

The Art of Letting Go

...and Holding On

WIM RIETKERK

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Preface

After speaking on the topic "the art of letting go" in a short radio talk, I received many striking reactions. One of them was a woman who asked me a question that no one ever asked me before: Is it possible to be too good? She told me that this question popped up in her mind after talking with her son. Is it possible to be too good, too loving, too friendly, too caring, or too giving? I thought this is not a common problem. Most of us care too little and feel bad about that. So, I asked: tell me more...and then she told me about her (only) son: "He lives on his own now and I write him letters. I also send him money and call him. I do everything for him. But it always ends up being a one-way street. I do more than I am asked, I give more than is good, but what is the response? It's as if all those extras do nothing but irritate him. Is it possible to be too good?"

It looks as if the bible warns us only in one direction and that is the opposite, that we do too little, care too little... Doesn't it say in the Sermon on the Mount that if someone takes our cloak, we should give him our coat also? Or: "If a man strikes you on the one cheek, offer him the other as well."? (Matthew 5:40-44). Do more than what you are naturally obliged to do and there is the promise that it will lead to deeper contact.

Here is where I started to give a more precise look into the Sermon on the mount. IF you recognize yourself in the conversations here above, keep reading with me a bit further along the line of the Luke's Sermon on the Mount in Luke chapter 6. I discovered a remarkable turn (twist) in the flow of his teaching. Indeed we read at first from vers 27 : be merciful, even to your enemies, and do

good, give without asking back etc., etc. , but then suddenly in Luke 6 verse 37, Jesus adds something remarkable, as if he foresaw a possible misunderstanding : “Let go and you will be let go.”

Slow me down, Lord!

Ease the pounding of my heart.

by the quieting of my mind.

Steady my hurried pace.

with a vision of the eternal reach of time.

Give me amid the confusion of the day,

the calmness of everlasting hills,

Break the tensions of my nerves

and muscles with the soothing music

of the singing streams that live in my memory.

Help me to know the magical, restoring power of sleep.

Teach me the art of taking minute vacations

slowing down to look at a flower,

to chat with a friend, to pat a dog,

to watch a spider build a web,

to smile at a child,

or to read a few lines from a good book.

Remind me each day

*that the race is not always to the swift;
that there is more to life
than increasing its speed.
Let me look upward
into the branches of the towering oak
and know that it grew great and strong
because it grew slowly and well.
Slow me down, Lord,
and inspire me to send my roots deep
into the soil of life's enduring values,
and that I may grow toward the stars
of my greater destiny.*

(Wilferd A. Peterson.)

Part I

The Art of Letting Go

Over the years I have read stories to my children, and one of the stories I read was Rascal. The story, as I was to discover years later, was not about a boy and his raccoon. It was about loving, and losing what you love. It was about growing up, about learning when to let go, and how. Which is to say, it was about life itself.

For all of life is learning when to let go, and how. How to let go of dolls. When to let go of friends and neighborhoods and summer jobs. How to let go of childhood and adolescence of the single life. How to let go of your children, in retirement your Job.

And someday, how to let go of life itself.

Ken Gire: Windows of the Soul p.81

Chapter 1

Letting Go Touches All of Life

Letting go is difficult. It goes against our nature. We have a natural longing to hold on to things, to get situations under control, to maneuver business relations to our advantage, and to keep people dear to us close by.

The French thinker Rousseau once said: 'Man is born free but is everywhere in chains.' There is truth to that. There is often something behind this longing to hold on: something inside that is holding on to me, imprisoning me. Sooner or later, everyone is confronted with the inability to let go and the pain this causes. Whether human beings are really born free is another issue, but clearly we do not easily know how to let go. We must learn.

Perhaps not everyone will agree with this right away. When we are aware of the moments or places, we feel free in life, we often think this means we are free in general, as a whole person. But in reality, we are often blind to those areas in our lives where we are not free. In fact, there is actually no aspect of life where letting go will not become important to us.

Where letting go might play a role...

Of course, the most obvious example is raising children. It is well known that parents often have a tough time letting go. With good intentions, parents often want to arrange everything for their children, to prevent things from going wrong for them and to help

them avoid making mistakes. Many children in such households end up grumbling: “cannot they just let me go?”.

Yet it struck me that this subject of learning to let go encompasses far more areas than that of upbringing alone. Not being able to let go of your children always means that you cannot let go of something within yourself, something that drives you to hold on to the other. If we are honest, we ask ourselves: what is it that actually makes it so difficult for me to let go of the other? Why do I not give the other the space to be fully themselves? These can be very different things: fears... or unconscious ideals, unfulfilled dreams. This brings us into the realm of our own inner life, the inside of our lives, psychology, counseling and spiritual growth.

Letting go in political conflicts

But before you think that this is therefore a personal subject and has to do only with my private life, I point out that the art of letting go touches all the problems we hear about in the world-crises today. Think of the conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza and, closer to home, the coexistence of European people with people of other races and cultures. The Croat Miroslav Volf wrote a book about this *Exclusion and Embrace* (Nashville 1996). The message of this book is that people will not come to peace as long as they hold on to their own national identity as a value to which everything else (and everyone else...) must be subordinate. ‘Only when I was able to put my being Croatian in second place and place Jesus Christ at the center did I become free from my hatred’. That is a form of letting go. He describes this as a kind of revolution in the style of Abraham. Cruel wars and revolutions take place because the real

revolution, that started with Abraham was not followed. I come back to this later on.

The world of business

We could start a process of self-examination by looking at the things to which we attach our identity and worth: my possessions, my car, my position and title, or my company. In the time of the Great Depression many shareholders suddenly lost all their money. One man on Wall Street reportedly jumped to his death, convinced that his self-worth was totally wrapped up in what he possessed. As the shares crashed, so crashed the man. He never learned to let go.

In a Dutch magazine created for, in their own words, ‘free-thinking managers’, a top personnel director for a large Dutch company was recently interviewed about her learning style. She answered:

LETTING GO IS A CHOICE

*‘For me, learning means teasing myself, taking on challenges that I actually find a little frightening. Pressure makes things fluid, I often say. But for me, developing means more than just learning. It actually has more to do with **un-learning**. Unlearning something is often so difficult that most people don’t even dare to try. And that’s unfortunate, because it really can make a great difference. What have I unlearned? Forcing a decision at the end of a rough week. Being able to cross it off your ‘to do’ list does give a feeling of relief, but it is often an illusion. That is rarely a good moment to make a choice. Now I deliberately choose the moment for important decisions. So how do I develop myself? **By letting go, letting go and letting go.**’ (Interview with Saskia van Walsum, NeXT September 2000).*

Images of God

So the art of letting go reaches into a wide variety of settings in our lives. Not surprisingly it even plays a role in how I deal with God. There is a book about St. John of the Cross entitled *When Gods Die* (John Welch, Paulist Press, 1990). He said: In the life of faith it is impossible to grow without letting go. Many of our doubts are the fruit of holding on to wrong images of God and in what St. John called 'the dark night of the soul' God 'sets us free from the grip of these images to grow to deeper knowledge. The Scottish preacher J. B. Philips once wrote about this in a book called: *Your God is too small* (Touchstone, 2004) and mentioned different images that can form a problem, like seeing God as a kind of Policeman or as just only the great Watchmaker who created all things and then left it alone, etc. Again, the key is letting go.

Our technological age feeds a spirit of control

Letting go has an especially interesting relevance to the influence of technology on our lives. Our society is deeply marked by the growth of science and technology. Our food, clothes, homes, trips and communication are today unimaginable without it.

Technology is actually the art of control, getting certain processes to do what we want them to do. It has had such an impact on our lives that when something seems beyond our control regarding our health or the natural world, we get afraid and concerned.

Of course there is nothing inherently wrong with technology and the longing to have an impact on things. Just the opposite. In the creation mandate given by God in Genesis 1:28, Adam is told to 'subdue the earth' and 'exercise dominion over' all the creatures on

it. This calling to care responsibly for our world applies to many areas of life today, but in our case, we often want to **take it too far**. We want to control life, even history and the future.

One of the best aspects of being human, exercising dominion, degenerates into one of the worst: exercising domination. Leadership becomes egocentric manipulation, self-development becomes self-worship, care for the other becomes control of the other.

Because of this shift letting go has become so difficult for us. This kind of domination is sometimes presented as a virtue. It can even feel good when we exercise it. And when evil feels good, it will no longer be recognized as something destructive. Letting go is difficult. We need special grace to let go.

Letting go is not pulling ourselves out of the swamp

Special grace, because when it comes to some of the deeper levels of our lives and society, it takes more than just a decision or effort in our own strength. We are often locked in patterns of judgment, fear and sadness. We sometimes do not even know ourselves at the deepest level, let alone how to break the bonds we might find there. The wise lesson of the story of Baron von Munchhausen is that: pulling ourselves up out of the swamp by our own hair is not possible. We need something else: a Hand from outside ourselves.

The lesson of the monkeys

A story from the Dutch military once stationed in Indonesia provides a telling example. The soldiers there learned to capture wild monkeys in a peculiar way. They would put a heavy glass

bottle with a narrow neck outside, with an apple in it at the bottom. The monkeys wanted the apples, so they would reach in and grab it. But with the apple in their fists, the monkeys could not pull their hands back out of the bottle. Their apple-filled hands were too big. But so was their desire for that apple. Rather than letting go to be free, they held on and were captured by the heavy bottle.

In the same way we are often held captive by what we desire. Even at great cost. The essence of the art of letting go is recognizing those things in my life which I will hold onto, no matter what the cost. Those things – those apples – all tell us the same thing: if you have me, then you will be like God.

This is of course the core of all temptations, just as it was in Eden (Genesis 3:5). Very soon after the beginning of human history human beings ate of ‘the tree’- not a literal apple tree (as painters from the Middle Ages have pictured) but the tree of deciding themselves about good and evil. The apples in the bottle are ‘fruit’ of this choice . The temptation arises from the fascinating idea that ‘now I will finally become who I want to be’ or ‘now I will be able to make of my life what I want’ – essentially, ‘now I will be able to escape death and live’. It is the ‘tree’ of wanting to be completely independent of God. Humanity has in other words removed itself from a deep dependence on God.

Art of letting go and the biblical history of salvation

In the garden of Eden it began: the core of all temptations: the tree of knowledge whose fruit promises: eat this and you will be like God. (Genesis 3:5). Very soon after the beginning of human history, human beings ate of ‘the tree’- The temptation arises from the

fascinating idea that ‘now I will finally become who I want to be’ or ‘I need this to survive’ or ‘now I will be able to make of my life what I want’ – essentially, ‘now I will be able to escape death and live’. It is the ‘tree’ of wanting to be rich in myself and completely independent of God. And so humanity removed itself from dependence on God.

This mistake was followed by the fratricide of Kain on Abel and the Babylonian confusion of tongues.

The ‘revolution’ of Abraham

Then God made a new beginning: with Abraham. This choice for Abraham begins with the command: let go! Leave your land and your kin and your father's house for the land I will show you; I will make you into a great nation (...) and through you all the families of the earth will be blessed (see Gen. 12:1-3). Only when you let go you can be a blessing to others. Abraham did it and he could do it because he trusted the promise. The postmodern person lacks the promise. Whatever he achieves serves as a launching point for the next goal to be achieved. It is restless, never ending. This kind of letting go does not lead to a pilgrim existence like Abraham knew, but to the nomadic existence that was part of Cain's legacy. Abraham ‘let go’ is led by the voice calling him. The expression ‘Abrahamic revolution’ I have taken from the book by Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*. Volf wrote: In Christ I renounce my own nationality. It is the only way to come to a solution for the great pain that exists between different nations. The beauty is: what we let go of in Christ returns to us through the ‘back door’, but now no longer as an idol but as an undeserved gift to be shared with others.

A breakthrough for the whole world

The promise made to Abraham—that all nations would be blessed through him—breaks through “in the fullness of time,” in the midst of history, when Jesus appears. In Luke 4:17, Jesus is handed the scroll in the synagogue and reads from Isaiah:

“He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

This passage contains a few striking elements. First, there is the “release of the captives.” In reality, that’s all of us, who like the monkeys in Indonesia are in the grip of our self chosen apple.

Second, this release is proclaimed with authority. Jesus Christ can do this because he offers us more than our own ‘apples’ offer. He stands there with the Messianic authority given to Him: in Him, we can anchor ourselves in God and his Kingdom and be set free from the bottle and receive the power to let go of our own “apples.”

You can only let go of something if you are offered something more beautiful! A cat will only let go of its prey when something greater is offered.

The prodigal son only returned home when, in the midst of the pigsty, an unexpected longing welled up in him—for his father’s house, which was so much better than what he was experiencing now: “Even my father’s hired servants have it better than I do,” he thought. That joyful awareness drove him back to the Father, who already saw him “from afar”! His love made him let go. The more

and better is the joy of knowing yourself accepted and loved by God, through Jesus Christ.

Promising

We are personally involved in this process of liberation. It is a gift and a skill. Difficult but very promising. For the most wondrous thing about this art of letting go is this: that what you let go of through the front door, often comes back through the back door.

Cf. Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:30–31: “Let those who use the world live as though they do not use it—for the present form of this world is passing away.”

What Paul is essentially saying is: possess things as if you do not possess them. This, wonderfully enough, gives the maximum of joy: when you receive something and hold it as a timebound gift to enjoy and to serve others, it offers the greatest pleasure. How often do we not notice that when we cling to things for ourselves, even the pleasure we once had in them starts to disappear?

The ‘realities of this world’ are meant to be a window onto something higher, as long as we receive the Giver in the gift it increases the pleasure because it was given to us in love. Things fall into place. But it always goes through a tunnel. Jesus calls this the law of the grain of wheat. It can only grow if it has first learned to let go. It has lost itself to the earth. Letting go is a form of dying. It means daring to be dependent again. Stop being your own god, stop deciding for yourself what is good or evil.!

It also means ceasing to be the god of the other person—the one you cling to and want to protect from everything and to hold on to yourself.

Closing meditation

Letting go is not just for great crises; it is woven into the small moments of every day. Each time I release control, even in something simple, I make space for God. The art begins not with grand gestures, but with small steps in ordinary life.

Chapter 2

Letting Go as an Act of Love

Abandoning?

Am I allowed as a Christian to let my neighbor go? If letting go of someone simply means abandoning them to their fate, then it would seem to be the same thing as dropping them or even casting them out. The person could even have a sense of being rejected. Many parents, friends and colleagues will for this reason choose to hold on to others to the bitter end, even if it becomes damaging.

Still the Bible speaks of letting go as a way of loving someone. It sounds paradoxical: how can loving someone and dropping them ever go together? At first glance, then, letting go seems only negative. The idea of letting go often implies distance, even coldness and brokenness. If I let go of a glass, it falls and breaks. Dare we do this with our neighbor?

The lovely little bird

Not long ago a small bird flew against a window of our house. It fell to the ground, and I went out and picked it up. As I held it in my hand and felt its little heart beating, I wanted to keep it. If I set it down somewhere, I thought, a cat would get it! I wanted to hold on to that little bird, to nurture and protect it. At the same time I knew from experience that without its own mother this little bird would never survive. So let go!

The moment I let it go, I thought this is the very thing Jesus is speaking of when He says, 'let go, and you will be let go.' It is not giving up. In fact it is just the opposite. It is giving something the chance to live as it should. Trusting someone to the One who can in fact give life! It is remarkable then that Jesus in the very same breath says, 'be merciful, just as your heavenly Father is merciful' and 'judge not, and you will not be judged'.

We saw in the introduction that the Greek word for letting go: *apoluo* can be translated in four ways: saying farewell, sending out, setting free, or letting go. Most commentaries choose 'setting free', in the sense that a condemned person, a debtor or a prisoner can be set free. But we can interpret it more broadly: let everyone go, who is unable to develop in the way they should because you are holding them down. It is indeed possible to be too 'loving' and too 'kind', too warm and too close, so that you actually become a hindrance to someone's growth. This is why Jesus adds a remarkable promise to the command: If you let go, you will be set free yourself! Letting go also comes with a process of healing from my own sometimes hidden dreams and wounds.

In this chapter I want to look more closely at how this works in two areas: in our relationships with others and in our relationship with ourselves.

1. Toward ourselves

Even with people we love the most, it can happen that our caring love comes across with a hidden claim. Take the story of the mother and her only son in the preface of this book. She thinks: 'Did I do enough? Is he unhappy with me? A sense of failure,

frustration, anger. Caring for people we love improves when we go through a personal process to look a step deeper inside ourselves: is my motive pure? Am I in fact unwilling to let the person go for selfish reasons and do I try to keep him by giving more and more? In being good there can be hidden unconscious hidden fears. Yes, indeed by being too good.

This is sometimes the result of our upbringing. In my youth in a big family talking about feelings was rare. It has to do with the culture in which we live. It happens more than we think that we talk about anything except our true feelings. Especially when we live in a family where we have never *learned* to express our feelings. All who are raised in big families find this difficult. But what makes it worse is that putting pressure on others to speak about their true feelings often has the opposite effect.

There is a great psychological wisdom in the command of Jesus to learn to let go. This word exposes what the problem is for people who are too good, too caring and too giving. There is a deep tendency to want to hold on to the other, just like I wanted to keep that little bird. Jesus points such people to freedom in the art of letting go: the one who does let go will be let go (set free) herself. This is an intriguing promise. It helps us to do what we may be did not learn in our upbringing: to delve a step deeper in the partially unconscious inner side for ourselves. For the mother inner fear to lose. For the son the feelings that accompanied his legitimate desire to do things for him self (or: what the bible calls the urge to leave your father and mother (Genesis 2:24). Both are prisoners of their own (understandable) feelings: Let go is a command: in relationship to our own inner wrong feelings. Let go: the inner fear. For the son: realise your desire is ok, but explain and let go of your

feelings that the love of your mother would not allow you to become yourself.

