

Every year Nebuchadnezzar's armies expanded his empire. Great numbers of slaves sweated under the burning sun to build palaces and temples. His empire became immense, almost limitless. His capital city became a miracle of beauty. And he, Nebuchadnezzar, lived in the

midst of this powerful world empire, determining the course of events with a word or a wave of his powerful hand. It did not matter to him what others considered right or wrong.

Who could possibly punish this powerful king for his sins? He was the highest judge of all. "*I am the Lord of the world,*" he thought.

God was watching Nebuchadnezzar, and He gave him another warning. In a dream Nebuchadnezzar saw a tree, a large, strong tree with its top reaching all the way to the heavens. The tree was visible to the ends of the earth. The beasts of the field found rest in the shade it provided, and the birds of the air nestled in its branches. All that lived was fed by the tree.

An angel descended from heaven and cried out: "Cut down the tree and hack off its branches. Let its stump stand, bound with a band of iron and bronze. The stump will grow again when seven years have gone by."

No wise men in the kingdom knew what this puzzling dream meant. Then Daniel was called. When he heard what the king had dreamed, he was at a loss for words. Finally he spoke: "O king, the Lord has sent you a hard message. That tree is *you*. God will take your power away from you for a while. You will be banished from human society. You will only be able to regain your throne if you recognize that the Most High God has power over the kingdoms of men and can give that power to whomever He pleases."

Daniel begged the king to repent, to be humble and merciful. Perhaps the Lord would see fit to spare him.

Nebuchadnezzar refused to listen. A year later came the punishment, just as Daniel had foretold.

The king was on the flat roof of his palace looking out over his city and his kingdom. As far as he could see and farther, it all belonged to him — the spacious countryside, the broad Euphrates River, the canals dug at his command. He looked at the mighty city inside those thick walls, the ponds and fountains, the palaces and temples. *He* was the one who had built it all. He had even constructed a city within the city, a royal fortress for himself, a stronghold that could never be captured. It was all *his* work; *he* was the creator of it all. Nebuchadnezzar was a god in this great empire!

His eyes shone with pride. He extended his arms toward the beautiful world at his feet. "This is the great Babylon that *I* have built!" he cried out proudly. "This is the city that *I* have built as a monument to my majesty."

God responded to these proud boasts immediately. A voice from heaven announced: "The time has come, King Nebuchadnezzar! The kingdom has departed from you!"

Suddenly there was darkness in the king's mind. His thoughts stood still. There was a strange glow in his eyes. His senses had left him; he was insane.

Nebuchadnezzar was no longer capable of ruling. He crawled on the ground and ate grass like an animal. He slept out in the open field. His fingernails grew and grew, but he didn't realize it. He knew nothing.

Nebuchadnezzar had wanted to be more than a man, but now he was less than a man; he was an animal.

This went on for seven years. Then, one day, he seemed to awake from his long, frightful trance. He looked up toward the heavens, and his mind was healed.

Nebuchadnezzar was deeply ashamed

when he realized what had become of him. Only then did he understand how small and insignificant he really was. He praised the Most High God who had humbled him to make him wise.

Nebuchadnezzar managed to regain his throne. His counselors and his chief officers came to him and crowned him king again. He became even more powerful than he had been before.

Although Nebuchadnezzar was the most powerful and important person in the kingdom, he knew he was a mere mortal who had received his power and glory from God. This lesson he never forgot.

220: Handwriting on the wall

It was nighttime, but there were dark figures sneaking through the streets of Babylon. Near the high walls of the royal citadel, men whispered to each other. Spears flashed in the moonlight. Here and there a command was given softly. Thousands of foreign soldiers were secretly busy in the light of the moon.

The great world empire of Nebuchadnezzar was ready to crumble. It had been conquered almost completely by enemies.

Nebuchadnezzar was long dead, and his successors were weak rulers. The last king had been defeated and taken captive by the Medes and the Persians, who had already penetrated the city.

Only the royal citadel was left. Belshazzar, the oldest son of the king, still held out there. For months his strong palace was besieged. No one knew how much longer he would last.

Although it was the middle of the night, no one was sleeping in the palace. There was a party going on. In a large, sparkling

banquet room, the king, his wives and his guests were seated at long tables — hundreds of leading citizens. They ate and drank; they laughed and sang. They did not allow the thought of the enemy at the gates to disturb their gaiety. They felt safe behind those thick walls. The idols standing along the walls, those gods of gold and silver, wood and stone, would surely protect them.

The king thought only of wine and fun. The party grew wilder and wilder. Wine flowed freely. Faces got redder and redder. Eyes sparkled. Everyone was drunk.

The drunken king wanted to make this insane celebration even wilder. He wanted to make sure that no one would ever forget this party.

He thought of the gold and silver goblets in his treasure chamber. They were holy goblets taken as booty from the temple in Jerusalem. They were brought to the party, filled with wine, and passed around joyously. Hands that had lost their strength swayed uncertainly as goblets were raised to drunken lips. The people praised the gods lined up along the wall, the gods who had defeated the God of Jerusalem.

Suddenly anxious cries broke out in the room. Trembling hands pointed to a spot on the wall. All eyes were fixed on the wall in horror.

High up the chalk wall, opposite the chandelier, was a hand, a mysterious hand. It was writing incomprehensible words on the wall.

The king collapsed in his chair, white as a sheet. Shivers ran up and down his spine. His knees were knocking.

“Call the magicians, the fortune-tellers!” he screamed. “Bring them in here!”

They came at once and watched the horrifying miracle, just as frightened as all

the others. The king promised honor and wealth to anyone who could decipher the mysterious words. That person would be dressed in purple and wear a gold chain around his neck. He would be the second most important man in the kingdom.

Second in what kingdom? There was nothing left of the kingdom except the royal citadel!

The king's wise men were unable to read the mysterious writing. This made the king and his guests even more afraid. They sat in groups, trembling. The whole palace was in an uproar.

Then the door opened and the former queen, the king's mother, walked into the room. She was more sensible than the others and had not taken part in the insane feast. She appeared on the scene because she had heard what was going on. She knew an old wise man, she said. He might be able to read the mysterious writing and explain its meaning.

Long ago, in the days of Nebuchadnezzar, this wise man had been an important figure. Later he fell from favor and was forgotten because he was only a Jewish exile. His name was Daniel.

"Have Daniel brought here," the queen mother suggested. "In him dwells the spirit of the holy gods."

Soon Daniel stood before the king. He had become old and gray, but his clear eyes shone with the calm joy of a child of God.

Stammering in fear, the king told Daniel about the rewards he would receive if he deciphered the mysterious writing. He thought that gold and purple and honor were the highest things anyone could desire.

Daniel gave a dignified answer: "Keep your gifts, and give your rewards to someone else. All the same, I will read the

writing for the king and interpret it."

No one else in Babylon would have dared to give such a bold answer. Daniel continued calmly: "O king, the Most High God gave your grandfather Nebuchadnezzar power and greatness, honor and majesty. But when Nebuchadnezzar became too proud and forgot about God, he was driven from his royal throne and stripped of his honor. He became like an animal until he recognized that the Most High God has power over the kingdoms of men and gives that power to whomever He pleases."

"And you, his son Belshazzar," Daniel went on, "you have not humbled yourself in your heart, even though you knew all of this. Instead you have risen up against the Lord of heaven. You have taken the holy goblets from His temple and brought them to this godless feast to let your guests drink wine from them. You have praised the gods of wood and stone, the gods that do not hear or see or have a mind. But you have not glorified the God who governs the course of your life."

"That God has written your sentence on the wall," Daniel declared. "The message reads: *'Mene, mene, tekel, and parsin.'* It means: weighed, weighed, wanting and broken. God has weighed your kingdom and put an end to it. You have been weighed in the balance and found wanting. Your kingdom has been broken and given to the Medes and the Persians."

The harsh message did not upset the king. With his murky eyes he sought out the wine again. Once more he reached for his goblet. Now that he knew the meaning of the mysterious words on the wall, his fear vanished. If the punishment was coming anyway, he might just as well enjoy himself as long as he could.

He decreed that Daniel was to receive all the rewards he had been promised — a purple garment, a gold chain, the highest place of honor in Belshazzar's kingdom. That same night the enemy captured the royal citadel. By morning Belshazzar was dead.

221: A plot against prayer

When Daniel was very old, he risked his life once more to be faithful to his God. By risking his life, he showed that he loved God above all else. God responded by showing how much He loved Daniel and rescuing him in a miraculous way.

The danger arose when Darius the Mede was king. He had divided his huge empire into 120 provinces and appointed a governor over each province. Three presidents supervised the governors. One of the three was Daniel.

Daniel was a zealous worker. He was also sensible. The king was very fond of him because he was the wisest of his officials. He was so impressed with Daniel that he planned to turn over the running of the whole empire to him. Daniel would control the empire as the king's regent.

The other presidents and the governors were already jealous of Daniel. They would be even more jealous if he became the regent, second only to the king. How could the king appoint that exile as their master? They hated that pious Jew; they cursed him daily. And they watched him closely, hoping to find something wrong with his work. They would have been delighted to bring an accusation against him.

But they found nothing to complain about. Daniel did nothing wrong. He ruled

the empire wisely.

Three times a day Daniel kneeled before the open windows of his upstairs room with his face toward the west to pray to God. Somewhere far to the west lay Jerusalem.

His enemies knew how faithfully he prayed. "We find nothing to accuse him of," they said, disappointed.

"What about his religion?" one of them asked. "Can't we trap him somehow in his piety?" They hatched a clever plot.

One day Daniel's enemies appeared before the king. They approached him humbly, with a great show of respect. "O king Darius, live forever," they said, intending to flatter him. "We have come to lay a beautiful plan before you. You are a good and mighty king, and we want the people all through the empire to honor you. Therefore we ask you to publish a royal decree that for 30 days, prayers and petitions in your kingdom may be addressed only to you. After all, you are our great and wise king. If anyone does not obey this command, let him be thrown into the lions' den. Issue such a decree, O king, so that the whole empire will honor you."