In education

In raising children and education it is hard for parents to let their children go! In every developmental phase dangers lurk everywhere--when the child rides its bike for the first time, or is going to summer camp on her own, later goes to the pub till late at night etc. etc. These situations are unavoidable, so how can a father or mother cope? Letting go and saying good-bye seems so impossible! Let us look to the well known parable of the lost son in Luke 15, the well-known parable of the lost son. The father gives his son his inheritance and lets him go. His youngest son asked for it. He wanted to go out into the world. But it is rather strange for the father to do so, because he had not yet passed away. In New Testament times, you would not give your inheritance to your children while you were still alive. This would be highly unusual, and the father had every right to refuse his son. He probably disagreed with him on this point, yet he gave his son his inheritance because he knew he had to let him go. To allow him to walk the path of independent decision-making, along a road whereupon he knew his son would face many difficulties and anything could happen. And indeed, it did go wrong. This is how highly the Bible views the uniqueness and freedom of individuals. The value of every person lies in the fact that he or she is not a robot but a real person, who grows only if he travels along that difficult path of his own actions (and creativity)

Many times fear is a reason. You don't dare let your child go because you are scared to lose him or her. It can be as simple as

that. You think "If I don't care for him, then who will?" Or "If I don't connect with him, I'll lose him, and we will end up living side by side as strangers." We are constantly driven by fear. Fear to lose, fear to fail, fear to be rejected, fear of pain (see "If only I could believe" chapter 4). Fear is a bad counsellor. As long as fear controls us, we damage other people and are prisoners of our own selves. Do only fears prevent us from letting go? I do not think so. We can also cherish dreams about what the other should be. We have wishes for ourselves, our children, our environment (situation), our girl/boyfriend, our church, our work... Those expectations can only be realized when we are in control. When we cannot realize them ourselves we will pass them on to our children and they end up carrying the load of these wish fulfilments. The only way out is: entrust them to God. and let go.

2. Toward others

When Jesus says, 'let go', we saw in the first place how this comes with a lesson for our own self. But it also changes the relationship with all people around us. I quoted in the first chapter already Saskia van Walsum in business- and Miroslav Volff in political relationships.

In friendships

Friederike Klenk, a German child education specialist, refers to an example in her own life how important this was for her friendship in an article 'Liebe heist loslassen' (in the German journal *Offensive Junge Christen* March/April 1997, p. 87). She tells in this article about a weekend she spent with her best friend. There were some hard moments when they were together as can happen even in the best friendships. But between friends one can also be frank about

the reasons of these frictions and learn from it: So she wrote: "I hate it if I am at your place and you constantly run to the telephone every time it rings, because you so badly need to answer it. Every time I must decide again whether I will accept you as you are or hold on to my dream of how I would like you to be. 'If I do not continually let go of my ideas of how I would like you to be, you will continually frustrate me, because you are at that moment not what I want you to be. And instead of withdrawing, insulted and hurt, I have discovered that it is for me really a saving power to realize how special it is that God loves us as we are. It is only after this realization that I dare to say to you that I would like to be with you without being disturbed by all those telephone calls.'

Frederike adds : I could write this to her frankly and relaxed because this insight came hand in hand with the gift of letting go as an act of love!

So, letting go in contact with the other person comes with an attitude of forgiveness, healing of my own anger and acceptance of the friend as he is and not as you want her to be.

3. Other obstacles

Sometimes we would love to let go, but we cannot. This happens when the person we live with is not a child or a friend but an enemy. Is letting go here also a viable way? We seem caught in a prison of pain and bitterness. How can we ever come free?

We saw how in another translation of the command in Luke 5: 37 the translation for letting go is: forgive (in the NGB). Without forgiveness it is impossible to come free. I know this is easily said. How can we forgive when the other person does not even admit

doing wrong? Or if they are already dead and gone? It can help to realize that we are not asked to do this for Jesus' sake alone, but for our own sake! Do I want to remain in the prison created for me by this other person? If not, I have the choice to forgive. Forgiveness and letting go belong indeed together and many times the act of forgiveness creates the room for letting it go. In fact, as Jesus said, only by faith forgiving sets us free to let go. The latter does not precede the former, just the opposite. It is the gospel of the forgiveness of sins that makes us able to let go. Only in this gospel do we discover space to stand up again and taste our own freedom.

The key is to admit that I myself in my own power cannot do it, but in the name and power of Jesus, I forgive. I let go. Just as Jesus prayed for those soldiers who crucified Him.

In family relationships

I think of a young man who came to talk to me about his father's complete lack of encouragement regarding his education. He had chosen to go to art school, but his father's only dream was that his son would become a lawyer – a dream he had had for himself and never achieved. Such longings, ideals and dreams are also something that make it extremely hard for us to let go.

If we are honest, we all have many expectations about how life should go. We have dreams for ourselves, for our children, for our surroundings, our friends and our church, our jobs and our callings. Especially as parents we have an idea of the life we would have wanted to attain, and we quickly project that on our children, even unconsciously. Children are sensitive to this burden. Unfortunately,

many sense that if they don't turn out the way the parents seem to want, it will be a great disappointment.

As we saw hidden dreams can keep us in prison but have also a negative effect in the life of our children. They will be burdened by deep insecurities. They will very often go different ways than we had hoped for but keep having doubting questions like: Am I really worth less as a person if I do not want to be a lawyer? If I do not achieve what my father did or my mother hoped for? Write that book or got that degree they hoped me to get? The art of letting go gives room to our children to chase their own dreams instead of being burdened with mine: letting go sets children and parents free.

Test

Frederike Klenk offers us a test to help us discover how good we are in letting go. I will mention three of the questions here, which we can ask ourselves.

Can I rejoice in the independence of my children or my partner, or do I feel trapped when things happen that are beyond my control?

Do I experience feelings of guilt when I want to do something else than what is expected of me?

Do I feel like a failure if I don't get the job or promotion or recognition that I so badly want? Do I feel less worthy as a person?

If we can answer 'yes' to any of these questions, we still have more to learn about the art of letting go. An honest look at ourselves may reveal to us for the first time what we are actually doing. Suddenly there may be space to ask the question: could it be that my

tendency to hold on is not only imprisoning others, but also imprisoning me? Could it be that I am trying to keep them dependent on me? Or that I have hidden conditions for my appreciation of them?' Honesty always helps!

Let us not forget: letting go is risky. We can only dare to do it building on grace. We can only dare to do it when we have met the Hand who gives it, who carries us as we try. The American preacher Charles R. Swindoll has made a few good observations about the art of letting go in his book *Grace is a Risk*. I would like to close with a passage from that book:

Letting go does not mean that I let go of love, it means that I may not determine how the other should live.

Letting go does not mean cutting all ties, it means that I will not dominate the other.

Letting go does not mean that I am just enabling someone else, but that I want to learn from what happens, whatever that is.

Letting go is acknowledging my helplessness, which means that the outcome is out of my hands.

Letting go does not want to change or accuse the other, since I can only change myself.

Letting go is not nagging but caring.

Letting go is not coming down on someone for something but giving support.

Letting go is not judging but letting the other be a person.

Letting go is not wanting to take care of someone else's business but letting them do it themselves.

Letting go is not being protective but letting the other see what is realistic.

Letting go is not denial but acceptance.

Letting go is not whining, blaming, or quarrelling, but looking for my own shortcomings and correcting them.

Letting go is not wanting to make everything fit my own wishes, but accepting what each day brings.

Letting go is not criticising everyone and wanting to change them but trying to become the best that I can be.

Letting go is not regretting the past but living for the future.

Letting go is becoming less afraid and more loving.

Closing meditation

To let go is to love in freedom. It means I do not cling; I do not bind, I do not possess. Love that releases is the love that trusts God's work in the other.

A Prayer for Understanding

Help me, God,

*To realize it is in being crippled that I learn to cling, and in limping
that I learn to lean,*

that victory comes not in how courageously I struggle

but in how completely I surrender,

and that this is how I am to grow,

by being defeated,

decisively,

by constantly greater things.

Help me to understand that Your power is perfected in weakness,

so that when I am rendered weak,

You are given the opportunity to be shown strong.

Help me to understand, too,

that “more things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of,

for so the whole round earth is every way

bound in gold chains about the feet of God...”

Chapter 3

the Gift of Letting Go in Old Age

Many enter old age just as it comes. Suddenly, there it is, the AOW, (the Dutch old age pension), the free time, a new lifestyle emerges. The art of letting go is never so important than in old age. Yes, it is great to have more time for a hobby, for children and grandchildren or to go on a cruise. But in all this letting go creeps in. The moment that you must let go one thing after another is unavoidable. Many refuse to stop. You see elderly people who want to stubbornly cling to successful adulthood: keep going, hold on to bygone position, and try to stay young. There is even a medicine against the 'age-markers': wrinkles and gray hair... (!). Opposite of this style of aging is the (wrong) way of thinking that now life is over. Two extremes: some let life flow out of their own hand and think 'it is all over'. This leads to a bleak view: old age is a decline, emptiness, your strength diminishes, and you give up. These disillusioned see old age as a loss of all the beauty and strength that now lies behind us. But stubbornly holding on to the past and to glory in it is the other deviation. It comes with a hidden refusal that life comes in chapters that more and even better is still coming.

Two dangerous pitfalls in old age. Both attitudes can be an obstacle to facing the real challenge of this stage of life. But there is one thing both attitudes have in common. Both have not learned the deep wisdom of letting go. Letting go is the key. It is not 'dropping' and it is not holding fast. It is entrusting. Three points are

important. A new self-image (1), taking on new challenges (2) and holding on to your destiny (3).

1. Growing self-understanding: who we really are!

Suddenly you notice that your self-image was indeed strongly influenced by what people think and thought of you. It feels like a striptease. What remains when all those layers of your public persona are peeled away? Are you an onion, or are you a tulip? With an onion, after the last layer is peeled away, there is emptiness; with a tulip, there is a bud, the flower in bud. You have a destination. What helps us switch gears? It's beautiful to read about our former queen, princess Beatrix, spending a lot of time sculpting. I know a teacher at a high school who started making films after turning 65. A businessman became a street pastor. That is to say: switching means growing to be more truly yourself. It cannot come without the art of letting go. Being able to put into perspective your 'past self', how you used to act. Falling back on who we truly are is simply relaxing and enjoying the fact that we exist and that we are allowed to exist as beloved children of God. With suddenly upcoming new possibilities and with new qualities. Many elderly people are said to have become milder: more approachable, easier to talk to. I think it has to do with this. They have become more themselves.

2. Reframing

Why do people lose courage? Matthias Horx, who wrote a beautiful book 'The Future after Corona', says: we lose courage when we see the future only in the light of the past as a repetition in another form of the same. This is especially a great danger in old age. The metaphor of life as a rowboat speaks volumes: you row forward but your gaze is directed to where you just passed, backwards. Plant an apple tree, said Luther. This idea is very interesting.



Matthias Horx calls that *reframing reality*. He writes: don't let yourself be guided by ideals from the past, but instead show something of what the future could be. Let the future be the frame around the present. If you plant an apple tree a glimpse of the future becomes visible. Dreaming of a future where black and white children can play together in peace stimulated Martin Luther King to the peaceful action against discrimination. What do you take from the hope on the future as stimulus for action in the present?

But if your vision of the future is fatalistic (like "this present world will perish anyhow" or "poverty and hunger will never end") it is

difficult to be involved in any 'apple type' action. When you give the future of the Kingdom hands and feet in the present, the presence will appear in a different light. It gives by way of speaking the portrait of the present a different framework. Give the message of the Bible on a hopeful future content in the present. We will go to work with the usual insights. We will plant an apple tree with Luther.

3. Life 's destiny

What happens when the ailments of old age strike? From lack of energy to dementia. Then those ideals pursued from the past extension break off at our hands. How do I still have the courage not to lose courage?

Not many are optimists like the story goes of former American president Ronald Reagan. When the doctor said after his annual medical check-up, "Mr. President, I have bad news for you," he said, "Go ahead, tell me, doctor." The doctor said, "You have Alzheimer's." Reagan: "It's lucky I don't have cancer." But we must say with most people the reality is that with old age confusion sets in and discourages.

How do we keep courage? It is crucial to understand that life has a destiny. We are not placed in this world to flourish and die like a plant. A higher calling was given to all humans after the creation. At the end waits our destiny. It is a journey with a homecoming. In the gospel of John we read the promise: 'let not your hearts be troubled: in the house of my Father there are many mansions. If it were not so I would have told you! I go to prepare a place for you

(14:2). Our final home. A pre-fab house ready to be placed in the future Kingdom of God. God the Father is waiting to welcome us.

The apostle Paul wrote towards the end of his life to his spiritual son, Timothy, not “I am glad it is finally over”. He said, ‘I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award me’ (2 Tim. 4:7,8). Paul looks back at what is behind, but he also looks forward to what is still to come - the destination, the final consummation, cleansed and crowned by God’s grace! In this perspective all of life can be viewed as the earlier building stones for the final stage. Round the last bend is the winning post, the destination of our journey, the city of which the LORD God himself is the builder and architect.

To grow old with this in mind means to look back, not with self-satisfaction, noting how well I had done, but with deep thankfulness experiencing all I have achieved as something given to me - aware of my failings and fallenness too as part of life. I can have peace with the fact that my path of life is coming to an end because I know that the Lord of Life is waiting for me at the finishing line - and he has prepared a unique place at his banquet for me and for every other finalist.

I like the Google maps app on my mobile. Type in Google Maps: what is your position and then destiny and the road opens up, it will be shown to you step by step. Simeon is here the best example. When Jesus as a baby was circumcised on the eighth day in the temple, he took the little baby in his arms and said : Now Lord I can go in peace because my eyes have seen the salvation. Seeing the higher light helps to let go.

With the years, we discover that strength does not lie in holding tightly, but in entrusting what we cannot keep. Each surrender prepares us for the great surrender: placing our life itself in God's hands. Letting go includes an increase of expectation and even joy of what is to come.

Closing meditation

With the years, we discover that strength does not lie in holding tightly, but in entrusting what we cannot keep. Help us God, to prepare ourselves for the great surrender: placing our life itself in God's hands. Make letting go your final gift to me!

(see "Life's destiny" W.G Rietkerk, KOK Uitgevers Utrecht 2023)

"If you love something, let it free.
When it comes back, it is yours;
when it does not come back, it never was."

Chapter 4

Letting Go in the World's Spiritual Traditions

Orientation: Letting go and Letting go is not the same.

A great deal is written today about the art of letting go. But what Jesus meant by it is something quite different from what a Buddhist monk, a postmodern philosopher, or a self help book in the supermarket teaches. What Jesus taught was closely connected to his explanation of our human condition. He taught that we were created by God and that we later went astray. The fault does not lie in creation but in our straying. That straying is *not* just a matter of “losing our balance” as if there are only some cosmetic changes needed as presented in most of the popular self help books. They do not address the heart of the matter.

In Eastern religions letting go is equivalent to detachment. That gives me a Stoic feeling. With Jesus letting go is not detaching as if the earth or bread and wine were somehow wrong.

Postmodernity makes it a lifestyle. Do not fix anything. Turn every resting point into a starting point. It sounds appealing, and it is certainly a correction to modernism with its fixed ideals, which have left us disappointed. But in postmodernism the pendulum swings to the opposite extreme. Jesus never intended letting go to serve as an advertisement for a lifestyle in which you attach yourself to nothing.

By examining how various worldviews around us understand the art of letting go, we can clearly grasp what the Bible actually means by it. We will first look at the way our postmodern era speaks about letting go, then turn to how the East and the new religiosity understand it. The crucial question remains: are we building on quicksand or on a rock? as Jesus asked us in the sermon on the mount (Matthew 7:24-27). Thirdly we will look to anthroposophy and 'happinez'. They offer cosmetic changes to find a better balance in life.

Letting go in a postmodern perspective

In our postmodern time the art of letting go is popular. Many young people choose changing jobs, struggle to commit—not only to a workplace or place of residence, but also to relationships. “Moving on” suits us well. The 1994 Dutch Book Week gift, *Transit*, written by Hella Haasse, was about traveling and moving forward as a way of life. Always being on the way. Holding on to nothing, always letting go. Living in the present. Often phrased as living like *nomads*. In the July/August issue of *UTNE Reader* (a magazine that claims to offer the best of the alternative press), the topic is the “nomadic existence” of the postmodern person, who continually changes residence, job, and circle of friends. The world seems to fall into two groups: rich and poor nomads. The nomadic *elite* travel out of free will, and the *destitute* travel because they are desperate.” “Wanderers by choice” is one of the main articles in this issue. “Exile used to be one of the worst things that could happen to you; now it is a glorious adventure” (p. 46 ff.). *Modernity* made us prisoners of ideals but In a *postmodern* time none of that is necessary anymore.

Interestingly the word and concept of *nomad* comes originally from biblical times, where Israel before meeting God is characterised as a nomadic people in for example Ezechiel 16:3 but than, as we read in the following verses: God came by and saw Israel as a baby still wrestling to live, and He said : live! He made them his people with a hopeful future. That changed them from nomads into pilgrims.

In the book by Miroslav Volf that I mentioned in chapter one (*Exclusion and embrace*) Volf writes that we can see in Abraham the difference between letting go without a foundation and letting go while standing on firm ground. In this book he describes the nomadic ideal as it is portrayed in the writings of French postmodern thinkers: “Nomads always stand at the center of their own world. They have no fixed place, but wander from place to place, always departing and always arriving. Every place of arrival is a place of departure, every resting point a starting point” (a.w. p. 40). Volf shows how this outwardly resembles Abraham... yet he too did not simply set out and let go.. Abraham was called, and Abraham had a destination. And he set out with a living community around him, not as a wandering knight. At times he even entrenched himself so firmly that war was the result (Gen. 14). But it is true: he constantly had to learn again how to let go. That is where it began (Gen. 12:1–3), and it never stopped. He had to learn to trust; he had to learn to let go the idols of his homeland, his fears and anxieties. He had to let go of Ishmael, the son according to the flesh, but also of Isaac, the son of the promise. Yet at the deepest level this was not because he lived a heroic nomadic existence, but because he had heard a Voice. He was more a pilgrim than a nomad.

Eastern religions

The best book I could find in this field was a book with the title about letting go by Ayya Khema,ⁱ written out of a **Buddhist worldview**: *Be an Island: The Buddhist practice of inner peace* (in Dutch: *Wees een eiland voor je zelf: de kunst van het loslaten door zelfbevrijding en meditatie*, Heemstede, 1994). The author is a Buddhist and defines letting go as salvation by 'detachment'. Underlying this is the worldview of the Buddha around the four great Truths: being born is suffering; growing old is suffering; being sick is suffering; dying is suffering. Deliverance, ultimately, lies in escaping from this circle of existence. The art of letting go is the way to this. It includes not only letting go of the bad things but also of the good things. Detachment is the ultimate goal. This kind of detachment touches all facets of life. With the help of the eight-fold path of the Buddha, one can withdraw from material life and from being born, growing up, declining and dying.

In the well-known book: "Buddha and his teachings,"ⁱⁱ by H. Beck we read: "Two roads, O followers must be avoided by him who has entered the spiritual life: the way of *gratifying* the inner lusts which don not lead to detachment, and the way of *self-punishment*, which is painful and of no use and which will in this visible and future life lead to suffering." (p.53). So the art of letting go in the style of "detachment" does not only touch all of life (as expressed in the first chapter of this book) but it creates distance, detachment from all of life.