It sounded like a great idea to Darius — all the people of his empire honoring him alone! He had the decree prepared, signed his name to it, and sealed it with his signet ring. Then it was published throughout the land.

Once that was done, the decree was irrevocable. According to a law of the Medes and the Persians, it could not be revoked. What the king had decreed was the will of the gods. Not even the king could take it back.

Daniel, of course, heard about the new law at once, and he knew what the punishment was for disobedience. God had said to him: "Seek My face, and you shall

live." The law now told him that if he sought God's face in prayer, he would *die*.

Daniel did not hesitate. His faith triumphed as his heart said: "I shall seek Your face, O Lord! I love You more than life itself. I want to obey You more than men."

Then Daniel kneeled before his open window facing Jerusalem. He continued to pray just as he always prayed, three times a day. He prayed for himself and for his people, even though he knew that his enemies were watching him. In faith he kept praying.

222: Daniel in the lions' den

Daniel's enemies laid a trap for him, and he fell right into it! The royal decree specified that prayers and petitions were to be addressed *only* to the king, but Daniel went on praying to his God.

Daniel's enemies lost no time in going to the king. Innocently they asked him: "Didn't you issue a decree that anyone who raises a prayer or petition to some man or god other than the king is to be thrown into the lions' den?"

The king nodded.

"Daniel, one of the exiles from Judah, has ignored the decree," they said. "He shows no respect for you. Three times a day he prays to his god."

The king was both frightened and sad when he heard this news. Now he understood the real reason why his officials had asked him to issue the decree. They could not disguise their delight at the success of their plot.

The king tried to think of ways to spare Daniel. All day long he thought. When it was evening, there was still no solution in sight.

By then Daniel's enemies appeared before the king again and pressed him to uphold the law. "It is a law of the Medes and the Persians," they said. "Not even a royal decree can change it."

Darius was the king, but the law was mightier than he was.

That evening, Daniel was arrested and brought to the lions' den in the king's pleasure garden. A stone covering the pit was rolled away. Out of the pit came the roar of hungry lions.

The king watched as Daniel was led to the pit, without resistance, without complaint. Daniel was not afraid to die. The old, gray man walked calmly between the king's soldiers.

"May the God whom you serve so faithfully deliver you!" cried the king.

Daniel disappeared into the pit. The rock was rolled back into place, and the opening was sealed. The lions roared.

The king felt so sorry for Daniel that he had nothing to eat or drink all day. Now, in the darkness, he couldn't sleep. The figure of Daniel walking calmly to his death hovered before him.

All night the king tossed and turned feverishly. He reproached himself again and again for making such a foolish law. His finest servant had been sacrificed to his vain pride.

The king had little hope that Daniel was still alive. He knew that Daniel's God was mighty, but how could any god close the mouths of starving lions?

When the first morning light crept into the king's room, he could wait no longer. He left the palace and hurried through his pleasure garden to the lions' den. His heart pounded as he stood listening at the opening of the pit. There was nothing to be heard but an early bird singing in the bushes.

Darius called out: "Daniel, you servant of the living God, has your God saved you from the lions?"

A thrill of joy ran through his body when a voice answered him from the pit: "O king, live forever! My God has sent His angel and closed the mouths of the lions. They have done me no harm, for I am innocent."

The king was delighted. He summoned his servants and shouted: "Pull Daniel out of the lions' den. He is alive!"

When Daniel stood before him without a scratch, the king was ready to sink to his knees. Then he thought of the betrayers who wanted this innocent man put to death. He had his officers arrest them at once. They went where Daniel was put the night before — into the lions' den! There was no angel to protect them. The lions at-



tacked them even before their feet hit the ground.

King Darius then issued a new decree: everyone in his kingdom was to honor the God of Daniel. And Daniel lived in peace and prosperity.

When Daniel died, he was still in Babylon. He did not live to see his people freed from exile, but he did receive some beautiful visions sent by God.

Daniel also sang of the Redeemer who was to come. Like Daniel, that Redeemer would be harried by enemies who wanted to put Him to death. Through God's power, He would be restored to life so that He could give new life to His people.

223: The return from exile

The day long awaited by the exiles finally

dawned. It was the day of their deliverance. For the exiles it was the year of Jubilee, the year in which they were set free.

Cyrus, the king of the Persians, issued a decree saying that the Jews were free to return to Jerusalem. But it was really *God*, who leads the hearts of kings, who brought this about.

It seemed like a dream to the exiles. From all directions they came together. Laughing and singing, they walked along the river by which they used to sit as they stared sadly toward the west. Now they were no longer captives; they were free! God had taken His people back; He had opened the door again to His lost child.

In a large, happy caravan they set out — 50,000 people in all. They carried their possessions and the sacred objects of the temple with them.

Zerubbabel and Jeshua were their leaders. Jeshua was a priest, and Zerubbabel was a prince of the house of David, a grandson of Jehoiachin and a great-great-grandson of pious King Josiah.