The Christian notion however is that sin is the problem, not the material life from birth to death itself. The problem is not the creation itself but that which has spoiled the creation. Therein lies

a fundamental difference. The Buddhist and the Christian diagnosis of the problem is different. The Christian and the Buddhist have in common that they both acknowledge that life is abnormal and that man is sick and both prescribe, like a doctor, medicine to a sick patient, but the Buddhists makes a different diagnosis than the Christian in saying that the root of all problems lays in the material being itself. It is this evil from which we must withdraw along the eight-fold path. Inner peace is the promise at the end. Become an island.. Here I could not avoid thinking of the American musician Paul Simon and his song: *I am a rock, I am an island*. May be he practiced the detachment of Ayya Khema to discover that it leads to depressive loneliness at the end. Eventually, you become one with the self-galvanized Buddha for whom earthly existence lies defeated at his feet. There is nothing or nobody that can touch him. But for the Christian, Jesus stands central. Here we see someone who suffered grievously under sin, brokenness, and judgement tin order to redeem and restore the creation. This is based on another diagnosis and leads to another prescription: the problem is sin. That's what we need to be delivered from!

Anthroposophy and 'Happinez'

In Holland two books in this field are popular : Kurt Tepperwein and his book "*Letting go those things which don't bring happiness*" and A.J. Welman. *The wisdom of letting go in old age (in Dutch: Ouder worden: de kunst van het loslaten)*. Both emphasize that each person learns two things in all phases of life: hanging on and letting go. The trick is to leave behind those things which only belong to a particular stage of life. Just like a transformed caterpillar sheds his cocoon. A toddler that grows learns how to move on and let go. He

loses interest in his old toys and looks for new toys. As he grows up, he gets more proficient and looks for new challenges.

Puberty is a crucial phase during which the principle of hanging on and letting go plays a big role. Everything gets tried out. The young adult even gets the mandate to let go of his father and mother and cling to his wife (Genesis 2:24).

Dr Welman uses walking as an example. "When you walk, your foot touches a piece of ground which then, with the next movement, you must let go again in order to take the next step". In growing up as a person we see something similar: we are constantly in motion but those who get stuck in past experiences, stunt their development. Parents must learn how to let their almost-smothered children leave the nest. And having grown old we are still by no means done with the task of letting go. At the end we say, "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit." We let go of life.

I like Welman's view. Interesting is his sharp observation of problems in 'letting go'. He says that one can deviate from the norm in two ways. There are people who cannot attach themselves and there are those who cannot detach themselves. They are unable to find the balance between hanging on and letting go. See the third part of this book.

The first group includes all those people who *don't dare to attach* themselves to anyone or anything. They can't make up their minds about what to major in at college or what type of work they should do, whom they should marry, or where they should live. They are flighty, uninvolved, and unable to make decisions. According to Dr Welman this happens because these people, in their youth, were

not affirmed enough and had little security to which they could attach themselves. Because, if you don't know who you are, you also don't know what fits with you. There is always an undertone of relativism in their talk: "Ah! What do I matter anyway?" "What does it matter anyhow? Who cares? Everything is possible in many different ways." These people were emotionally neglected and a weak will is the result as well as an inability to make decisions. Letting go doesn't even enter the picture because it was never learned. One cannot detach when you are never attached.

The second group of people includes those who cling and *hang on too tightly*. They won't ever dare to let go. These people, according to Welman, grew up in an environment of fear. During their growing-up years they continually saw red warning lights: "Look out! If you let go, everything will collapse. Keep things under control." Behind this lies the thought: "Live perfectly, because then nothing can go wrong." And: "The more perfect your life, the less chance there is of things going wrong." In this case, letting go is difficult because of the great anxiety coupled with it. The Anthroposophists correctly note that healthy personal development includes the art of letting go.

There is a lot of wisdom in their teaching. Nevertheless : something basic is missing. For them is central that letting go means letting go of all those things in life that hinder the process of self-actualization: This is where my critique enters the picture. For most of the western people around us letting go is finding the balance in myself. As if the main problem of humans is that we are *out of balance*. For them a human being is like a grandfather clock; if the small hand or one little wheel is slightly bent out of shape, the whole clock refuses to function. But with some correction the

clock will work again . The hidden preposition is that the goal of human destiny is self-fulfillment. In the Christian worldview self-actualization cannot be the ultimate goal. It is too heavy a burden for a man to be his own God. This is not where we are made for. We are made for higher glory. In the anthroposophical view we keep circling around ourselves, not to say; we remain prisoners of our own ego!

Happinez

Most popular books lean on this worldview. They help people to find balance. Earthy wisdom!. See the books of for example Paul Coelho, Celestine Prophecy and the popular practical guides you can buy in the supermarket or any regular bookshop. Restore the harmony. But that ignores that the problem in letting go goes deeper as I will show in the next chapter.

The Sermon on the Mount

In the Sermon on the Mount letting go is spoken of in a completely different way. It speaks about the total reversal of the ego-centered life. Luther expressed this attitude with the Latin words: man is *incurvatus in se*: turned inward toward oneself. Here lies the core of the need of mankind. Human beings are not disharmonious because of bad habits or because of their earthly desires .Our problem is **sin**: not the fact that we have desires, or that we are out of balance but that we see our self in the center of the universe. This is our inborn situation since the fall of mankind in the beginning and has turned us inward toward ourselves. We cannot free ourselves from that. We must be redeemed. That happens when we allow God, in a totally unexpected manner, to rescue us from the deep and to show us grace. Only the power of His love has

the strength to free us from the tyranny of our own “self.” A cat lets go of the mouse in its mouth when given a piece of bacon. Likewise, only God can loosen the grip of our “self” when He treats us with the tenderness of the love of Christ. Only God can free us from the prison of the self.

He accomplishes this through love. Because His love for us was so great, He went all the way for us: He died for us. By accepting Him we receive a new mindset, in which His death becomes the judgment over our old way of holding on. The continual art of letting go plays here a major role (see Luke 6:37). You do not truly learn to let go through detachment, as Buddhism teaches, nor through ego-driven striving for self-realization, as in anthroposophy, nor through the method of relaxation recommended by The Celestine Prophecy. We become truly free only by surrendering to God, by confessing our sin and believing that Jesus died for us on the cross and rose again and by living in relationship with Him who created us and who does not let go of what His hand has begun.

In the book *Lilith* by George MacDonald the main person is Lilith who is in deep trouble. Her friend Adam - who fulfills the role of Christ - cannot save Lilith unless she first opens her hand. In her hand she has clutched her “self.” Even when Adam commands her to let go, she cannot do it. And yet it must be done. At last Adam, at her request, cuts off her hand. Only then does her hand open, in which she had clenched the treasure of her “self” and she becomes free. She immediately falls into a deep, refreshing sleep. “Poor woman,” I said, “she will wake up with only one hand.” But Adam answered: “Where the dead mutilation clung to her, her true, lovely hand already grows.”

The gospel says that we gain our life only when we first lose it. That can happen only through the touch of God's love. Only then do we dare to jump into the depths. Letting go of what binds us and step into new responsibilities. For only one who has let go of himself can bind himself in the right way.

How can you learn to let go? We cannot do this by ourselves. I cannot do it if I am a strong personality, and I cannot do it if I am a weak personality, for I am a child of Adam. The typical trait of us human children is that we want to maintain control over our lives. We want to manage our lives ourselves, build ourselves up, keep ourselves in our own hands, develop ourselves in the way we wished we had been designed. Out of that lostness and guilt Jesus calls us away. And He says to you: "As long as you hold on to the earthly dreams you have imagined for yourself, with all the desires that belong to them, you will lose everything! Those things will imprison you! Acknowledge your guilt. Come to Me as you are, and everything will become different. With Me there is forgiveness and healing! Allow Me into your life and you will learn from Me what real life is."

For real life is that you make your life with all its dreams and desires, subordinate to the saving work of God. God loves you, and He cherishes you. He longs to make our lives bear fruit. But just as a vine must be pruned and cut, so we must be grafted – and that cannot happen without the art of letting go.

Closing meditation

Many cultures speak of release, detachment, surrender. But true letting go is a heart-breaking operation. Lord, help me not to hold

on to my 'self' as final stronghold but to deliver it to You. Help me to love without fear. It is a school of the heart, on invitation of the Master.

Chapter 5

Learning the Art of Letting Go

Letting go is a struggle. As we have seen it touches all of life. It is not something you do once and then you are ready. If we follow the eastern ascetics it leads to loss. Nor can we go the way of the anthroposophist's and popular self-help books. They remain self bound.

I believe that the foundational law of the Kingdom of Heaven has its own base, and a whole other source and promise. That is what I want to point out in this final part.

A. The base

Jesus asks us to let go only because he gives us a base for doing so. The basis is God's unconditional love in Christ. He sees each individual as unique. It is wonderfully freeing to know that you are not the god of another human being. You don't have to let the other go in the ultimate sense because you can entrust them to God. Sometimes that also means you leave that person in the care of others. At times that might be the best thing you can do. But this comes to us many times with a feeling of dying. True letting go **is** in deepest sense dying to our self made dreams and longings. In order to receive something deeper: the discovery that your value as a person does not lie in what you have or what you do, but in who you are in God. To discover this is a remarkably freeing experience. In Christ you can stand before the face of God as a unique human being. The gospel lays this foundation.

I learn this especially from Jesus words to Mary in John 20: He did not reject her: quite the opposite: He said: I go to my father and your father. He is there for you. It is even His name JHWH= I am there for you! I believe this was for Mary a kind of dying. Dying to her fear to stand on her own feet. Jesus pointed to her : no, you are not really left alone. From now on His Father was also her Father. That is the foundation.

In the same way the mother in the introduction of the book should stop playing God to her neighbor and learn to let go even where it feels like a kind of dying to herself because there is *the foundation of the Father 's love* who will take care of her son and of her.

B. The plan

Secondly, it is important to know the mainline of biblical teaching : God working to move mankind back on the main track. Realize that our lives are not just random. God wants to lead us -- to carry us. He takes us in his school. To discover this and to keep counting on it, despite the shame and pain, is fundamentally important.

I refer to difficult circumstances we fear or we worry about. I am not saying God sends us all the things that come across our path, but it is true that he will work all things to their best for those who love Him. (Romans 8:28). *His plan is the source of our energy.* We can never master the art of letting go if we do not take strength from the Lord. Trust Him in his love for you.

C. The promise

That leads me to the third point: God is the big sculptor, unremittingly busy, carving out of raw materials the uniqueness of

man: making us alike to His image. The big craftsman, who sees our true personhood, laboriously chisels pieces away and makes us into the people we really are. The story goes that the great sculptor Michelangelo when asked what he was doing as he was curving a stone said : I am setting free the angel that is hidden in it.

Letting go is an exercise in dying; but that dying is an echo of the mystery of Gods work.. In nature a seed does not grow unless it dies into the ground. That is an image of the Law of the Kingdom. Letting go is such an important subject because it is part of this Law of the Kingdom. That is the promise and in the next part of this book we will see how God is doing this in the life of one man: Jacob. It will create room for growth and freedom. God the Father leads us on this road. Christ is King and the kernel of corn who set the tune. (John 12:24).In the rhythm of grasping and letting go, the body and the soul of a person can grow. That is the echo of the mystery of Gods work. Natural wisdom finds its truest source in the "law of growth" of the Kingdom. That's how God has wanted it. Along this road we are blessed. Along that road of sowing, the grain can grow and its true life-form can unfurl. Set free and you will be set free. Send off and you will be sent off. Say goodbye and you may begin anew again. God is behind that and He asks us to trust. He says, "It will be well with you" because He is no policeman or judge but more a lover who is endeared towards us. And he himself has gone ahead of us on the road of letting go.

Closing meditation

No one masters letting go at once. Each loss, each farewell, each letting go comes with an invitation, even a command (as Jesus said:)

to lose your life and to trust more deeply, to live more freely, to. In letting go, love comes to its goal..

LETTING GO

There are wishes we must let go of.

There are people we must let go of.

There are memories we must let go of.

There are plans we must let go of.

Letting go takes strength.

Letting go brings tears.

Letting go raises questions.

Letting go can awaken anger.

We cannot let go on our own.

We need someone

who helps us and supports us.

Jesus Christ enables us to let go.

If He teaches us this,

it is a gift from Him to us.

Thus, the ability to let go becomes grace.

And when we can let go in this way,

we become free and open to something new:

to what God wants to give us - a new beginning.

Margrith, 27 (Ethos, Schwengeler Verlag Berneck)

Part II

Jacob: A Life Shaped by Letting Go

Introduction

The aim of this second part of the book is to show in the life of one person how hard and how important it is to learn the art of letting go. I tell about the life of Jacob, who became one of the patriarchs of Israel, how everything in his life revolved around the art of letting go. How his inability to let go gave him a bad reputation already at birth (chapter 1), how he later believed he had to seize the blessing promised to him by his own means (chapter 2), how God taught him in a dream the foundation of letting go. (chapter 3), and then what he learned during the formative period of his life (chapter 4). It continues with how he experienced the fruit of letting go upon his return to the Promised Land (chapter 5). Yet even at that point his learning was not complete (chapters 6 and 7).

Then comes the turning point in Jacob's life where he finally finds the only basis for letting go: holding on to the blessing (chapter 8). He then passes this on to his most loved grandchildren in the style God taught him (chapter 9) and finally, he leaves this behind to his descendants as the most precious gift he could give them (chapter 10). God gave to Jakob a new name. Israel. It became the name of all the people of Israel. In that one name is expressed that letting go is at the core of the covenant relationship between God and his people, only to be received after wrestling with God and holding on to the promise.

Chapter 1

From Raw Material to Diamond

“Immediately afterwards, the second child was born. He held tightly onto Esau’s heel! She named him Jacob” (Genesis 25:26; read the full passage Genesis 25:19–34).

The story of Jacob

Already in the story of Jacob’s birth and youth, “holding on” and “letting go” play a significant role.

Jacob’s life is part of the greater biblical story. The bible begins with the creation in Genesis 1 and 2 , the fall in Genesis 3 to 11, and then the restoration through the election of Abraham who God chooses (with his descendance) to be his instrument in saving fallen mankind: “I will make you to a great nation through which all the people on the earth will be blessed” (Genesis 12 : 1-3). Jacob is the grandson of Abraham and together with his father Isaac one of the three patriarchs of Israel.

From Genesis 1 to 11 God deals with all of humanity. But quickly after the fall and the tower of Babylon, the narrative camera zooms in on one man, on Abraham, followed later on by Isaac, Jacob, and their descendants.

God wants to renew humanity by creating a new model. A new seed sown in the jungle of mankind. He focuses on Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Their mission comes to its promised goal in Jesus, the

Messiah Israel's greatest son. The seed of the woman that will bruise the head of the serpent. (Genesis 3:15).

Read in this light, the story of Jacob makes sense. In fifteen chapters God refines and polishes this prototype of the new man, made of stubborn material until something pure emerges—what I would call a diamond. A diamond is the result of tremendous pressure. I have been told that diamonds essentially come from the same raw material found everywhere in the earth—coal and peat. But it undergoes a vast process: melted by heat, pressed under immense pressure, then cut and polished.

The Gospel teaches us that what God did in the first covenant with Israel, He now does universally in the new covenant with the coming of Jesus—wherever the Gospel is preached. That's the New Testament perspective. And so, what God did in Jacob applies to us as well—to our own lives. God is after diamonds (Rev. 21:18). As the apostle Paul said in the letter to the Galatians: In Christ it all turns around becoming a new creation (6:15).

Setting the stage

In this introductory chapter on the story of Jacob, we identify four steps about the process that is already at work before we begin to live:

- 1) We were prayed for even before we exist
- 2) There was a design,
- 3) there is raw material, and
- 4) we stand under the promise of grace that transforms everything.

If we want to grow into the kind of person God envisions, this chapter provides special guidance. Within these four milestones preceding personal growth, the story of God's dealings with people unfolds. We will trace them closely in the text.

1. The centrality of prayer

Jacob does not appear out of nowhere. He is a descendant of Isaac. The text begins: “This is the story of Isaac” (verse 19). The Hebrew word used here should be translated as “offspring” or “lineage.” This is more accurate, as it deals with Isaac’s descendants: “This is the offspring of Isaac.” Isaac was Abraham’s son. Already in Isaac’s life prayer was central: Preceding prayer. Genesis 24 recounts the remarkable way God led Abraham’s servant Eliezer to find a bride for Isaac. By prayer! A second example of divine guidance follows in verse 21: Rebekah was barren after they married. “So, Isaac prayed to the Lord on behalf of his wife because she was barren. The Lord answered his prayer, and Rebekah became pregnant.” (verse 21).

These verses set the tone for Jacob’s backstory. It is a story of guidance, of prayer, and of answered prayer. This is extraordinary for all of us, though we often lose sight of this historical dimension. We live in the here and now and need to regain the biblical understanding that we have a backstory. Before you existed, prayers were already said for you. Your parents likely prayed for you before you were born. Life can be chaotic, but it also has divine timing.

No one comes into existence by accident. Today people say we are “thrown into existence.” That is not true. You are the design of the Highest. Incredible care, planning, and sometimes even pain

preceded your life—before you were even aware of anything. Now, as you grow up, you may come to see that God has laid His hand upon your existence. This can free you from the “autumn leaf” feeling of insignificance and purposelessness that pervades our times—a poison of meaninglessness. Scripture stands firmly against that.

2. A Higher Calling: there was a design

What happens next? In Genesis 25: 22 and 23 we read that God answered Isaac’s prayer and Rebekah conceived twins. The two struggled violently within her. The text uses a strong word: “struggled.” They fought and jostled so much that it drove Rebekah to despair. She goes to God and asks, “Why is this happening to me?” God reveals a mystery to her: “Two nations are in your womb and two peoples will be separated from your body; one people shall be stronger than the other and the older shall serve the younger.”

This defies human norms. In Israel the rights of the firstborn were well defined. This prophecy is abnormal. It points to the uniqueness of God’s calling—the way things will play out between them breaks all conventional expectations. Normally, the younger is subordinate to the older, especially in that time. But God reverses it. This has nothing to do with human effort or responsibility; it is a kind of higher destiny that many times goes against human-made rules. God reveals to Rebecca his style in determining destiny. To make clear that in the end it is not we but God who was in charge.

Over every human life hangs such a higher calling. The English call it “destiny,” humanists say “fate.” These terms point to something

very real: where we believe we make our own choices, most of life happens to us. Friends, work, a partner, the place you live, children—yes, we act, but much of it simply happens. And it doesn't always turn out as we wished.

God tells Rebecca: your children are born under a higher calling. The art of life lies in coming to peace with it. And that is possible—if you dare to believe that behind this calling there is a higher hand at work. A hand that intends something beautiful. What we learn here is the fundamental law of God's kingdom: It is not the strong who are chosen, but the weak. God made the weakest of men the greatest—the crucified one.

At children-baptism in the Netherlands, a certain song is often sung, on the mystery of salvation. *You are a pearl in Gods hand.* But..

3. The material is raw

“When the days were fulfilled for her to give birth, indeed there were twins in her womb” (Genesis 25:24). Two completely new beings. One entirely covered with hair—hence she named him Harry. Esau means “hairy,” so: Harry. That's how it sounded in those days.

The second child was born holding his brother's heel, and so he was named accordingly: “Heel,” or “Heel-grabber.” Even this name, something negative is already present—something like “deceiver.” The guy who always wanted to stay in control! And grab what he could get! The key point here is: two unique names already express that two different people are born. One step further: no

one chooses his/her genetic makeup. We all receive it—we did not choose it, and we must deal with it.

Our nature has been corrupted since the Fall (Genesis 3). Esau develops into a man entirely given over to “hunting and women.” This aligns to some extent with Lamech (Genesis 4:19ff). Jacob is a potential Pharisee, a domestic man, attached to property.

Hunting is not sinful, and neither is being domestic or attentive to agriculture. A beautiful, red-haired body is wonderful, and Jacob’s cleverness is not a vice either. We always see beautiful creaturely gifts on one side and, simultaneously, sinful, rough material. Good and bad are mixed in the human being. So, a human is not born as a blank sheet of paper, as many humanists believe. We are raw and rebellious material.

It is important to keep this in mind when raising our children. On one hand, this means we must not spoil them. They need guidance; they must learn norms, because norms shape character. But we should also enjoy them!

They have a unique personality, endowed—if we may say so—with unique material from their Creator. Parents must “sift this out.” They must affirm their children, enjoy them, and thus bring out their uniqueness.

We see this in Rebekah and Isaac as well. They love the unique qualities of their children: wild game from one and domesticity from the other. Of course, it is wrong that one parent prefers one child and the other prefers the second. This will lead to great problems later. We should not follow Rebekah and Isaac in this. But it shows that we too, as educators, make our own mistakes.

Parenting must be learned—from others, from Scripture, from our forebears.

In conclusion for this point: Never see your children as a copy of yourself, let alone try to shape them into that. No—affirm them in their uniqueness, in their gifts. Model for them how to develop character, but only within the framework of God's commandments.

4. Under the promise of grace

That doesn't come easily. Only when God's grace works and intervenes in our lives—cutting and shaping—will something come of us. This grace is, like a climax, the most important thing Scripture highlights in the story of Jacob.

At the end of this part of the story in Genesis 25: 27–34 this grace is intrinsically connected with the birthright. In the story of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—and beyond—this right is inseparably tied to the blessing God gave Abraham (Gen. 12, 15 and 17). The blessing is God's saving plan. “I will make you into a great nation and bless you, and through your descendants all nations of the earth shall be blessed” (12:2–3). This intervention in a broken world, eventually culminates in the coming of Jesus. This grace includes also Esau although he despised it as we read in the end of this chapter.

A long way to go

However, both Esau and Jacob have a long way to go before God has them where he wants them to be.

Take Esau.

Esau has the birthright. But Esau is a man of the here and now. He is raw and honest. A child of nature. Hunting, fishing, eating, drinking—that's it. He roams through hills and valleys but sees no trace of God.

One evening, returning from the hunt, he sees Jacob cooking red lentil stew. And he says, "Let me gulp down some of that red stuff!" (verse 30). The word "gulp" is deliberately chosen. It contains everything—greed, desperation, hunger, thirst: Give it to me!

"Anyway, we're all going to die," Esau later says cynically, when Jacob proposes his condition. Jacob is shrewd here. He sees his chance: "You can have it—but sell me your birthright."

Esau agrees: "What good is it to me? I'm going to die anyway—so what's the point?"

And so, he sells Jacob his birthright (verses 30–32).

Then comes the chilling end: "He ate and drank, got up and left" (verse 34). It's as though the author poured all emotion into these four short phrases. That was it. He ate, drank, stood up, and left. That's how little he valued his birthright. That was his life—just like that. So simple.

Verse 34 pains me. Behind Esau, I see all those who are baptized—but deny it. Most of the European citizens are baptised. At baptism, God assures us we share in this Abrahamic birthright. Only if we surrender to it, let it work within us, will we become something. But many in Europe are like Esau and have despised their birthright. Marcuse defines them as 'one-dimensional'.

In the 19th century, a well-known other observer, Wormser, said: “Teach the nation to understand its baptism—for if it does, it will be saved.” That still applies today. The core of baptism is that we are included in Christ. Christ is the Firstborn; He holds both Abraham’s blessing and the birthright in His person—the true seed of Isaac, the Son.

As for Esau; he later receives a second chance (we will come to that). He becomes a servant to his brother. The promise also for the ones who give up their birthright remains. But there is a long way to go.

And Jacob?

He thinks he has succeeded. But there is still so much of the old nature in him—so much hypocrisy and deceit, so much self-interest—that God must still do a lot of work to polish him into a diamond. In the next chapters we will follow this process in Jacobs life, It is a long way indeed from the promise of grace to its full effect in Jacobs life.

Closing meditation

Lord, you see in us not just what we are, but what we can become. Like Jacob, our rough edges are not wasted—they are the very places where grace begins its work. Give me the honesty to see my own rough edges.

Chapter 2

Jacob's Life as Mirror for Us

“And so, Jacob went close to his father Isaac, who touched him and said: ‘The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau.’” (Genesis 27:22; read the entire chapter 27)

This is a dramatic sketch of the consequences of being unwilling or unable to let go. This time on what happens when one, at all costs, tries to draw all blessings toward oneself!

The story of Jacob shows us how God transforms people. In this chapter (Genesis 27), we see the “raw material.” Jacob is presented to us sharply and unvarnished in his “old” nature: cunning and calculating. No, he does not let go but ensures that everything goes exactly as he and his mother want. Even more: they seize for themselves what they should have received as a gift!

In the story of the patriarch Jacob, Israel holds a mirror up to itself. How honest! This is possible because even this part of Israel's story is marked by the wonder that God does not separate himself from ego-centered people but remains working with them. The light falls on Him! He is not a distant God, but a God who is near, continually working to transform us into the image of His Son. I believe Jacob is given to us in the Bible as a kind of model. It is very important to consider this, because in this story we see that God truly acts. He connects with us in every detail of our small human lives. He works through this. This story continually directs our gaze to God, who acts like a great sculptor working with stubborn and

hard, raw marble, yet never ceases to do His work: transforming us into the image of His Son. For that is the goal! Jacob's story is about this transformation of character. This is what we see in Genesis 27. In this chapter I will elaborate on the fourth point from the previous chapter: God's grace in Jacob's life and in our own.

The inheritance

We begin with the first verse of chapter 27. It says: "When Isaac was old and his eyes were so weak that he could no longer see, he called his older son Esau and said to him, 'My son.' Esau replied, 'Here I am.' Isaac said, 'I am now an old man and don't know the day of my death. Now then, get your weapons – your quiver and bow – and go out to the open country to hunt some wild game for me. Prepare me the kind of tasty food I like and bring it to me to eat, so that I may give you my blessing before I die' (verses 1–4).

There lies the old Isaac, his eyes so weak he can hardly see, his legs so stiff he can no longer hunt, his hands so gnarled he can't prepare anything. And his memory? One wonders where it has gone. Does he not remember the prophecy about Jacob? That he would inherit the Abrahamic blessing (ch.25:23). What he does know is: before I die, I must pass on this blessing! The same blessing that carried him throughout his life, the great mystery of God's saving plan. It is the blessing of his father Abraham, meant to go out to all nations. It is Isaac's spiritual legacy. He thinks: if only this continues, then all will be well.

Old age comes with infirmities, but old age has also unique qualities. It teaches us to distinguish what truly matters. Secondary things fade, the essential comes to the fore, along with a deep

desire to pass it on. This is the beautiful thing of Isaac in old age... He wants to pass on his spiritual legacy.

Esau, however, was not concerned with this. That's why Isaac devises a trick to have him alone, so that he can pass it on. It is not entirely free of self-interest – he loves good food, especially wild game – and says to Esau: “Prepare it for me the way I like it.” Esau clearly knows how to prepare it. To the very end, Isaac enjoys life. And why not? He combines the pleasant with the useful. And useful, even of great importance, is indeed what Isaac is about to do. He is about to bless the firstborn. But as he proceeds with his plan, complications and entanglements begin (verses 5–33). To understand this, one must know that in ancient Israel, in the time of the Old Covenant, the blessing was inextricably linked with the birthright. The firstborn became the head of the family. He received the inheritance. Even if the second, third, and fourth sons all received a share, the main blessing went through the firstborn.

But there is something profound behind this very beginning of the history of the Abrahamic blessing. Here God himself told Rebekah, the mother (25:23), that there is never an automatic transmission of the blessing; and that, to avoid cherishing the blessing as a piece of property that someone automatically inherits, He gave it in her case to the younger instead of to the eldest. This was to teach that, many times, the spiritual is not automatically tied to the natural order of the firstborn. Grace remains grace and never becomes a property. Isaac seems to have forgotten that God had already spoken at Jacob's birth! “The older will serve the younger,” And Esau wants to forget that he even sold his birthright to Jacob (25:29–34).

Deception

Jacob is the main character in the unfolding drama. For when Rebbekah overhears the entire conversation between Isaac and Esau at the door, she rushes to Jacob: “Did you hear that? He is going to bless Esau! Quick, fetch two young goats. I’ll prepare them just the way he likes. You take the food to him so that he blesses you!” And Jacob does it. At first reluctant, but he does it. Fully aware, he goes, brings the goats, disguises himself, puts animal skins on his hands and neck – for Esau was hairy and Jacob was not. With a certain irony, he says: “I am smooth” (verse 11). Then he enters Isaac’s presence. Isaac is indeed very suspicious at first. He says “Come closer!” three times (verses 21, 25, 26). To himself he muses: “The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau!” (verse 22). For he wanted to bless him” (verse 23). Once more he seeks confirmation, draws Jacob near, kisses him, smells him, and recognizes Esau’s scent – then he blesses Jacob (verses 24–29). He does so with the words: “May God give you abundance... nations will serve you... be lord over your brothers... cursed be those who curse you; blessed be those who bless you” (verses 28–29).

Esau, when he returns and everything is revealed, rightly cries out: “See! That’s why he is called Jacob!” For the name “Jacob” literally means “heel-grabber.” From the word for “heel” in Hebrew, an adjective also exists, which could be translated as “Heely” – which in Hebrew implies trickery or sly.. “Now you see what his name means,” Esau says, “Twice he has deceived me!” (verse 36).

And so, we see in this story how all of them, the whole family is not an example of a nice believing generation. Quite the opposite: all of

them fall a short. Rebekah who secretly listened and orchestrated the blessing; Isaac who wants to bless someone other than the one God chose; Esau who reacts bitterly but desires the blessing only for his own status; and Jacob, who lies and deceives for a good cause. It is a mess. If this is the Church, the people of God in its original form, one could easily lose all courage. One might want to stay way from them!

Honesty

When I read this story one thing suddenly popped up in me. This is the story that Israel tells about itself! It is not very honoring. The Greeks and the Romans talk about their past in glorious ways. About their victories and courage and wealth. Israel tells openly of the deceit by its own patriarchs. How can that be? When Israel tells its story, it wants to teach us something. Israel is not in love with its own history when it tells us about Jacob – no, it wants to show us something about the God of Israel. It offers insight into who God is – the One who made a people from this one man and through him blessed the world. It shows the people in all their cunning and sinfulness with the purpose of revealing that God is great, He works with stubborn material.

I believe that wherever God works – this can be taken as a rule – people must first understand how stubborn they really are. Everything must first be brought to light. Church history confirms this again and again: every reformation or revival begins with a deepened awareness of sin. That is why Israel tells how raw and sinful the material is that God works with. When we read in Psalm 146 that God is called the God of Jacob, we can still breathe a sigh of relief and say, “Yes – then even I still have a chance!” That is the

message of Genesis 27. It is not: humanity is being slandered here. It is not that Israel's story is being overly criticized just to shame itself – as is often done today. Rather: we are to be led to true honesty and then to marvel at God – at His greatness and grace, that He holds on to us and continues with us. An indispensable link in God's working – as I learn from Genesis 27 – is self-discovery. To be led to discover oneself, to be revealed in our duplicity, in the deceit and falsehood that sadly lives in all our hearts.

Theater or play-acting for the Great Goal: do as if...

Having said this there is more to learn in this key-passage about Israel's patriarchs. That there was dishonesty, ok, that is clear, but what spoke to me especially is: how this dishonesty was dressed in piety. Let us take a closer look at Jacob's sin. I believe it was not primarily about cheating and lying. Verse 12 contains something remarkable. There, Jacob himself says:

“If I do this, my father will feel me and realize that I am not Esau. Then I will appear in his eyes as someone who is mocking him. I will bring a curse upon myself and not a blessing!”

I have always read this with a certain astonishment: “...that I am mocking him...”. Not who is lying to him. As if lying is ok if it keeps the relationship in balance and serves your (holy) purpose.

That means; Jacob himself believes that lying is ok, if as long as it is for the good purpose. Then secondly: He does this with sacred motives! For Jacob truly desires to receive the blessing and the birthright. And he likely had good reasons for this. He had heard the stories—about Abraham, his grandfather, and about Isaac, his father.

He had always been moved when it came to God's plan of salvation. He wanted to be involved in God's blessing. That's why he does what he does. That's why he plays his game. He does it for God.

In truth, Rebekah and Jacob thought they were helping God along a little. Hadn't He said: "The older shall serve the younger"? When Isaac began to favor Esau, they thought: "This will go completely wrong—this is not the right path. We must intervene!"

And so they took matters into their own hands. Again and again this is Israël's sin, a little dishonesty for the sake of God's cause—don't we all do that sometimes?

For example: Communion is being celebrated; in your heart you have no peace with God. But then you think: "What would my children say if I didn't go to communion?"

So, for a good cause, you engage in a little dishonesty.

Moments like that occur throughout our lives. Dishonesty and role-playing for a good cause—holy deceit.

Holy deceit has hollowed out the Church from within and has given it a bad reputation. For the Esaus who walk in—they see through it all quickly and say: "But this isn't genuine or honest at all!"

This, then, is Jacob's great problem. One could say: he is saved but not renewed. He is justified but not sanctified. He knows he is the firstborn, the bearer of the blessing—and yet he lives entirely according to his old nature, in the power of the old man: full of egoism, deceit, and pretense.

And yes—it is true: God continues His work with this Jacob.

God moves forward

This brings me to the final point as we look ahead to the next chapters. God continues with Jacob—despite everything!

We read at the end in verse 33:

“Then Isaac trembled violently, for Esau had come in and said: ‘Here I am!’ And Isaac said: ‘Who then was it who brought me the venison? I ate it, and I blessed him—and he shall indeed be blessed!’”

Suddenly, it dawns on Isaac. Whether he suddenly remembers, or his conscience strikes him more clearly—either way, he now knows: It was God’s intent that it was Jacob!

“**He** shall be blessed!”

From this I draw a conclusion that sounds familiar to our ears—but which we must hear again and again:

God’s grace is undeserved. It is free and sovereign. “He moves in a mysterious way” (William Cooper). The way it goes is in His hand. He and cannot be held back by human sin. On the contrary, it becomes the more miraculous in contrast with our human stubborn ideas.

God takes the initiative, and His grace breaks through all human resistance. God is not a distant God but one who actively works in your life and mine. He wants, to use Paul’s words, Christ to be formed in you. God wants to shape us into His image. In this regard we are grateful for the honest example of Israel.

For when sin is revealed in all its harshness, then the miracle of God continuing his work shines all the more brightly. How is it possible that God continued with Israel—and with us? Even more: that He worked with such raw, rough material?

That gives us enormous hope and leads us to do the exact opposite of what Jacob did here: trust in Him and leave it to him, Focusing on what this passage teaches us on letting go: “Let us help the Lord a bit”, thought Rebecca. “I see it running in the wrong direction”. The art of letting go sometimes takes the form of leaving the realization in His hands!

In a crisis—when you think everything is going off the rails—don’t start manipulating, deceiving, or putting on a performance. Instead, go before God, lay it all in His hands. Let Him work within you. Learn to wait on Him and open yourself to His Spirit. Then He will show you the way.

Closing meditation

When I read Jacob’s story, I see my own reflection: ambition, fear, longing, struggle. In his brokenness I recognize my own need for God’s patient shaping. Lord, help me to be honest and thankful for Your steadfast love!

Chapter 3

The Dream at Bethel

‘On the way through the desert to Haran where Laban lived Jacob stayed at a lonely place took a stone as a pillow under his head and fell asleep. He dreamed of a ladder that stood on the earth and reached up to heaven. Angels were ascending and descending the staircase. And at the top he saw the Lord standing, who said to him: ‘I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. To you and your descendants I will give the land on which you are lying and lo, I am with you wherever you go, protect you and bring you back in the promised land’ (Genesis 28:10–22;)

Letting go becomes possible when one has a foundation for it: the personal affirmation of redeeming grace. When this breaks in into Jacob’s life from God’s side, something changes!

After the first day’s journey in the desert, the Lord appears to Jacob in a dream. He saw a ladder and a stream of angels ascending and descending on it, and above it: the all-encompassing holy presence of God. But the most extraordinary thing is what he hears! Despite everything that had happened — one might say, despite all that Jacob had done — he hears only words of salvation and promise! This is what touched me the most.

Let us follow the story. God Himself appears to Jacob in a dream .It must have been shocking to him. It is always shocking when the hidden world that according to the biblical worldview surrounds us opens up. It reminds me of the prophet Elisha in 2 Kings 6: he

briefly gets a glimpse into the invisible world surrounding him (and us) and shares this with his servant: “Lord, open his eyes so that he may see.” and he saw: there were fiery horses and chariots all around Elisha’. In crucial moments this is how God helps his people to find the way with eye-openers. It lays the foundation for everything God will do in Jacob’s life going forward. We could summarize this moment with three words: surprising, awe-inspiring, and inviting. Pay particular attention to the key verse, verse 15, where God, without any condition, says to Jacob: “I am with you. I stand behind you. I will not leave you.”