The two leaders led the people along the same route that their forefather Abraham had followed many centuries before. Abraham did not know where God was leading him, but the exiles knew where they were going. The old people remembered Jerusalem clearly, for they had played there as children before the horrible judgment struck. The young people had often heard the old people talking about Jerusalem. The land of their fathers awaited them.

There were some Jews in Babylon who had lost their love for their own land and people. They had become prosperous in their new land, and they felt at home there. They stayed behind when the exiles set out for Jerusalem.

After a long and dangerous journey lasting four months, the exiles arrived safely in the holy land. What a sight it was! They found only a few people scattered here and there in the neglected fields and ruined towns.

The returned exiles went to work bravely. They rebuilt their houses. They started tilling the soil again. Not long after their arrival, they gathered at the ruins of the temple, where foxes and jackals wandered freely, to set up the altar again.

The old people knew where the altar had stood and saw to it that it was rebuilt on the original site. The smell of sacrifices soon ascended to the Lord — from the ruins of a temple in a city burned to the ground.

Some months later, the people assembled again. The solemn hour had come for laying the foundations of the temple.

The young people rejoiced when this great project was begun, but the old people wept. They remembered Solomon's temple, and they realized that the temple now being built would never be as glorious as Solomon's temple. The ark, the sign of God's presence, had been lost forever. Therefore the Holy of Holies would be empty.

Was it then, when the foundations of the temple were laid, that the wonderful stone was found? It was so large and heavy and strangely shaped that it did not seem to fit among the other stones. The workmen didn't know what to do with it; shaking their heads, they set it aside. But when the architects saw the stone, they realized that a mistake had been made. That strange stone was essential to the temple. It became the most important stone of all, the cornerstone on which the whole structure rested.

The stone rejected by the builders became the cornerstone. What a miracle!

224: The rebuilding of the temple

When Solomon built the temple, he had an abundance of treasures and valuables on hand. Backing him was an enthusiastic nation ready to pitch in and help. Now the same project was undertaken by a small, insignificant group of people who had just returned from Babylon.

The rubble was cleared away, and new stones were hacked out. Men were sent to Tyre again to bring back cedarwood from the Lebanon mountains.

Before long people arrived on the scene and offered to help. The Samaritans and others living in the land of Judah came to Jerusalem and said: "Let us help you with the building, for we seek God just as you do. We have been offering sacrifices to Him as long as we have been in this land."

It was a difficult offer to refuse, but it *had* to be refused. The Samaritans did serve God, but they also served idols and bowed before them. Therefore they were pagans at heart. If they helped with the rebuilding of the temple, they would bring their sins along with them. The small nation that had been punished so severely in exile was afraid of going astray again. The holy work had to be done by God's people alone.

Bravely the Jews refused the offer. And they continued to refuse when they saw anger and hatred welling up in the Samaritans, who went away embittered. From that day on, the Samaritans opposed the Jews.

They spoke ill of the Jews to the governor of the district. They ruined the tools used by the Jews. They hindered the Jews in every way they could think of.

Finally the people began to lose courage. They stopped working on God's house and returned to their own cities. For years the

temple lay untouched.

Bad times came for the Jews. Repeatedly they suffered crop failure. The small nation of Jews was so caught up in its own cares that no thought was given to rebuilding the temple.

Then a prophet named Haggai called the people together. He urged them to take up the work again. The Lord spoke through this prophet and gave His people a message: "Is it right for you to live comfortably in your well constructed houses while My house is in ruins? Rebuild My house! I am with you."

Haggai prophesied that the new temple would be even more glorious than Solomon's temple. Solomon's temple was only a *sign* of God's presence, but the Messiah Himself would set foot in the new temple.

Another prophet, Zechariah, appeared on the scene and helped Haggai encourage the people: "Thus says the Lord of hosts: 'Not by might nor by power but by My Spirit.'" Zechariah sang of the glorious future the Messiah would bring.

The people took fresh courage and went back to work. Their enemies tried to hinder them, but they failed. They even enlisted the help of Tattenai, the governor of the district, in their campaign against the Jews. Tattenai asked who had gotten the Jews started on the rebuilding of the temple. When he heard that the order had been given by Cyrus and that there was a copy of the edict in the land of Babylon, he changed his position from opposition to support. He even provided money and food for the builders. The Samaritans had involved Tattenai for evil purposes, but God turned the situation around in favor of the Jews.

After that, the work went well. Five



years later, the new temple was complete. A joyful celebration was held, and the new house of God was consecrated with great offerings.

225: Ezra and Nehemiah

Fifty years went by. The young people who rejoiced when the foundations of the temple were laid had become old men and women. Yet, the walls of Jerusalem were still in ruins. The city was an open area that could not be defended from attack.

Then Ezra appeared on the scene. He was a priest and scholar who lived in Babylon. Ezra enjoyed the king's favor and was given permission to go to Jerusalem, taking 1500 Jews with him. The king offered them an escort of horsemen to protect them from enemies and robbers, but Ezra declined it. After all, he trusted in God! And he was right: his party arrived safely.

Ezra's leadership was sorely needed. The people had begun to wander away from the Lord again. Godless foreign women lived among the people of God.

Ezra eliminated these sins in a stern manner. He knew the law of Moses. The people should also know the law, he

believed. The law would lead the people and protect them in their status as a holy people.

The people listened to Ezra and repented. Ezra's battle was won. But when he tried to get the people to rebuild Jerusalem's walls, things went wrong. The Samaritans, their enemies, wrote a letter to the king. The letter was full of accusations against the Jews. Then the king ordered a halt to the work.

In Babylon lived a Jew named Nehemiah. As the king's cupbearer, he was a prominent and very important person. When he served the king, he had to be sure to be cheerful and good-humored, for the king did not want any long faces around him.

That wasn't difficult for Nehemiah, for he was a cheerful man by nature. Never had he shown the king a sad face.

One day, however, it was very hard for him to do his work joyfully. Nehemiah had a visitor at home — his brother Hanani, from Jerusalem. Hanani told him about the walls that still lay in ruins, and also about the opposition from the Samaritans.

This news made Nehemiah so unhappy that he could no longer eat or sleep. He wept because of the misery of his people

and prayed to the Lord for a way out.

When he appeared before the king and queen as cupbearer and poured wine for them, he tried to look cheerful, but he didn't fool them. He was too upright a man to be good at hypocrisy.

The king asked him: "Why such a long face, Nehemiah? Aren't you feeling well? It looks to me as though the pain is in your heart."

Nehemiah was startled that the king had noticed his sorrow. He proceeded to tell him the whole story. The king did not become angry, for he was very fond of his cupbearer.

"What is your request?" he asked, in a friendly way.

"O Lord, let it be!" Nehemiah prayed silently. Then he said to the king: "If it please the king, I would like to go to Judah to make sure that the city of my fathers is rebuilt."

The Lord answered Nehemiah's prayer: the king gave him permission to go. He was given horsemen as an escort and letters to the governors through whose districts he would travel.

Although Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem as a powerful figure, no one knew the purpose of his visit. The first thing he did was to tour the city to see how much work there was to be done. He rode through the ruins in the middle of the night, accompanied only by a few servants. He circled the entire city wall and inspected it by the light of the moon. Here and there he had to make detours around piles of rubble.

Nehemiah was not afraid to get to work. The next morning he called the elders together and told them his plan. Joyfully they responded: "We'll all get ready to start the rebuilding."

They threw themselves into the work en-

thusiastically. But it wasn't easy. Their enemies, the Samaritans, gave them no peace. Sanballat, the leader of the Samaritans, was always making trouble. The Ammonites, led by Tobiah, joined in as well, and so did the Arabians.

"What are those feeble Jews up to?" Sanballat asked contemptuously.

"As soon as a fox jumps up against those walls, they will crumble," Tobiah scoffed.

The Jews responded: "The God of heaven will help us!" Now that they followed their leader in faith, there was no stopping them.

226: The rebuilding of Jerusalem

Under Nehemiah's leadership, the Jews worked steadily. There were always armed bands of enemies nearby, looking for opportunities to attack them.

The Jewish workmen divided themselves into two groups. One half worked while the other half stood guard. The men were busy every day from the early morning light until the stars shone in the sky. While the builders slept, watchmen stood guard. Nehemiah and his men didn't even take off their clothes to sleep.

The Samaritans and their allies were not the only enemies that the Jews faced. There was also an enemy within, an enemy living among them.

There were Jews who did some very sinful things. These Jews knew the law — Ezra made sure of that — and they pretended to live by the letter of the law, but they were lacking in *love*.

They mistreated their brothers. In times of prosperity they lent money to others. When the money was not repaid in time, these rich Jews took away the children of

the people who owed them money and made them slaves.

This led to great dissatisfaction among the people. Nehemiah, who was always generous with his own money when the poor approached him, spoke out against these moneylenders. They felt ashamed of themselves and let their slaves go free.

The work on Jerusalem's walls continued. The walls grew higher and thicker. The enemies saw to their amazement that the Jews would succeed.

They tried a new approach. Perhaps they could get rid of Nehemiah. "Come with us," they said. "We want to have a talk with you."

He knew that they meant to kill him, so he did not go with them. "I'm much too busy," he answered.

Then they tried to scare him. "We'll tell the king that you're a rebel," they said. "We'll tell him that you want to be king in Jerusalem."

Nehemiah was not frightened. He knew that God would watch over him.

Finally, despite all the opposition and difficulties, the great project was completed — much to the amazement of the Jews' enemies.

A great feast was held. Ezra read the law of Moses aloud, and the people renewed their covenant with God. They promised to keep the law faithfully and be a holy people.

Jerusalem was now a strong, beautiful city built in the hills of Judah, just as it used to be. It had been conquered and destroyed years before because love had disappeared.

Jerusalem still was not free and still did not have a king of its own. But the King was coming — the great King for whom God's people had waited so long. He would walk through the rebuilt gates and enter the

rebuilt temple.

When He came as King, would the people meet Him in love?