This verse not only shows us that God is at work in Jacob’s life – the man who, in a sense, becomes the true firstborn of Israel – but also that God, who would later enter the world in his Son as the firstborn, wants to work similarly in every human life. In your life and mine. But how?

Surprising

We discover this in Jacob’s story. He is a one day’s journey away into the desert, in the Negev. He reaches a small town or settlement – we don’t know exactly what it was – formerly called Luz. There, in the middle of the barren desert, “the sun sets on him,” and he lays his head on a stone, for there is nothing else to rest on. He lies there in this cold, grey wasteland, and for the first time in his life, he is completely alone.

Why this journey? This is explained at the beginning of Genesis 28 (verses 1–5). Isaac and Rebekah did not want Jacob to choose a wife from among the Canaanites but rather from Abraham’s relatives in Haran – even though it was 800 km away and the journey would

lead through the desert. This is the first reason. Not a bad one, since Esau had made the wrong choice in this regard. “Choose a believing wife,” Isaac told Jacob. This still stands as a biblical principle: if one has the choice, choose a believing spouse. Isaac told Jacob: “It’s worth the trouble of a long journey!” And so, he sent Jacob on his way, through the wilderness.

It’s also said shortly before this that Esau wanted to kill Jacob. “When Isaac is dead, Jacob’s time will come; I’ll tear him apart!” said Esau (27:41). So Jacob flees – it is also a kind of exile. For the first time in his life, he’s traveling alone in a vast desert. I can imagine how he lay there: the sun set, it was a dark Middle Eastern night, and he placed his head on a stone. He probably felt completely abandoned – reduced to himself.

It’s striking that the story of Jacob mentions the sun twice: once it sets, and later (at Peniel, 32:31), it rises. Here lies a connection (see chapters 31–32). In chapter 28, verse 11, it says: “And the sun had set.” The Jewish Midrash explains: “This means that night descended upon Jacob’s soul.” At Peniel, this process ends. There, the sun rises upon him!

Pay attention to the element of surprise! The phrase “And behold” (verse 12) is not strong enough. In Hebrew, it appears four times, expressing astonishment. Suddenly, something happens – in the middle of the night. That’s when the Lord comes to him in a dream. The dream lifts the veil, so to speak. In it Jacob sees a ladder – a staircase – standing at his head, reaching endlessly up to heaven. And on it he sees – note the order – a stream of angels ascending and descending.

This is extraordinary. It doesn't say descending-ascending what you would expect : that they first descend with God's message and then ascend with human responses. No — the order is reversed. They first ascend, reporting what they've seen and heard, bringing it before God's throne, who then sends them back down to serve. Because that is what angels are called in the Bible: servants.

Hebrews 1:14 says: "Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?" It is wondrous that Scripture repeatedly gives glimpses of this intense connection between God, heaven, the invisible realm, and this world. Here the angels first go from Jacob to God and then come back with a message of God to Jacob. So deeply is our condition made known to God , a continuous stream of angels moves back and forth, maintaining the connection.

And above the ladder Jacob sees the Almighty Himself, in glory and majesty. And then He speaks. Note His words: "Jacob, I am the God of your grandfather Abraham and your father Isaac" (verse 13a), and then all the blessings once promised to Abraham are repeated — the land, the descendants, the blessing: "Through you all the families of the earth will be blessed!" (verse 14b). The Abrahamic blessing comes upon Jacob — and it is amazingly personal and precedent. It sounds almost unconditional: Behold, I am with you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I promised you" (verse 15). Why is this so surprising? There is no reproach. It is God's embrace — without a raised finger, without asking "Why?", without punishment, without demand. And it is preceding our own efforts, whatever we do or did.

Amazing grace

We touch here the heart of the Gospel and God's infinite wisdom. He encounters a man in captivity, exiled in the wilderness. And He draws him close, into His heart. The first thing is not a word about sin but about saving grace! We see this always. When later on God makes a covenant with Israel, the first thing He says is not what we might expect – “Now obey my Commandments!” No, He begins with: “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Exodus 20:2). This is God's opening line: “You are mine.” And everything else follows.

The early Church Fathers said: “The covenant of God with humankind is unilateral in its origin and bilateral in its practice.” That is the heart of the matter. In New Testament terms: “God's love precedes all our works.” And it is unconditional. but of course: “Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all” (Isaac Watts).

Love so amazing

Jesus illustrated this in the parable of the prodigal son. When the son returns home, the father does not first say: “Now confess your sins and clean up your life, then maybe I'll let you back in.” No – it says: “While he was still a long way off, his father saw him” – meaning he had been watching and waiting – “and he ran to him and embraced him” (Luke 15:20). That is what God is like.

I see the same in Jacob's vision. God saw him from afar. His angels had reported everything. And He embraces Jacob with this promise: “Jacob, I am here for you. I will fulfill everything I have promised. I will never leave you, nor forsake you!”

This touches the very core of Jacob's life. From the womb — where he clung to Esau's heel — he was a man seemingly driven by fear of abandonment. From this fear came a compulsion to stay in control. Jacob is someone who manipulates, schemes, deceives — trying to keep everything in his own hands. That's his fear: to lose control. He grabs Esau's heel, seizing all rights for himself; controlling, dominating.

It is in the desert that things in Jacob start to change for here he is in complete solitude, and God gives him, in his grace, a revealing dream. God doesn't even point out what Jacob has done wrong. Instead, He says: "Jacob, I will never, ever, ever abandon you!" This is the foundation under what he is from now on learning about trust and letting go.

Awe inspiring

Then comes the second point. Only such grace gets Jacob moving. The law does not change us—but grace surely does. For the first time we see Jacob vulnerable—not smooth, not in control anymore. He says: "How is it possible? The Lord was in this place, and I didn't know it" (verse 16). I find this a beautiful sentence. Yes, Jacob, things are happening around you! In faith, incredible things happen without our involvement. We catch only a whisper of what God is doing; most of the time, we are blind to what He is accomplishing in the heavenly places. Jacob didn't think it was possible that there could be things of which he had no idea. Awe-inspiring, he says—and that is exactly what it is. He says: "This is the house of God; this is the gate of heaven!" Then he sets up a memorial stone.

Inviting

Now a short jump. When we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we also pause at the memorial stones—namely, bread and wine. There is a connection between one and the other—between the bread and wine and the memorial stone Jacob set up. In a way we could say where we celebrate the Lord's Supper—this open gate is present again. And then, at the top of the ladder (as Jesus promised in John 1:52) we again see God in His endless love for a broken and fallen world. Bread and wine are witnesses and memorials of the miracle that God is standing there—and that He also promises it to us: “I will never leave you nor forsake you” (Hebrews 13:5). “I will fulfill all My promises” (Psalm 105:8; Revelation 21:5).

That is why Jesus also takes up these words when He says: “Behold, I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). So the ladder is actually like a chain pulley, such as we see in those “old” clocks. The chain is fixed at the top, but at the bottom it can swing freely. God moves with us—wherever we go or stand.

What is our response?

I can assure you: only this changes people. We see this at the end of Genesis 28. Jacob makes a vow, but what he says at first glance is disappointing. Is that really all that such a powerful vision from God produces? The only thing Jacob says is: “If God does what He now says—if He really protects me on this journey, if He truly gives me bread to eat and clothes to wear, if I actually return safely—then He will be my God, and this stone I have set up will be a temple, and I will give Him a tenth of everything” (verse 21). Isn't that once again this legalistic trait: You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours? Isn't that a bit of a deal with God again?

You can read this reaction with great disappointment. That was my first reaction. How can Jacob respond like that? God says *unconditionally*: “I am with you!”, and Jacob replies *with conditions*. “If God does this, and if He does that, and if...” What kind of reaction is that? Unconditional love demands an answer without conditions. That’s the only full response. But a Jewish commentary led me to a different understanding. There it says: “You have to pay attention to the beginning of Jacob’s words—it is a vow, a promise (verse 20), a way of determining how one will commit oneself to God and His service in the future.”

I think this is a beautiful interpretation. I had overlooked this. It is a promise including commitment! There is something of a leap here. I give my future out of my own hands. I let go. It’s still accompanied by many questions full of doubt. Should God really do it, Jacob thinks he still needs to see one, two, three, four affirmations and under that conditions he will surrender. Jacob—the man who always wanted to keep control of everything. But it is a step and made me think of the father of the epileptic son in the gospel of Mark who said : “I believe—help my unbelief.” (Chapter 9:24). Jacob says: “If you fulfill this, I will give myself completely!” That is enough for God to go further with him.

This still holds true today. Even for us Western-minded people, who want to control everything—who want to take life into our own hands—there comes a moment when God approaches us. When we are weary and powerless or in the wilderness, God gets the chance to show us that He truly is there: “I am here for you.” The Gospel expresses this even more strongly: “I give Myself completely for you!” The Good Shepherd is the one who gives His life for His sheep.

And then? What does God expect from us in return? Yes, if I understand the end of Genesis 28 correctly, it's minimal. Really, it's only about us responding: "Lord, if this is really true, then I will give myself completely, 100%." That was Jacob's response—and it can be ours too. No, Jacob is not yet where the Lord wants him. But there's a crack—a break in his narcissism, in his self-centeredness. He has made himself dependent, and when God sees that, He continues with us as with Jacob, see the next chapter.

Crucial in learning the art of letting go is to build upon the only one foundation there is: Gods promise of his faithfulness.

Closing meditation

Jacob discovered that God was present even in his loneliness. When all else is stripped away, the promise remains: "I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go." Lord, show me the hidden reason behind my inability to let go and grant me *that* awareness!

Chapter 4

In the School of Life

Jacob worked seven years to be able to marry Rachel; because he loved her, they felt like only a few days to him.” (Genesis 29:20 read the whole chapter 29 and 30)

Letting go will not go without the wider framework of what in the New Testament is called sanctification. This is the transformation of change in will, mind and emotion. This came in Jacob's life in a process in which others did hold a mirror before him. Letting go is embedded in a process of learning, without which it will not become the hardcore of the spiritual man that Jacob was meant to be.

Two times seven years in God's school

There are times when God speaks to us. There are times when God “deals” with us. Then He works on us through the things we experience. Sometimes it hits us joyfully: in a sign of His guidance and affirmation. But just as often it happens that He “encounters” us, touches us, or even strikes us. Being a Christian is not cheap. Being truly transformed into the image of Christ costs something.

This is the message of the fourth part of our reflection on the story of Jacob: the two times seven years of joy and sorrow, love and labor with Laban. It gives us an insight in the healing, retributive, and educational justice that God accomplishes in the flow of Jacob's life.

For fourteen years, God, as the great sculptor, scrapes, chisels, and polishes His servant Jacob. This is enormous work, and it comes at a cost—it costs much. The apostle Paul would later say: The old self, which we are in Adam, must die; the new self, which we are in Christ, must rise (Col. 3:8-12).

With God we find not only comfort and security, but He also cuts deeply into our lives. He allows us to collide hard with ourselves. He holds up a mirror: see what you did to the other, look now, it is happening to you—then you will know how it feels. In countless ways, God is at work in our lives. We see this in the two periods of seven years in Jacob's life.

You might be thinking: Yes, God did that with Jacob—but not with me. Jacob is, after all, a special figure from the Bible. He is even a patriarch of Israel, so for him this may have been true—but for me? I don't notice any of this!

If you're thinking this way, I want to draw your attention to something specific: even Jacob saw or heard little of God at this stage. It only became clear to Jacob *in what happened* to him over time. Nowhere in Genesis 29 or 30 do we read that God spoke to Jacob. After the blessing and the powerful promise in the previous chapter, Jacob now has to face struggle. In the New Testament this struggle is described in Romans 6 and 7. These chapters deal with the battle against the law, the battle between the old and the new self. Paul writes: "Sin sprang to life, and I died. The good I wanted to do, I did not do; and the evil I did not want to do, that I did."

Training ground

We read Genesis 29 and 30—the two times seven years in Jacob’s life—are crucial years, as God’s training ground. During this time—and this is striking—God does not appear to Jacob even once. Yet He is deeply involved with him. That is the core message of these two chapters. Everything we experience in life is not just coincidence! Even more powerfully than through words God teaches us through life events, through our own actions, through what He allows us to go through. This shapes us, and this is the sense of the chapter.

This is most clearly highlighted in verse 11 and 25 of chapter 29 and verse 2 of chapter 30. We read there how Jacob was betrayed. Instead of his beloved Rachel, he is tied to the unattractive Lea. His reaction is threefold: We read that Jacob wept, quarreled, and became angry. — “He raised his voice and wept. Than secondly; it literally says: “He quarreled with Laban after the deception.” And the third time: “He became angry.”

These are three moments preceding the act of letting go. The school of life proves to be God’s teaching. Circumstances that one might call coincidence—but Jacob knew better: This can’t be coincidence. This is the hand of God! Good experiences and bad ones . Let us first look at the good ones. and what they taught Jacob.

The encounter at the well

(Following the written text now:): After Jacob had traveled a long way through the desert—on foot, 800 kilometers, full of hardships—he arrived in the land of his family.. But how in the world was he to

find his uncle Laban there? There were some shepherds sitting at the well. They were far from welcoming. Jacob asks politely: “My brothers, where are you from?” They answer curtly: “Haran.” “Do you know Laban, the son of Nahor?” Jacob asks. “Yes,” they say—nothing more. Jacob presses on: “Is he well?” “They say shortly: ask his daughter—“there she comes” (verses 1–6).

So Jacob is forced to approach Rachel directly. When he sees her he is overcome with emotion. The shock is so strong that he in his own strength alone removes the stone for her from the well and gives water to Rachel’s sheep. What love at first sight can accomplish! Then—after all, she was his cousin—so he embraces her and calls her by name (verses 7–12).

In his Commentary Calvin explains: “He probably first mentioned his name and only then kissed her”. I like it that Calvin reflected on this detail, (never kiss somebody before you have made your self known and established a relationship..!) but sorry for Calvin: here the order is reversed: Jacob kisses first and then states his name. It underlines the greatness of his love at first sight.

Also in good experiences we realize how many things are out of our own control. In any case, it’s a moment of deep emotion: we read: “Then Jacob lifted his voice and wept” (Genesis 29:11). Why? For what? One must try to imagine it briefly. Think about the fact that he had wandered alone through the desert for many days to the family in Haran, a home of which Jacob had heard about again and again from his mother. And of course she had told him the story of how Eliezer had gone the same way to Laban, and how after praying to God, the first person he met at a well was Rebekah—Jacob’s mother. Of course this has been in his mind and

what happens now to him? There is a well and he meets a girl: Rachel! “L’histoire se répète,” say the French. And indeed, it seems history is repeating itself. And along with this event comes the realization: this was guidance! Suddenly Jacob recognizes this and he thinks :here I am, once again, God is guiding, this time by putting my future wife on my path! He bursts into tears. Jacob, who always tried to control everything himself, who tried to bend circumstances to his will—for the first time things are happening to him that are entirely out of his control. He suddenly sees the hand of God. And this does not leave him untouched. This sets the tone for the continuation of the story.

The first seven years

After Jacob has stayed with Laban for a month Laban says in a polite way: “Could you also do something for me?” What Laban means is: “Let’s make an agreement. Enter my service and work. Just tell me what your wages should be.” Jacob sees his chance and says: “I want to work for a bride price” (Genesis 29:15–20). Now, Laban had two daughters, Rachel and Leah. Leah was the older one, but she was not beautiful. It says: “Her eyes were weak” (verse 17). No one knows exactly what that means—some say watery, others dull—but in any case, she was not attractive. The younger daughter Rachel was truly a beauty. Jacob knew what he wanted. He was head over heels in love with Rachel. “I will work seven years for her,” he says, and Laban agrees.

The seven years pass like a dream. They feel like mere days to Jacob. Years filled with longing. Here is another lesson in God’s school: The impatient Jacob learns to wait. The unconverted Jacob wanted to satisfy his desires and longings immediately. He would

manipulate circumstances if things took too long. He would pull the strings. But now life—and God—teaches him self-control. He learns to nourish longing without immediately fulfilling it. This is important, even in our time and in our lives. It's an essential element for developing true character: learning to endure longing without immediately fulfilling it. Through this we grow and gain strength.

The wedding

Then, after seven years, the moment of the wedding arrives (Genesis 29:21-26). Laban invites all the men of the village—only the men are mentioned—and there is a grand wedding celebration that lasts seven days. At the end of the first day, the bride is brought to the marriage bed by her father. But then Laban executes a trick. At the beginning of the night, when all the men of the village—including Jacob—have eaten and (over)drunk, he brings the bride to the groom, veiled as she is. And in his stupor Jacob sleeps with her. When he wakes up in the morning, to his horror, it is not Rachel but Leah in his bed. In his dreams it had been Rachel but in the morning— “Behold, it was Leah.”

Who doesn't think back to earlier events here? That double meaning: “The voice is Jacob's, but the hands are Esau's.” “Behold, it was Leah...” Jacob jumps up, runs to Laban, and exclaims: “What trick have you played on me? I worked seven years for Rachel!” And then he uses a particular word: “Why have you deceived me?” This word lies at the very heart of Jacob's own name. (Jacob : ‘deceiver’). Laban replies, fully informed: “In our country”—with emphasis on *our*— “we do not do such a thing, to give the younger before the older. Here, the firstborn comes first.” The wording of

this explanation rings a bell. It points back to Jacob's own deceit. when as the younger he bought the birthright of the older at the incident with the lentil stew (see Genesis 25). So not only does Jacob's deception of Esau come to light but both actions are avenged. Every word, every passage of this story points back to Jacob's own tricky past, He is being repaid. Suddenly Jacob experiences what it feels like to be deceived. What words cannot achieve life does. Yes, there is such a thing as retributive justice. He who deceives will be deceived. "With the measure you use, it will be measured back to you," says Jesus (Lucas 6:38). Be glad if this happens to you during your lifetime—and not afterward!

In our time, we have become very cautious in interpreting events in our lives as done by the hand of God. Yet this is thoroughly biblical. The Bible does not teach—and I want to emphasize this clearly—that all circumstances arise directly from the hand of God. That would make God a kind of fate. If I understand Islam correctly, then in Islam Allah is such a God: He rules everything and everything that happens is His will. That is not what the Bible teaches. The Bible explains it very subtly: "In everything that happens, God is involved with us." That is a deep truth. Things happen that God does not will—murder, betrayal—but God works through them. It may seem like pure coincidence but it is not.