227: Esther becomes queen

Ahasuerus, the king of the Medes and Persians, was celebrating a feast with his princes and servants in the royal capital of Susa. It was a glorious feast lasting seven days. The guests lay on couches inlaid with gold and silver and drank the king's wine from golden goblets.

The king had spared no expense to make this a great and glorious feast. On the last day of the feast, when the delight of his guests reached its height, he decided to give them a special treat: he would show them the most beautiful of all his wives!

The king had many wives, but Queen Vashti was the most beautiful of them all. He sent a message that she was to come to the feast wearing her most beautiful garments, with her crown on her head.

Queen Vashti was holding a feast in her palace for the leading ladies of the court. She refused to appear at the king's feast. She did not want all those men staring at her.

The king was furious. He asked his wise men and counselors: "What does the law say? What must be done with Queen Vashti now that she has refused to obey the command of King Ahasuerus?"

"She must be punished severely, O king," they answered. "Otherwise all our wives will become disobedient when they hear about it. She must be deposed as queen."

The king agreed, and it was done. In those days a woman had no more rights than a slave.

Later, after the king's anger had died down, he was sorry he had gone so far. But he could not go back on what he had done and restore Vashti to her position of honor.

His servants sought to console him. "Shall we seek another wife for the king?" they asked. "Shall we assemble the most beautiful girls in the entire country in your palace? Then you can choose the one you like best and make her your queen in place of Vashti!"

The king liked the idea.

There was an old Jew named Mordecai living in Susa. The first Jews had already returned from exile, but Mordecai stayed in Susa. Living in his home was a young girl as beautiful and pure as a white myrtle blossom. Her name was Hadassah.

Mordecai was her stepfather and cousin. He had taken her into his home as his own daughter when her mother and father died.

Mordecai and Esther loved each other.

When the king's servants went out looking for a beautiful wife for the king, Hadassah's beauty caught their eye and they took her to the palace. They did not ask anyone's permission; Hadassah had no choice in the matter.

Mordecai was lonely and upset. Why had God let his child be taken from him? Every day he walked around outside the palace. He hoped to find out how things were going with Hadassah and what would become of her.

Finally he heard that the king found her the most beautiful and charming of all the young women. Ahasuerus fell in love with her and made her his new queen.

Hadassah was given a new name. From then on she would be called *Esther*.

Queen Esther had not told anyone that she belonged to the despised Jewish nation. But God knew. He planned to use her in a

special way. It was His will for her to become queen.

228: Mordecai and Haman

Mordecai sat by the palace gate every day, just as if he were a servant in the palace. Soon no one noticed him.

He kept a careful eye on the comings and goings and listened to everything that was said. Two of the king's servants stood near him one day whispering in a dark corner. They were angry at the king and were making plans to kill him.

Mordecai overheard them and warned Esther. Esther passed the word along to the king. The two servants were caught and punished.

The king's life had been saved. His scribes recorded this event in the chronicle covering the king's reign. But Mordecai soon passed from the king's mind.

Haman was one of the king's servants. He stood higher in his master's favor than any other servant. The king made him the first minister over his great empire.

When Haman walked out the palace gate, the people were supposed to bow before him. That was the king's command.

But Mordecai would not bow before Haman. He pretended not to see Haman when he passed by.

Mordecai knew that Haman was an Amalekite, a descendant of the cruel nation that had tried to murder Israel shortly after Israel became a nation. In fact, he was a direct descendant of Agag, the proud king of the Amalekites whom King Saul had defeated in battle. Haman was just as proud and cruel and wicked and cunning as Agag.



Mordecai refused to bow before Haman. Mordecai himself was a descendant of Saul, and Saul and Agag were enemies. Therefore Mordecai and Haman were enemies. The struggle that had gone on for centuries between the Israelites and the Amalekites broke out again between these two men.

Haman was furious when he found out that Mordecai refused to bow before him. He could easily have killed Mordecai but that was not enough for him. He wanted more! He would now accomplish on his own what his forefathers had failed to accomplish in the wilderness.

A Jew had dared to refuse him homage. Haman would make all the Jewish people suffer for it. He would wipe them out! There would not be one Jew left in the kingdom. The very thought of it gave him pleasure.

Haman would have to consult the gods about the timing. When he cast lots or "purim," the thirteenth day of the twelfth month was chosen.

Haman then went to the king. "O king," he said, "there is a certain people scattered throughout your kingdom. They are a rebellious and disobedient people, and they do not concern themselves with your laws. It would be best if we wiped them out completely. All their money would fall into your hands."

The king took his signet ring from his

finger and handed it to Haman. "Do with that people as you please," he said carelessly. "As for the money, you're welcome to it."

Haman was satisfied, for the king had given him even more than he asked for. In the name of the king, he issued a decree that on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, any Jew could be killed. His possessions would then belong to the person who killed him.

Haman sealed the edict with the king's signet ring, which meant that the decree could not be revoked. Messengers carried the decree to all corners of the empire. Haman was content.

As Haman sat drinking wine with the king, the Jews moaned in despair. What would become of them now? Who could possibly save them from this death sentence?

229: Esther and Haman

Mordecai sat at the palace gate, his clothes torn in mourning. Yet he had not given up hope. Now it dawned on him why God had allowed Esther to be taken from him and why she had become queen.

He wrote a letter to Esther: "There is still one chance: *you* must go to the king and beg for mercy for yourself and your people."

It was a dangerous suggestion that might well cost Esther her life, for it was strictly forbidden for anyone to appear before the king without being summoned. The punishment was death — unless the king held out his golden scepter as a sign of his favor.

Esther wrote back to Mordecai and



asked: "Tell all the Jews in Susa to pray for me. Then I will go to the king. If I perish, I perish. At least I will die for my people."

There was a deathly silence in the king's room when the figure of Esther appeared in the doorway. The king's servants were amazed and shocked that the queen dared to appear without being summoned. They held their breath.

The king saw the sadness in her eyes and could not bring himself to be angry at her. He extended his golden scepter to her as a sign of his favor and asked: "What is it, Queen Esther? What is your wish? I will grant it, even if you ask the half of my kingdom."

Esther's request was simple: she wanted the king and his most important servant, Haman, to eat dinner with her in her palace that day.

The king understood that Esther had not risked her young life just to ask him to dinner. He knew that there was something else on her mind.

He accepted her invitation and appeared at her table that day with Haman. The king



was most friendly, and Haman was bursting with pride. After they had eaten, the king asked: "What is your wish, Queen Esther? Whatever it is, I will grant it, even if it means giving up the half of my kingdom."

Esther still did not have the courage to bring up what was on her mind. She only asked the king to come back the next day with Haman to eat dinner with her. Then she would give him an answer to his question. The king agreed to her request.

That evening Haman went home feeling prouder than ever before. But when he walked out of the palace gate, Mordecai ignored him instead of bowing.

Haman's joy turned to frustration. He knew he could take revenge on Mordecai before long. Still, he could not let that stubborn Jew defy him so persistently.

He was bitter when he got home and told his wife and friends what had happened that day. "I am the only other person invited to the meal by Queen Esther. And I have been invited again for tomorrow. But what good does that do me as long as Mor-

decai defies me?"

They said to him: "Cheer up! Ask the king tomorrow for permission to kill that Jew. Surely he will say yes. Then you can accompany the king to the queen's palace in a good mood."

That struck Haman as an excellent idea. Immediately he had a high gallows erected to hang Mordecai.

That night Haman could hardly sleep — that's how eager he was to see his hated enemy hang.

230: Haman's humiliation and death

Haman tossed and turned that night, eager to have Mordecai hanged. The king tossed and turned too. For some strange reason, he couldn't get to sleep. Finally he summoned one of his servants and had him read aloud from the chronicles of the kingdom.

The servant obeyed. He happened to read the part that told how Mordecai had once saved the life of the king.

The king asked: "How was Mordecai rewarded? What honor was paid to him?"

The servant answered: "Nothing was done, O king."

The king saw the first rays of morning light entering the palace. "Are any of my counselors here yet?" he asked.

He was told that Haman had arrived. He had come to the palace early, eager to get the king's permission to put his great enemy to death.

When he walked in, the king said: "Tell me, Haman, what should be done for the man whom the king wishes to honor?"

Haman thought to himself: "To whom would the king want to pay greater honor

than to me? He must mean me!" He could name his own reward for his faithfulness to the king!

He answered: "Let that man ride through the city on the king's horse wearing royal robes. One of the king's leading servants should run before him and cry out: 'This is what the king does for the man whom he delights to honor.'"

The king said: "Go now, and quickly get the royal robes and the horse. Then pay the honor you have suggested to the Jew Mordecai who sits at the palace gate."

Haman was stunned. He had no choice but to obey.

He summoned Mordecai and dressed him in royal robes. He put him on the king's horse and ran before him through the streets, crying out in a hoarse voice: "This is what the king does for the man whom he delights to honor!"

Mordecai then returned to the palace gate, and Haman hurried home like a dog with his tail between his legs. He felt miserable.

When he told his wife and friends what had happened to him, they shook their heads in concern. Surely this was a bad sign.

Soon the king's servants arrived to pick up Haman for Queen Esther's dinner. This honor, at least, was for him alone. He was still the man who stood highest in the king's favor. The day of his wrath would come soon.

For the second day in a row, Haman and the king sat at Esther's table. Again the king acted very friendly and asked her: "What is your wish, Queen Esther? Whatever it is, I will grant it, even if it means the half of my kingdom."

Esther could be silent no more. "O king," she cried out, "please let me live — me and



my people! We are sold, my people and I, to be destroyed!”

The king was amazed. Who would dare to take his favorite wife away from him? His eyes flashed with anger. “Who is this enemy of yours?” he asked. “Where is the man who would dare do such a thing?”

Esther pointed to Haman and the color drained from Haman’s face. “An oppressor, an enemy! He’s right over there — that wicked Haman!”