What this story of Jacob teaches—and what remains relevant today—is this: God is truly at work. He is truly present, no matter what happens.

There is a saying: He who does good will meet with good. And he who does evil will meet with evil. Often exactly the same evil he inflicted on others. In small things and in big ones. I once heard of

someone who, in a clumsy parking maneuver, scratched another car. He was too coward and lazy to leave a note. Three days later someone put a big dent in *his* car—and did not leave a note either. What thought crossed his mind ? He felt what Jacob must have felt in a much larger way. It is the hour of truth.

Such experiences—like Jacob’s—work wonders. They transform us. Not automatically, but if we recognize in them God’s discipline— God tapping us on the shoulder, The same hand that carried Jacob (and still carries him) is the hand that strikes him. God was not the one who deceived Jacob—but He used the deception to draw near to him. This is how He works—slowly but surely—toward a different Jacob, who will one day be called Israel. It is a process. We see that like a climax in the third part of Jacob’s education under Laban.

The second seven years

After Laban pulled his switcheroo he put a bandage on the wound. Right after the wedding week Jacob is allowed to marry Rachel as well. But he must work another seven years for her (Genesis 29:28).

Two things jump out in these second seven years. The first is that God’s blessing continues. In just seven years, Jacob has fathered twelve children! “You will spread out abundantly,” this is the remarkable beginnings of the Jewish nation as the people of God.

Second: this was a learning school in the minefield of family relationships! There is struggle and tension, jealousy and rivalry between Leah and Rachel, heart-wrenching loneliness within the family. Leah cannot bear the fact that, though she bears son after son Jacob still does not love her. Being unloved is the worst thing that can happen to a person. With every son’s birth, she hopes to

win Jacob's love, again and again. "Now he will love me," she thinks when Reuben is born. "Now his hatred will vanish," she says with Simeon. "Now we will be united," with Levi. Until finally she leaves it to God. A learning process begins for Leah too. With the fourth son she says: "I will praise the Lord," and no longer mentions Jacob (verses 31–35). But later in the chapter it starts again—because she still cannot let go of Jacob.

Meanwhile, Rachel is consumed with jealousy. With every child her sister bears Rachel's envy grows. Finally she cries to Jacob: "Give me children, or I'll die!" (Genesis 30:1). She does not even say "then I will die" but "then I am dead." We see here how deeply this is woven into the old Israelite worldview. For a woman bearing children was her highest calling. And if she bore none her life had no meaning—then she was as good as dead. And Jacob? He gets angry, overreacts: "Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?" (v.2). This overreaction reveals how deeply wounded he is. "Am I in God's place?" Yes—indeed, he had lived his whole life as though he were. Finally he realizes how things truly work.

Later in chapter 30, the rivalry between Leah and Rachel intensifies. These are seven long years, poisoned by envy, bitterness, tricks, superstition, and jealousy. Such things happen—put in New Testament terms—when the old self reigns and God is absent. Reading this story one can only say: Israel's election by God truly rests on grace alone.

The lesson

What touches me most about the second seven years is the fact that God continues His work despite all human sin and failure. Strikingly God opens Leah's womb. Here we get a glimpse into God's heart. Leah—the weak, the unloved—He gives to her the first place, ahead of the beautiful, the beloved. This is also a lesson for Jacob.

Moreover, I see God at work in Jacob (Genesis 31:7-13). Everything is a mess, and yet in this school of life Jacob learns the one thing that matters—to pay attention to God to what He is doing. Slowly but surely God becomes a real presence for Jacob—one he takes seriously, in all his relationships.

It happens with stumbles and recoveries. At one point he overreacts—"The evil I do not want, I do." Another time he underreacts—"The good I want, I do not do." Toward Rachel, the overreaction, the harsh words—is that really the way to comfort a wife whose soul is in deep pain? "Am I God, that I can give children?" But toward Leah, Jacob remains cold. In all these chapters not a single conversation between Jacob and Leah is recorded. That is very sad.

Amid this cowardly silence and overreaction, Jacob must grow into the man God wants him to be. He is on the way. He sees God's hand in his life. He learns to recognize his sins. He stops trying to play God. That may be even the heart of the art of letting go! Thus, the outline of the true Jacob emerges—the man who will act rightly. Jacob is in the process of being born anew.

Summary

There are times when God speaks to us. There are times when God “deals” with us. Letting go is part of a packet. It has to do with discovering guidance in happiness the recognizing guilt and failure in our shortcomings. And letting God be God. This came in Jacob’s life in a process in which others did hold a mirror before him.

There are phases in our lives when God is silent—but during which He is deeply at work. Not everything that happens to us is automatically God’s doing. But—and this is a fully biblical statement—in every circumstance God is working to teach us, convert us, prune us, carve and scrape us, until the old self is dead and the new person in us rises.

That person is created in Christ for true righteousness, authenticity, and holiness. God wants character. What He did with Jacob in the Old Testament as an individual He does in Jesus—the firstborn of all nations- in all who are rooted in Him. Therefore: trust Him, watch for His hand in your life, cut into your own flesh, and pray the prayer that comes from Reinhold Niebuhr:

God , grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.”

Closing meditation

Life itself is a teacher. Success and failure, joy and conflict—all become lessons when I dare to ask: What is God teaching me through this? Open my eyes for Your instruction and guidance!

Chapter 5

From Wanderer to Shepherd Prince: Success or Blessing?

“When he said, ‘The speckled shall be your wages,’ then all the flocks bore speckled. And when he said, ‘The striped shall be your wages,’ then all the flocks bore striped.” (Genesis 31:8 – Read the full text in chapter 30:25 and 31:1–30)

After having spent the two times seven years at a salary for two wives Jacob stays with Laban for some more time, another six years. In those years, he works for his own “house” (family). They are years in which God teaches him the difference between success and blessing. And how letting go is at the center of this transition. Jacob is in these chapters still very much the old Jacob, with his tricks. He must learn to say: “It was the Lord! It wasn’t me and my tricks!” How do we recognise blessing? Can we describe and define it as success? But most of all: how do we partake in it? We will explore these questions further in this chapter.

Success-story

At first sight the story of Jacob with Laban is a success story. A nomad becomes a prince of flocks. In our time the headline for this story would be: From Dishwasher to Millionaire. It was a full-blown success story. We read at the end of chapter 30: “So the man became exceedingly prosperous and had large flocks, female and male servants, camels, and donkeys” (verse 43). Flocks meant

wealth; with them one could buy, trade, and secure labor. Jacob became a powerful man.

That is the "foreground story." But the Bible would not be the Bible if it didn't also show the background story. Especially how Jacob's perspective over these six years gradually shifts from the foreground self made success to the deeper background story of God's hand in action. It is remarkable to see how even Laban goes ahead of him in this insight. Let us see that first.

At the end of the second seven years Rachel gives birth to a son and names him Joseph, meaning: "This tastes for more" (30:22–24). After that Jacob says: "Now I will return to my father's house." But first he must ask Laban's permission, since he is still in his service. When Laban hears of this he says something remarkable: "I have learned by divination that *the Lord has blessed me* because of you" (verses 25–27). This is a striking statement. That's why I say that Laban precedes Jacob here in what will be the main lesson of this period in Jacob's life.

Red wire

Suddenly the word "blessing" appears—a theme that runs like a red thread through the Book of Genesis. It began with Abraham: "Through you all nations on earth will be blessed." This blessing is what Genesis is really about—not just Genesis, but the entire Holy Scripture.

Laban realizes: Jacob has it. Whatever he does prospers. Everything Jacob touches turns into gold. But Laban doesn't say, "The Lord has blessed you." Instead, he phrases it in a peculiar way: "I have learned that the Lord has blessed *me* because of *you*." Laban looks

deeper. He saw some-one else being instrumental for his blessing beyond what outwardly looked like success.

Recognizing the blessing

So the question posed by this passage is: How do we learn to see God's blessing? How do we recognize it? For Jacob this was the spiritual lesson of this phase of his life. In those six years with Laban he learns to step back from his own cleverness and scheming, from focusing solely on his own success and manipulation. He learns—partly through Laban's words but mainly through the angels message in a dream—to look at the background story. This casts him back onto the God of Bethel and helps him to look for the blessing and later on in chapter 32 to lean on the blessing alone!

Success comes with manipulation

Laban's reaction encourages Jacob to stay for another period and he comes with a deal. Ok, I will not go now but grant me to stay for a time. Jacob feels free to ask Laban to let him go as soon as he has earned enough property to make the journey to his homeland possible. 'Give me the speckled animals in the following years to earn the needed property to leave' he asked. What follows is the 'old' Jacob in action. and Laban agreed. He thought that is a good deal because the speckled animals are rare. What we read in the next part is still the 'old' Jacob in action. Jacob sets up his work in a purely natural way. He tries to genetically manipulate nature, although with much superstition and magical thinking. He peels branches in a specific pattern and places them in the feeding troughs. He believes that when the sheep and goats see the branches while mating, they will produce striped, speckled, and

black offspring. Another type of superstition was that if the white sheep look at the black sheep after being mounted by a ram they would receive black offspring. Such beliefs existed in those times... (I read that this superstition still existed in the Middle Ages in farmer villages that if someone thought of a specific person during conception the child would resemble that person!). It is superstition, but it clearly plays a role in Jacob's thinking. He believes he can influence the process this way. It is Jacob in his 'old nature'. The manipulator. Through his cunning and cleverness, he tries to secure the blessing for himself, striving to produce success by his own efforts. God has to heal him of this mindset. This becomes clear in the next chapter (Gen. 31).

The table turned

What was felt as a natural process was in fact a hidden gift of God. We read how by the end of these six years God sent him an angel. The angel made it clear to him that God had used his breeding methods. *God* had blessed him in a special way—despite all his superstition and Laban's tricks. Laban kept changing Jacob's wages case by case. In an extraordinary way God blessed Jacob—yet Jacob kept thinking it was all his own doing. When Jacob realizes that all his wealth has stirred up envy and jealousy among Laban's sons and he sees Laban's face turning grim he senses that a storm is brewing. He is not stupid, so he thinks: It's time to get out of here. And God affirms this to him: "Jacob, you must return to Isaac, to the land of your birth." (it says "to Mokedem" to your "Maqom" your birthplace) (31: 1-3). But not after having learned him a crucial lesson!

This is the moment God had been preparing him for over the years. An angel of the Lord appeared to him . He Jacob calls his wives Rachel and Leah and tells them: the God who appeared me at Bethel said to me : ‘Jacob, remember, it was me who gave you that prosperity’. It was *my* blessing and not your superstitious plan. I was at work here’ (31:4–13, especially verses 10–12). It was not you, it was me.

There is a secret here. True for everyone of us. God is supporting us, carrying us, opening doors, and in the meantime we think it was our own hand who did it! This is what Jacob learns here. He recognizes his deep dependence on God. How great is the moment when we suddenly realize that behind everything we do and often in spite of our doing it was He blessing me.

The success mindset

In our society, everything revolves around success. Success is something you achieve yourself. It is measured by outward standards: how many euros you earn, how many people vote for you, how many viewers your show has, your rank among the world's top athletes. It is about fame, power, and wealth.

Success is something I make, blessing is something I receive. Success glorifies the doer, the person. Blessing, however, points beyond the person—it points to God. Success is short-lived, blessing endures across generations. Blessing is a fruit, while success is a product. Success is quickly forgotten. Who knows today the name of Abe Lenstra, the hero goal-keeper in my youth but the fruit of Luther’s work is still alive and working. Jacob must learn in this phase of his life to let go of the success mindset. Once

again he must practice the art of letting go. Letting go of success-thinking and instead reaching for blessing. This transforms our whole life.

In his earlier life Jacob had to understand what a blessing is (f.i. in the dream at Bethel) now he must learn to recognize it in things he believed to have achieved regarding wealth. It is not his success. If we cannot experience success as a blessing (in disguise) it turns into an idol or even a curse. After all, money, success, and careers have all too often destroyed or at least endangered marriages and friendships.

God is not a kind of heavenly Santa Claus who just sprinkles his treats on the earth. No, the God of Abraham is a God with a plan of salvation for this world. To this end He chooses people; blessing is always connected with election. Meanwhile, His enemy, the devil, tries to counteract and sabotage this plan—to pull people away from it. And how does he do that? Through success. Give someone a luxury sofa, give him wealth, and fame and he won't move. Give him resources and more than enough to eat, and God will never get him moving again for His plan.

I write this about Europe, the incredibly rich, sometimes terrifyingly rich Europe. I believe this: one cannot truly be thankful unless one has first learned to recognize blessing, just as Laban so beautifully said. His statement contains all the essential elements: “I have learned that God has blessed me because of another.”

These words give all of us a hint as to where we should start by discovering what blessing truly is. Once we have done that, we will

(hopefully) begin to long for it. And then we will discover that blessing does not always coincide with material prosperity or fame.

There are three elements to discover in Laban's statement:

Mediator

God blesses us because of someone else. That is an interpersonal dimension. Have you ever thought about this? Who would that be?

God gives it. Jacob had to learn this. Laban puts him on the right track that will find later on the deepest answer at Gilgal. He thought he controlled his life, but he was wrong. There is a supernatural dimension.

Supernatural

This is the main point in this episode of Jacob's life: what is felt as a natural process is in fact a supernatural work of God. When Jacob makes a deal with Laban that all the speckled, spotted, and black animals will be his, and the rest Laban's, Jacob is still thinking only in terms of cause and effect. Watch how he manages his herds, his entire behavior seems to say: "I believe in success, and I can make it happen myself." At this stage, Jacob does not yet truly understand what blessing is. He must still learn that blessing always consists of something that transcends cause and effect.

Setting in motion

Finally, recognising God's hand in our lives sets us in motion. When Jacob realises this, he does not remain where he is. He must go back to his home, his maqom, to share what he has received with his family and his people. When God's blessing is not shared, it

stagnates. This remains true today: if we refuse to pass on the blessings we receive, they cease to flow.

Blessings are recognizable by the movement they produce. If the blessing we receive does not move us to bless others, it isn't truly a blessing. This is how God intended it—but among us His blessing has been poisoned. Success that cannot be released is not true success. Blessing by contrast unfolds, opens up, and sets things in motion. Thus blessing confronts us with a great task: learning to share with others.

Summary

We have seen how Jacob learns to recognize God's blessing in his life. God used an angel and a dream to lift the veil on the background story before his eyes. There is a dynamic at work in this story—and that is God's blessing. This dynamic continues. You can see it in the stream that flows through the entire history of salvation—from Jacob to John on Patmos: The blessing must reach the ends of the earth. Jacob can only be included in this stream when he, as shown at the end, returns to the God of Bethel. This is where the section on Jacob ends. At the end of the story the angel appears and says to him: "You must keep building on the promise that was given to you at Bethel." "I am the God of Bethel." And the God of Bethel is the God who blesses you unconditionally (31:11 and 13). We celebrate this blessing each time we come together in the christian tradition and take the bread and drink the wine. as signs of the one to whom we owe this.

Closing meditation

There is a difference between success and blessing. Success feeds the ego; blessing feeds the soul. May I learn to recognize the difference and to go for the blessing.

Chapter 6

The Wisdom of Boundaries

Jacob took a stone and set it up as a pillar. He told his men to gather stones and they made a heap of them. Then Jacob and Laban ate there beside the heap. Laban called it Jegar-Sahadutha (Witness Heap) in his language, and Jacob called it Galeed (boundary stones) in his language. 'This heap is a witness between you and me today,' said Laban (Genesis 31:45–48; read the full section in Genesis 31:22–55).

Letting go certainly does not mean allowing others to walk all over you. Letting go includes the ability to set clear boundaries. Only someone who learns to stand up for themselves—out of a true awareness of their own worth (which is, at the same time, a humble awareness)—can truly let go. Also this form of letting go is a form of living out love.

Proper self-awareness

“Have you lost control of your life? Are people taking advantage of you? Do you find it hard to say ‘no’? Are you disappointed with God because of unanswered prayers? For a healthy balanced life it is essential to set clear boundaries. A boundary is a personal defined space that shows what we are responsible for. In other words: boundaries define who we are and who we are not!”

These are the questions at the opening of the book *Boundaries* by Henry Cloud and John Townsend—and could easily be used at the start of this this chapter about Jacob's life We encounter a new

stage in Jacob's personal growth here. The most beautiful aspect is how deeply God engages with our lives: He confirms, protects, and watches over our growth—transforming us into free, responsible individuals, into the image of His Son (Romans 8:29). In this story, we see four key stages in the process of 'shaking ourselves free' as the Hebrews define maturity.:

- Accepting criticism
- Unmasking idols
- Standing up for oneself
- Setting boundaries

A learning process

Let's pick up the story where the last chapter left off—with Jacob talking to his two wives. He explains his decision to them and they fully agree it's time to separate. 'Let us go home. return to *the place where I belong*'(30:25) in Hebrew maqom= mokum (as the jews in Holland called the city of Amsterdam where they felt at home). Mokum means the place where I am meant to be to, to follow my calling and to find my destiny. That is what home is. Jacob places his wives and children on camels, drives the herd from the pen, and—in what truly is a nighttime escape—he leaves. He chooses a time when Laban is away for a sheep-shearing festival, gone for three days (verses 17–19a).

Jacob's decision was right, but the method—that's classic Jacob. Avoidance and fear. . It's an escape even though it could have been his first step toward adulthood. Many people take their first steps in this way, somewhat forced, filled with fear—just like Jacob. God leads Jacob through another learning process.

When Laban returns home from his festival and learns that Jacob has left—with all his possessions, his daughters, grandchildren, and even stolen household gods—he forms a group and pursues Jacob. Since Jacob is traveling with livestock Laban could quickly overtake him.. The night before he will meet Jacob Laban has a dream in which God appears to him saying: “Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad.” Sometimes, God gives such direct warnings (verses 22–24).

Despite this, the next day’s confrontation is tense. Laban accuses Jacob: “You deceived me and fled secretly” (verses 26–27). He also says: “You stole my gods” (verse 30). You are a deceiver.. (think of Jacobs name..)

1. Accepting criticism

Jacob’s response is remarkable. Very mature. He doesn’t get defensive . He does not shout back something like: “look who’s talking!” Instead, he reacts honestly and vulnerably: “I was afraid” (verse 31). That’s simply the truth. He was terrified that Laban would keep his daughters and prevent him from leaving. He says it outright: “I was afraid.”

This is the first step in growth: being able to accept harsh criticism—not by putting up a shield but by honestly explaining like Jacob did. He said: you are right but there was a reason. I was afraid that if you would know you would never let me go.. “ I had a good reason.” Such honesty is disarming.

2. Unmasking idols

Next, Laban demands to search their tents because of the missing idols. Idols are what we depend on besides God. Laban trusted in these images, a kind of dolls that that represented the powers of the weather and of fertility and of welfare and he believed he could use or influence them. Rachel, like her father, had faith in them and stole the household gods. Laban enters her tent but Rachel cleverly hides them by sitting on them and saying she can't get up because she's menstruating (verses 34–35). A touch of humor here.

The author of the biblical text mocks the idols: they're hidden under a woman's skirts. The message is clear: "See how sick making these things are?". Idols block growth. They need to be exposed—and soon Jacob will bury them where they belong: underground, gone. (Genesis 35:2–4),

3. Standing up for oneself

Laban does not discover any idol. He excuses himself to Jacob and this is for Jacob the first time that Jacob dares to be frank and outspoken to the father in law that had treated him badly. Jacob lets it out: "What did I do wrong? Show me what I've stolen!" Then follows a powerful speech. Laban stands face to face with a changed Jacob. For the first time we see here a mature man, He doesn't grovel, complain, or play the victim. He is simply outraged—righteously. He honestly believes he did nothing wrong (he didn't know Rachel had stolen the idols).

"For 20 years I served you—14 years for your daughters, 6 for your flock. I never took anything from you. I bore all losses myself. I

suffered in the heat by day and the cold by night, and you never acknowledged me!” (verses 36–40).

This is healthy. Jacob finally releases all his frustration. He adds: “If the God of my father, the Fear of Isaac, had not been with me, you would have sent me away empty-handed. But God saw my hardship and rebuked you last night.” (verses 41–42)

This may be the most moving moment in Jacob’s story. He stands up for himself. And suddenly Laban changes. Instead of getting angry he softens. “Now I understand,” he seems to say. Laban is finally touched, finally human.

4. Setting boundaries

This moment leads to the chapter’s climax: a covenant. Jacob and Laban separate, but do not sever. That is the beauty of it. Broken relationships can be healed. You can separate and still hold responsibility for each other. They mark this covenant with boundary stones. Laban says: “*You stay there, and I’ll stay here. May God be our witness that we treat each other responsibly. You care for my daughters and I won’t cross these boundaries in hostility.*”

The heap of stones becomes a visible symbol of the covenant. And it marks a shift: from “you **or** me” to “you **and** me. They must move forward *together* under God’s protection (verses 52–53a). They seal it with an oath. Jacob offers a peace offering, invites all his kin, and they share a meal—celebrating this mature relationship (verses 53b–54).

Then Laban departs. In a tender moment he hugs and kisses all the little “Labans”—his daughters and grandchildren—and returns to his

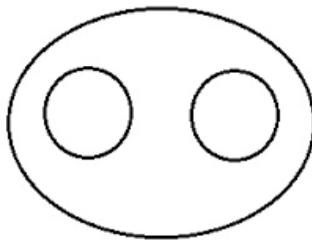
own place (verse 55). He had his place. Jacob has his. Everyone has their own space, task, and calling. This is only possible when boundaries exist. Setting boundaries is a necessary step in Jacob's journey toward maturity.

True community

I would like to dwell a little more extensively on this point. True community requires clear boundaries. It is not **fusion**—a suffocating symbiosis without responsibility. A closed circle. It is not **fragmentation**—isolated individuals with no real connection. The right image is the **ellipse**: two autonomous persons held together by a shared covenant with God. Only where people can say “me here, you there” can responsibility, freedom, and genuine community exist.

The ellipse Is a beautiful image for true community

It consists of two entirely autonomous individuals, and yet they are connected by that one covenant with God, who is described as the friend of Abraham and the refuge of Isaac. This covenant surrounds and encloses them like an ellipse in which they can live connected and at the same time separate with the both embracing covenant with God.



God is personal

God's involvement in Jacob's growth is striking. He does not prevent all suffering. He is not a magician who fixes everything instantly. Human history is real, and broken choices have consequences.

Yet God never withdraws. Our relationship with Him is also elliptical: God is there, and we are here. He surrounds us with His covenant. He affirms Jacob's longing for independence, protects him, warns Laban, and watches over the future. He does not remove responsibility, but He gives protection, correction, and presence. After parting from Laban, Jacob encounters God's angels and says: "Mahanaim"—two camps. Jacob has his camp, but there is also God's camp. God lets Jacob glimpse that he is not alone. He travels with him. This is a high point in Jacob's journey toward independence. He has his own place, yet remains surrounded by God's presence.

Generation X

We began this chapter with a book based on a study about the problems of Generation X, those born in the eighties. They struggle with broken relationships. Many of the young people today (even 50 %) come from divorced families. In my view Jacob was something like a "Generation X" child. Looking at the first phase of his life the comparison fits. All his relationships are toxic, broken, or damaged. There is tension between his parents, Isaac and Rebekah. Then his relationship with his brother Esau falls apart. His relationship with his first wife Leah, whom he did not choose, is troubled. Then comes the story of his dysfunctional

family and his complicated relationship with Laban. Jacob becomes part of a family where broken relationships exist everywhere.

Yet God is at work. He works in Jacob's life to transform him into a man who is mature and purified in God's service. We saw in this chapter how a part of the healing comes with setting boundaries and protecting 'living space'. Growing up is the same as succeeding to create your own personal living space.

Closing meditation

Letting go also means learning to set limits. To say 'no' can be as holy as to say 'yes'. Boundaries protect both love and freedom. Lord, help me where I must let go and where I must stand firm. Help me create the living space in which true life can grow..

Chapter 7

Letting Go and Holding On

"At Jabbok Jacob was left alone and there a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day and he said: let me go for the day breaks. But Jacob said, 'I will not let you go unless you bless me.'" (Genesis 32:26; read the entire chapter of Genesis 32)

In the dark night of the soul (St. John of the cross) we learn what truly gives meaning to our life and where we find the basis for letting go.

Jabbok

The greatest turning point in Jacob's life occurs during the nighttime struggle as he crosses the river Jabbok. The literal letters of the two words (JBK-JKB) underline this as the pivotal moment in Jacobs life. This is the hour of truth in which Jacob wrestles with God. This central moment in Jacob's story is the axis around which everything revolves. Here Jacob surrenders himself and gains that wondrous trust, which manifests itself in two forms: letting go and holding on. Here Jacob becomes a different person with a new name according to God's plan.

Let us first look back on Jacob's life up to this point. Jacob is a man who repeatedly reveals what lies hidden in us all: he wants to keep control of his life—he decides, he manipulates, and he is willing to go down crooked and twisted paths to get his way. And even though the Lord had taught him much during the years with Laban

there still remained an unchanging core. It was still Jacob—the one who always wanted to keep things in his own hands.

Then come the reports about Esau. After Jacob had sent his servants ahead they return with the message: “We came to your brother Esau and he is already on his way to meet you, accompanied by 400 men” (v. 6). When Jacob hears this he is terrified (v. 7).

Thankful

For the first time we read here that Jacob turns to the Lord in prayer (vv. 9–13). And it is also the first time we hear a tone of humility in his prayer. No longer: “If you help me, then I will give you...” as he had once phrased it in Bethel (28:20–22). But now for the first time there is a tone of wonder in his prayer—wonder that the Lord has so faithfully and lovingly carried and led him up to this point. Here Jacob makes up the balance. In short he is saying: “God, it is a miracle that you have put up with me and blessed me despite everything.”

But still fearful

But than directly alongside his humility there is also fear: “What will happen now? Esau is coming, and I am completely defenseless”. Naturally his conscience was pounding. In a way Esau had every right to be angry... What could Jacob do? Even in this moment we see Jacob in all his cunning. Three times he sends ahead gifts of livestock as peace offerings to his brother (vv. 13–21), This is not just a small gesture. He hopes to soften Esau’s heart and prepare the meeting.

First, a group of 200 bleating goats. Esau must have been honored by the wording Jacob instructed his servants to use: “This is a gift from your servant Jacob to my lord Esau” (v. 18). *Servant* and *lord*—it could not be clearer. Then came the second wave: 200 sheep and rams along with another humble message. And then a third wave even with male donkeys, bulls, and camels. What a flood of livestock! Surely this would convince Esau to receive his brother.

Jacob thought: “I will pacify him with the gifts that go ahead of me; after that I will see his face” (v. 20). The Hebrew text emphasizes “seeing his face”—a phrase that appears up to three times in this verse. “Maybe he will lift up my face once I have covered (atoned for) it and once I see his face...” Reconciliation here involves three elements: lifting up, covering, and beholding. Only when a downcast face is lifted up and guilt atoned for people can truly look one another in the eye.

As evening falls everyone is on the move. Only Jacob and his immediate family remain—for a brief time. Then in that night Jacob took his two wives, his two maidservants and his eleven sons and crossed the Jabbok at a shallow point (v. 22). He helped them to cross the stream and brought everything he had across to the other side (v. 23).

These charged words describe what we explored in this book on letting go. Everything that was dear to him—his property, his wives and children, Jacob brought them across the river. Then he left them there and returned alone. “So Jacob was left alone” (v. 24).

The tension of this moment almost has the tone of a death scene. This is how I imagine dying: letting everything go and remaining

alone. Jacob lets them go. He admits: "I can no longer protect them; they are no longer in my hands. Were they ever truly mine? The Lord gave, and the Lord takes away."

I picture this crossing of the river as a kind of final act. The last line of defense—this river between Jacob and Esau—is gone. It is the point of no return. Jacob is defenseless, subject to powers beyond his control. He has done all he can; now he must wait and see how Esau responds. Tomorrow could look completely different than he hopes. It's as if 400 rifles are pointed at his head. Will there be a reckoning? Who will pull the trigger first—and when?

Jacob's struggle

"And Jacob was left alone... completely alone."

At that moment something happened—a most wondrous thing. A man wrestled with him. At first Jacob might have thought he was facing one of Esau's soldiers or even a demon. But slowly he began to recognize: this was a struggle with God. No one other than the Lord himself in angelic form came to him. God himself confronted Jacob.

It may seem strange—but perhaps not as strange as we think at first. Isn't it true for many people that in their deepest need and most profound loneliness they come face-to-face with the Lord himself? That is how God did it then and how He still does it today. When we have let go of everything and stand empty-handed we fall back on Him. Then He is there. That is when the final decision comes. What do we do then? Do we run away—or do we fight?

Only now does the true Jacob appear. He doesn't run—he grabs. He wrestles with God to the last breath. He holds Him tightly with both arms and won't let go. It's remarkable: Jacob fights with God. Can that be? Who imagines fighting God? He is the Almighty! What chance does a mere human have? Yet the story of Jacob at the Jabbok shows: God allows Himself to be wrestled with. He gives us the space for it. More than that: God even leaves a physical mark to show how important this was. One could say this was a spiritual struggle with God as God appeared in human form. During the fight Jacob knew what was at stake: to fight and not let go.

The struggle lasted for hours—and the angel could not overpower him. He could not defeat Jacob. This is so extraordinary that even Jacob is astonished afterward. The angel does not win! Even though he injures Jacob's hip—his loins, symbolic of a man's strength. Yet the text does not say: he struck him—it says he merely touched him. The Hebrew word used is “jigáw”, soft in sound, echoing Jacob's name. The story is rich with wordplay: Jacob–Jabbok, Jacob–jigáw. “*Touched in his natural strength*”—a beautiful phrase. His loins remained weakened forever. There was a cost to this struggle.

The blessing: Letting Go and Holding On!

As morning dawns the man says: “Let me go, for it is daybreak.” But Jacob replies: “I will not let you go unless you bless me” (v. 26). Here is the essence of this mysterious struggle. Jacob is fighting for the blessing. That is the purpose. For this, he let go of everything. Letting go has a flipside. True letting go always goes hand in hand with holding on. Jacob's style: “... unless you bless me.” For in that

blessing lies Jacob's ultimate foundation. Only the certainty of this blessing makes 'letting go' possible.

This blessing had been promised by God even before Jacob's birth as his mother Rebekah had told him. It was the blessing already promised to Abraham when God called him (Genesis 12:1–3). Jacob sought his final anchor in the gracious saving favor of God—promised to him, without him, and despite him. This God will heal and redeem the world and all its peoples—through Abraham's descendants!

Letting go is never possible without holding on. Jacob held fast to the promise. Realising that the heart of the promise to Abraham is fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ, In Him lies the blessing promised to Abraham, now extended to all nations. Jacob held on to this—before the blessing came. Now that the blessing has come, we may hold on even more tightly.

Flipside

This is the flipside of letting go. You cannot let go without holding on. If Jacob had not been touched by God's love, he would have fought Esau to the bitter end. Now he could let go. It was hard—infinitely hard for a man like Jacob. But he could reach the goal and ultimately succeed because he could rely on God's sure grace. When one holds on to that grace, letting go becomes trust. One lets go like Jesus let go of Mary Magdalene asking her to do the same: "Do not hold on to me, for I am going to my Father and your Father" (John 20:17). Like Jacob let go of his wives and children at the riverbank. When we let go in this way letting go does not

become a fall into the void but rather an act of coming with empty hands: the position from which the Lord can ultimately bless us!

Is letting go an art?

We see here that it is not an art, it is grace. It is a gift. It is something He works in us. He meets us in our emptiness and tests us with the question: “Do you truly dare to entrust yourself to Me alone? Do you truly dare to let go of everything and cling to Me forever?” This was the purpose of His struggle with Jacob—not to break him, but to make him grow. Until the true Jacob emerges—the one called *Israel*.

A new experience is added. A foundation is given under holding on! It is the blessing. For us, three thousand years later, the blessing unfolded in the coming of Christ. Always look to the face of God in Jesus Christ, who was crucified for the salvation of you, me, and all nations. “Throw the sack of God’s promises at His feet,” as Luther once said. He will never step over it. This is how you can catch Him. Then you win the fight with the Almighty! And letting go becomes a life-skill, grounded in His grace!

Name change

This encounter and the wrestling between Jacob and the angel is followed by a name change. This underscores the profound transformation that has taken place in Jacob. A man who has learned to let go through grace in such a way is no longer the same person.

Names play a significant role in this story anyway. One should pay attention to the wordplay between Jacob and Jabbok. Jacob must

pass through the Jabbok to become the person God wants him to be.

Jabbok means emptiness. A name that is primarily to be understood quite vividly as the designation for a wadi, a riverbed that is dry and empty for most of the year. The word also means wrestling. The author is saying: “In the emptiness comes the wrestling.” and it leaves you behind with a wound: *jigáw*. Jacob had to pass through the Jabbok to become who he truly is. We have already seen that emptiness is closely linked with the grace of letting go—withstanding there with empty hands. But through both of these ‘names’ he came to his final new name.

What Is your name?

All of this is contained in the story of Jacob’s wrestling at the river. When Jacob stakes everything and almost swears, “I will not let you go unless you bless me,” the angel asks him, “What is your name?” (verse 27). Not exactly a pleasant question. ... “How are you actually known?” That’s what lies behind the question. Will it be *jabbok* or will it be *jigáw*? What is your name? How do people know you? Than he replies: “Jacob”. It is as if Jacob is saying: up to now my true identity was Jacob. And that’s indeed the case, for the name contains grasping the heel, flattery, cunning, or however one wants to call it.

Nico ter Linden rightly says: “At this point, the story comes to its climax. Jacob is his name—Deceiver. By naming his name it is as though his entire existence is illuminated in its fallenness and corruption”. Finally, the decisive word is spoken like a self-confession from Jacob. ‘Yes, that is how I have always been. I was

always the one who tried to hold all the strings of my life. I even thought I had to help You so that your promises would come true. That is what I thought with Esau's lentil stew and on Isaac's deathbed: 'If I do not act here, nothing will happen'. So I manipulated people—even in spiritual matters. It became second nature to me.”

For the Lord, this single word—Jacob—is enough to hear the whole confession of Jacob's stuck life. It's like in the parable of the Prodigal Son, where just the act of homecoming is enough for the father to embrace his son and with a single word of blessing forgive his entire past and heal him. This breaking open, and thus coming to the Father is sufficient at this point. No longer does Jacob project his fears and desires onto God. He lets go.

A new name

This is a different Jacob. Here we see him in his true nature. When everything falls away, one thing remains for him: God's loving intentions. And before this appeal to his heart, the Lord relents. With a movement of his arm he sweeps away Jacob's entire old life: “Your name shall no longer be Jacob.” Gone, forgiven, and forgotten is the old name. God wipes it away and speaks a new name into being: Israel. El means “God,” and Isra “he struggled.” So: “He who struggled with God.” This shall now be his name. Included is the outcome: he struggled and won.

In this name what the Lord had already planted deeply within Jacob at his birth comes to light . He would be a man who would not only receive but also fight for the blessing with strength and from his innermost being. A man willing even to wrestle with God Himself!

In New Testament terms one might say: in receiving his new name Jacob put off the old self and put on the new (Col. 3:9).

In the Bible a name stands for the true person. With us, names are often just labels used to distinguish one person from another. After all, who knows why they are called Müller and not Janson? But in the Bible, a name is often chosen with the utmost sensitivity to express a person's essence. It is more like what the English call a nickname. The nickname a class gives its teacher, capturing him perfectly in a short phrase. That's how it is in Scripture too. You see it, for example, in name changes like Naomi, who became Mara (Ruth 1:20), or Simon, who was later called Peter (Matt. 16:18).

Jacob's true nature is now expressed in his name. He is no longer Jacob, but Israel. His new name carries a deep affirmation: Fighter of God. And Jacob may know this: that he fought particularly well in that nighttime struggle at the Jabbok. The Lord sees this and says it: "What a fight! How deep and completely devoted was your heart."

In this life-and-death struggle, Jacob was one hundred percent engaged. He won, though it was at the same time pure grace. Such a fighter God allows to prevail.

Jacob would very much have liked to hear God's name now as well. But he only hears: "Why do you ask my name? After all, it is wonderful!" The essence of a human being can be captured in one essential word—but the name of God surpasses all names. No, we will never become "pals" of God. Even in the deepest trust, his holiness, his unsearchability, and his majesty remain present. This makes Jacob's astonishment even greater. "How is it possible? I

have seen God face to face,” he says, “and yet my life was spared.” That’s why he names the place Peniel (verse 30). Jacob actually puts it a bit more strongly: “And my life has been preserved.” Deliverance, redemption, arriving at one’s true calling—all of this is contained in passing through such a “Peniel” experience.

Defining

To close, I would like to briefly touch on another dimension contained in this story. Jacob’s struggle defines the destiny of all his descendants. They will all be called Israel after him—until, at the fullness of time, the Son appears, “Israel in its most concentrated form” (H. Berkhof).