The king stood up. He was furious. He stepped outside to calm down and think. Only now did it dawn on him what a mean plan Haman had put before him — now that he saw how it affected his own wife.

When he went back into the room, he found Haman on Esther’s couch, begging for mercy. That was a gross offense. The king also discovered that Haman wanted to put Mordecai to death. A servant showed him the gallows Haman had constructed especially for that purpose.

The king exploded with rage. “Hang Haman on that gallows!” he shouted.

Swinging from his own gallows was Haman the Amalekite. Mordecai the Jew then became the king’s highest official in place of Haman.

The rest of the story ended happily. The decree issued by Haman in the king’s name could not be revoked. But Mordecai and Esther were allowed to use the king’s signet ring to issue any decree they chose.

They published an edict allowing the Jews to defend themselves when they were attacked on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month. When that day finally arrived, the Jews all over the empire defeated their enemies.

They never forgot that day. Haman had cast lots or “purim” to decide the fate of the Jewish people, but God had saved them in a

miraculous way. From that time on, the Jews celebrated the “Feast of Purim” every year.

231: By faith

It had been a long, long time since Adam and Eve, driven out of Paradise, began a new and difficult life on earth, a life apart from God. Their life became a struggle, with death awaiting them at its end.

Despite the darkness, one star always continued to shine — a great gift God had allowed them to take along when they left Paradise. That gift was the assurance that a Redeemer would come, someone who was stronger than sin and death, someone who would bring God and man together again. That assurance, that faith, gave Adam and Eve strength in times of grief and disappointment.

When they died, the divine promise still awaited fulfillment. But the Redeemer would surely come — for them too! That’s why they could pass through the dark gateway of death to the land of eternal joy. They lived and died by faith.

The lot of the first people on earth was also the lot of the believers who came after them. They hoped, they believed, they built on God’s promises. Then they died — without seeing the fulfillment.

Yet, their belief that God was faithful made their lives happy. Through that belief they were justified, and God forgave their sins.

By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain. Therefore the Lord accepted Abel’s sacrifice and showed that he was justified.

By faith Enoch had the courage to

preach. He vanished from the earth without tasting death. No trace of him was ever found, for *God* had taken him away.

By faith Noah built the ark to save his family from the flood.

By faith Abraham was obedient when God called him. He left his country without knowing where he would wind up. He lived in tents in a foreign land, calm and satisfied. He awaited a better fatherland — not the land he had come from, for he could have returned there anytime, but the *heavenly* fatherland.

By faith Abraham was willing to sacrifice Isaac, for he knew that God could restore him even from death. And in a manner of speaking, he did receive him back from the dead.

Isaac and Jacob also lived by faith. It was by faith that Joseph asked to have his bones carried along to Canaan.

By faith Moses was hidden by his parents for three months after his birth. The command of the king did not stop them.

By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to go through life as a son of Pharaoh’s daughter. He chose to suffer hardship along with God’s people instead of enjoying the pleasures of sin for a while. To him God’s promises were greater treasures than the wealth of Egypt. By faith he left Egypt, without fearing the wrath of the king. He stood firm, seeing the Unseen.

By faith Israel walked across the Red Sea on dry ground, while the Egyptians drowned. By faith the walls of Jericho were smashed. By faith, Rahab, a sinful woman, was spared death with the rest of her people because she had received the Israelite spies in peace.

Who else shall we name? Gideon, Samson, David, Samuel, the pious kings, the prophets? They all lived by faith.

By faith they did great things — conquering kingdoms, driving back enemy armies, raising the dead, suffering oppression without running away. They all believed that a better life awaited them.

Daniel closed the mouths of lions. His three friends survived the intense flames of the fiery furnace. Jeremiah was not silenced by prison and the slimy pit.

Faith was the power that gave them strength. Yet, they all died without seeing the promised fulfilled. They did *not* see the Messiah.

But God did not forget His promise! His people had been waiting for thousands of years. During all that time, God remembered what He had promised.

That's why He saved Noah when the whole world perished in the flood. That's why He called Abraham when the world forgot Him again. That's why He delivered His people from Egypt and cared for them as an eagle cares for its young.

That's why He was patient with His people time and again, although they often scorned Him. That's why He protected them in exile and led them back to their

own land.

The Jews were allowed to return to their land. There they waited. But the waiting was almost over.

It was a dark time for Israel. There were no more prophets to proclaim God's Word to the people. Malachi, who lived in the time of Ezra, was the last prophet.

Enemies came and conquered the people — all the great world empires of Nebuchadnezzar's dream, and more. The Syrians, especially, oppressed them cruelly. Then the Maccabees, five brave sons of one priest, tried to free Israel. For a short time, Israel was free. Then along came the Romans and subjected them again.

The Messiah still had not come!

Now, after many centuries of hoping and waiting, God's time had arrived. The Redeemer was about to come. He would free His people forever. This Savior would come not just for the Jews but for people all over the world.

The Redeemer was the shining morning star in the dark night of sin. He was the sun of righteousness whose coming signaled the dawning of a new day.

*In Bethlehem He was born.
Jesus Christ was His name!*