The Dutch hymn 461 expresses it like this:

“He, who fought for us,
alone, man against man,
suffered as God and man
what no one can endure,
in the garden’s hidden place,
at the cross in death’s agony,
he showed us the way—
through suffering and through death.”

(Liedboek voor de Kerken 461:5-6)

Here, the line is drawn from Jacob at the Jabbok to Jesus Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane. That was his Jabbok—the emptiness he had to pass through. The place where he released his own and held on to only one thing: “Not my will, but your will be done” (Matt. 26:39). What happens at the Jabbok with Jacob is ultimately just a

foreshadowing of what Jesus accomplished in the midst of history for all of us. With Jacob, it is still limited to one man—even if his descendants are already foreshadowed; with Jesus it is a breakthrough of blessing for the entire world. In the isolation of Gethsemane, Jesus entered the struggle with God for all of us (Matt. 26:39–45). And he overcame—and paid for it with his life. Jacob was allowed to experience this in advance. And we are allowed to look back on it.

Closing meditation.

Help me in moments of drought and emptiness, in loneliness and abandonment to place my hand on this blessing. “One suffered for me, alone, man against man, endured what no one else could do”. Lord give me this as the basis for my letting go as I hold on to the blessing that promises to give also to me ‘the white stone with my name on it, which no one knows except him who receives it’ (Revelation 2: 17).

Chapter 8

From Fighter to One Who Lives by Grace

“If I have found favor in your eyes, then accept this gift from my hand. For to see your face is like seeing the face of God.” (Genesis 33:10; read the whole chapter of Genesis 33)

The sun rose

The next paragraph begins with the sun rose above him as he passed Penuel (Genesis 32:31) This signals that a new phase in Jacob’s life begins: He is a different man now, speaking of grace instead of “birthright” (verses 5 and 11). His transformation is evident—God has moved into the center of his life.

“The old has gone, the new has come,” as Paul writes in his second letter to the Corinthians (5:17).

The core of Jacob’s change

In Genesis 33, we discover what this transformation entails. After the deep nightly experience we read: Jacob lifted his eyes and sees Esau approaching with 400 men (33:1). What would Jacob do? He positions his wives and children. First the maidservants with their children, then Leah with her children, and finally Rachel with Joseph at the back—those he loved most, so they’d have the best chance of escaping if something went wrong (verses 2–3).

By itself, it's not wrong to act prudently. In this regard, Jacob is still the same as before.

God rarely changes our genes. The clever stay clever, the thoughtful remain thoughtful, the spontaneous remain spontaneous, the optimistic remain optimistic. The fighter stays combative. God does not aim to change the created content of the 'raw material'. Rather, He seeks to transform it based on the traits we already possess.

We are all like Jacob. To put it simply: we must shift from "me at the center" to "God at the center" of our lives. I assure you—when this happens, as it did for Jacob at Penuel—everything changes. Even the way we deal with our traits, our intelligence, and everything else we've been given. We see this in Jacob.

Jacob says to Esau: "To see your face is like seeing the face of God.". Let that sink in. This line gets to the heart of the matter. After the wrestling match at Penuel Jacob has completely and radically let go of the situation with Esau. He has placed it in God's hands. That's how he meets Esau. To Jacob, what Esau does now is equivalent to what God does. His fate lies in Esau's hands. "Your face is God's face. If you strike me or take revenge—it's all my fault. I fully deserve it. I am in your hands, just as I am in God's hands."

Then, in the middle of the story, the miracle happens. After Jacob has positioned his wives and children and bows down seven times like a servant (verse 3) Esau runs to meet him, embraces him, throws his arms around him, kisses him - "and they both wept" (verses 3-4).

I couldn't help but think of the father in the parable of the Prodigal Son. He too sees his son from a distance, and the son is crushed and guilty. We read there: "While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him." (Luke 15:20). That's how it is when God's grace triumphs. This happens here through the act of the one he feared most! In Esau Jacob saw who God is. To the one who comes to Him in guilt, expecting judgment, He offers unbelievable love, forgiveness, and joy. What we read here is the miracle of the Gospel: "I saw your face as one sees the face of God, and I lived! Even more—you were pleased with me!" It sounds like: "My brother was lost, and now he is found".

Esau and Jacob—both sons of Isaac and Abraham—show in this encounter what the grace of God means. This is the core. God stands at the center. The word "grace" only appears twice in the entire Book of Genesis? Both times in this chapter (vs. 5 and 11).

When Esau sees the whole crowd of women and children he asks Jacob: "Who are these with you?" Jacob replies: "The children God has graciously given your servant. " and again in verse 11: "God has been gracious to me". So not only is God the center—but also His grace. That is the miracle: God does not deal with us as we expect.

The effects of grace

Recognizing grace is the core of Jacob's change in heart. If we follow the text, we see several effects that flow from it—offering a striking new profile of Jacob:

1. Reconciliation – He can now share and thus reconcile.
2. Contentment – He says, "I have everything."

3. Tenderness – In the way he treats his flock and children.
4. Independence – He follows his own path.

Let us look more closely at these four points.

1. Reconciliation

When Esau meets Jacob and his entire family, he sees the herds Jacob sent ahead and asks: “What do you mean by all these droves I met?” Jacob replies: “To find favor in your eyes, my lord. It is a polite way to say: All my blessings, they are yours! Esau responds: “I already have plenty, my brother. Keep what you have for yourself.” (verses 8–9). (Notice how Esau says “my brother” for the first time. Jacob still calls him “my lord.”). But Esau replies: “What is yours be yours.” Behind this whole passage the painful past where Esau lost or better sold the blessing comes in the mind of both brothers. In this answer Esau is essentially saying: “That blessing (the birthright blessing, W.R.)—I don’t need it back”! Also Esau is going through a deep process. God has worked on him as well.

As soon as Esau—symbolizing the Gentile nations—acknowledges that Israel carries the first blessing a great problem is resolved. Then the door is open for reconciliation.

Look also at Jacob. He insists: “Please take my gift!” But more precisely he says: “Please take my blessing” (verse 11). In a hidden way Jacob is saying: “This blessing I once stole from you—here it is. Let’s share it.” and Esau ultimately accepts to share it. That is reconciliation. The word is not used—but everything here speaks the language of reconciliation. And it arises from grace. Reconciliation through sharing—and with a mighty perspective.

War and peace in Gaza

Let me touch again briefly on Esau and Edom. Esau is considered the ancestor of Edom. Edom here represents the "brotherly Gentile nations." Jacob is Israel, chosen by God to carry His blessing. That is the situation to this day. And how will it end? It begins in conflict and ends in peace—because Jacob allows Esau to share in the blessing. And Esau acknowledges Jacob as the carrier of the main blessing. Imagine that this insight would inspire the present tensions between Israel and the Arab world. "Edomites" sharing in Jacob's blessing. We as Christians would add: Was not that the mission of Israel's greatest son the Messiah: Jesus?

Jesus is the great Son of Jacob, the Firstborn whom God sent into the world. Romans 8, which we have quoted before, says: "Those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters." (Romans 8:29). All these Gentile nations are grafted into the one root—Israel as the first result of grace into the world.

2. Contentment

The second effect can be seen in the small sentence in verse 9. Esau says there: "I already have plenty." Jacob replies: "God has been gracious to me; I have everything" (verse 11). Jacob surpasses Esau. Now they boast and try to outdo one another—but in a good way. Jacob says, "God has been gracious to me; I have everything." As if to say: "This is actually the greatest thing I have received." I have my God; that is enough. Much more than I ever asked for has been given to me in Him.

That's how it works: anyone who has truly seen the open heart of the Father no longer measures their well-being by sheep and cattle. Sometimes pain remains—Jacob will soon miss Rachel and that will cause him pain for the rest of his life. And yet, there is also a deep-seated peace in Jacob's life. He is blessed with a measure of peace amid both his possessions and his losses.

3. Tenderness

Then comes the third consequence of God's grace in Jacob. As he moves forward with his entire herd and surrounded by all his family, Esau says: "Let us journey together; I will accompany you" (verse 12). But Jacob replies: "My lord knows that the children are delicate and that I have flocks and nursing calves with me. If they are driven hard for even one day, the whole herd will die. Go ahead of me at your own pace; I will move at the pace of the livestock and the children" (verses 13 and 14).

Beautiful, isn't it? Jacob, the pusher, who fled from Laban like a whirlwind now says: "Yes, but there are babies, there are calves—we go at the pace of the weakest." I call that tenderness. There is more behind this statement, but still, I see in it a distinct element. At the very least, a light falls here on Jacob's heart, the heart of a shepherd, who no longer drives and rushes forward, but who allows the rhythm to be set by the weakest. Isn't that something remarkable—to move at the pace of the children, at the measure of the calves? That's how it should be when people truly live by grace. We can learn a great deal from this. But do we actually do it? Do we align our pace with that of the weakest?

4. Independence

Esau offers another solution. He says: “Then at least let me leave with you a detachment of my men, to accompany you on the way to Seir.” Esau intends to return there. But Jacob is noticeably clear on this. He says: “Why? Let me find favor in the sight of my lord!” We might say: “Please?” Which really means: “No!” Jacob says it here with full clarity and decisiveness: “No!” (verse 15).

This is a fourth element in Jacob’s changed attitude that I don’t want to leave unmentioned. Jacob simply wants to go his own way. In short: reconciliation with your brother does not automatically mean that you must live under the same roof and thus risk falling back into old patterns. Jacob continues on his own path. “I’ll follow after you,” he says, with his usual cunning. But he does not. Instead of going to Seir, he turns to the right, to Shechem (verse 18).

Esau seems to understand this quite well. Politeness sometimes includes a degree of concealment. Esau got it and accepted it. He probably thought: You’re right, this is how it should be. All the conflict has now been reconciled, but living together again, returning to the old family—that is not your calling. You are now independent; you stand on your own feet. Go ahead. Independent with God. This is a fourth and beautiful element in the life of a man who lives under God’s grace. When God is at the center of life, a person is no longer a weakling, a doormat, nor will he allow himself to be treated as such. He will not become a slave to his brother. No, such a person gains something of Jacob’s pride, who from now on may shape his own life. No longer under foreign powers, but free under God, standing on his own feet. That is how the Lord wanted it—not only for Jacob, but also for you and for me.

This brings me to the end of this chapter. What God did with Jacob stands as an example for you and me. We were allowed to learn that a life centered on God means: living from the grace of God—that is the core of everything. This leads us to reconciliation in our relationships. It leads to us being fulfilled, moved, and matured. God is a God of closeness. He has a plan for your life. He continues with it, through thick and thin, through everything. Through His Holy Spirit, and in Jesus, who is the firstborn among all peoples. “God will confirm and shelter you and me, all of us and on His scroll, on which He writes the nations, He will count you as grafted into Israel, and so ensure that you bear the name of the children of Zion. (Psalm 87:4)”

Closing meditation

Jacob limped away from the river forever changed. Strength is not found in winning, but in surrender. Lord, make me aware that surrender does not make me a slave but sets me free and strengthens my independence..

Chapter 9

The Blessing of Crossed Hands

"When he brought them close to him, Jacob crossed his hands and placed his right hand on Ephraim's head, though he was the younger, and his left hand on Manasseh's head, though he was the firstborn. And so he blessed Joseph." (Genesis 48:14; read chapter 47:27 the end of chapter 48.)

What his father Isaac had to learn at his deathbed, Jacob had learned in the flow of his life: first will be last, and last will be first—so that no one may boast. Only grace can change a person and teach him to let go—crosswise.



Jacob Blessing the Sons of Joseph (Rembrandt van Rijn, 1656)

In this chapter, we delve deeper into the final days of the patriarch Jacob. He lies on his deathbed. Rembrandt has portrayed this in an incomparable way. On the left is the old Jacob, raising himself up slightly from the cushions, with his two grandsons at his knees. Rembrandt gave Manasseh dark hair, clearly a Jewish boy, whereas Ephraim is blond (and thus resembling a Northern European?) Behind them stands Joseph, attempting to intervene. To balance the composition, Asenath, Joseph's wife, is included in a beautiful robe. All the painting's focus is drawn toward the blessing right hand. If you draw two diagonals across the painting, you will see that the point where they intersect is precisely where Jacob's blessing—but also crossed—hand is shown. There is deep meaning in this gesture. It is symbolic. This is what Jacob learned as the fruit of a long process of letting go. This is where the art of letting go has led him.

Leaving Rembrandt's explanation beside the meaning of the crossing hands is clear: It is the insight that God is a God who disrupts all our plans. His blessing passes, so to speak, through the cross. Previously, we already saw that the art of letting go is deeply connected with the grace of God—and here it is the heart of blessing (see chapter 8). We see how Jacob, at the end of his life, in the act of the crossing hands visualizes how he in his life has experienced this grace. In the crossing of his hands he makes clear how this grace worked miraculously in his life. He tells them where it began (vs.3-7), the way it went on and finally he visualizes it at the end of his life. We observe, in succession:

- A. The start
- B. The aftermath, and
- C. the impact of God's grace in Jacob's life.

A. The start

The first thing Jacob does: he includes Joseph and his sons in a *retrospective* of his life (verses 3–7).

His deepest pains become visible. How he had to bury Rachel on the journey, “although we were only a short distance from our destination (Ephraim).” One can sense here a pain that was never extinguished. Perhaps Jacob unearthed even more old wounds... But this is not what he wants to emphasize at the end of his life. He wants to speak about how his whole life was carried and overshadowed by the loving, gracious presence of God Almighty—“El-Shaddai.” This is the first name he mentions in verse 3 as he looks back on his life.

God Almighty appeared to him there in the wilderness (Genesis 28), when he felt abandoned by both God and man and had to flee from Esau. Though it was his own fault, the Lord never reproached him. Instead, He showed him love and promised him blessing: “I will make you fruitful and increase your numbers, and I will make you into a community of peoples in this land!”

Throughout the book of Genesis God never explicitly reproaches Jacob. Yet the Lord often opposed him. He disciplined him, taught him, even wrestled with him... But when the Lord appeared to him, it was always the supporting hand, always in the spirit of love, of sonship—and undergirded by the intention that through Jacob, God would bring His blessing into the world. This is extraordinary: this divine appearance encompasses and overshadows Jacob’s entire life journey, even its most painful moments—such as the loss of Rachel.

B. The aftermath

It is not easy. Allowing grace into one's life always means dying a little. The old self must die so that the new self may rise.

Everywhere grace takes effect in people's lives, these wondrous processes occur: our certainties begin to shake, hidden ideals are exposed, false securities laid bare. God will cross out our plans.

This is at the heart of the story, as Jacob proceeds to bless his two beloved grandsons. You two, he says, I count as my own sons. You will be like Reuben and Simeon to me.

There is similarity between the dying Jacob and the dying father of Jacob: Isaac. The lesson that Isaac, Jacob's own father was forced to give the blessing to the younger instead of the older, and to stretch out his hands in a crossed manner. When Isaac was old and blind he followed his own instinct and was forced to learn God's way. Jacob is also blind—his eyes have grown weak—but the author essentially says: he learned the lesson and blesses in the style of God. He does so as one who sees the Invisible. He blesses with inwardly opened eyes, like a visionary who, after a lifelong journey on God's discipline bench, now sees as God sees. He blesses as God blesses—and does so willingly, freely, and in unity with God's Spirit.

How does God bless?

In his crossed hands, Jacob passes on the blessing in the way in which the grace of God enters our world and our lives. The younger receives first place, and the older comes second. Joseph thinks Jacob is mistaken. Joseph—that is us too; we also think it's an error. Joseph says so with many words. Manasseh is the firstborn. That meant a great deal at the time. The firstborn was the father's

pride and joy. He would carry all responsibility and inherit all wealth. But Jacob does the exact opposite of what Joseph wants.

It's worth briefly examining the two grandsons' names. Manasseh means "forgetting", and Ephraim means "fruitfulness."

Forgetting is the most obvious way of coping with problems and moving on in life—but fruitfulness is God's way: bearing fruit through pruning. The blessing they received remarkably foreshadowed in their names..

But Jacob added something. He said to Joseph: I know, my son, I know—but remember, the youngest will also become great. Jacob blesses in God's style. That's how God always does it. He bypassed Lamech the mighty and chose Noah, the comforter. He allowed Isaac to be born—not from Abraham's first choice, Hagar (young and fertile), but from Sarah (old and shriveled).

He did the same in Jacob's life. For Jacob, Rachel—the beautiful one—was to be the matriarch and ancestress of the Messiah but the Lord chose Leah, the one with the weak eyes.

The same pattern holds in the New Testament. The Messiah is not born in Herod's palace, but in a manger in Bethlehem, to a poor woman.

And Jesus Himself—He didn't surround Himself with leaders or city elders, but with Zacchaeus and women of questionable morals.

Why does God, with His grace, always act contrary to what the world sees as normal?

He does this because He constantly wants to show that His grace and blessing do not come through our achievements, our efforts, or our great heroes.

Blessing comes only through the path of letting go—and by stepping before the throne of grace with empty hands.

This is what Jacob learned in his life. This is what he passes on—as the deepest wisdom to his descendants: So that whoever boasts may boast in the Lord.

C. The impact

However, this disruption of our plans is completely misunderstood if we view it as something negative. As if God were the spoilsport of everything beautiful. As if when one opens up to God suddenly a lot of nice things will disappear from one's personal life. Many people have this distorted image of God and of Christians: that becoming a Christian means having to give up everything that makes life enjoyable and enriching. Even Jacob's wisdom in old age can be misinterpreted this way: God disrupts our plans, and that means (so we think) He takes away what is beautiful; He punishes what we enjoy doing.

Yet the exact opposite is true. When Jacob says: God in His grace, disrupts our plans, he sees how God freed him from his idols: from his narcissism, from his tendency to manipulate, from his lust for power, from his greed for wealth, from his negative attitude toward Leah, away from his "darlings" and all that stood in the way of his life's true flourishing.

That is why Jacob ends his blessing with a testimony, full of joy, about how the Lord has led him. Yes, God has shepherded Jacob (verse 15) all his life until that very day. Behind all his sometimes-bitter life experiences stood the Good Shepherd. And if there's one thing a shepherd wants, it is that his sheep don't fall into pits or get killed by wild animals but rather graze in green pastures—and grow. And it was precisely his struggle with the angel, says Jacob (verse 16), that saved him. That very struggle freed him from the delusion that he had to manage life by himself. The fact that he became “crippled” through this was not a negative thing—it was God's surgical knife in his life, protecting him from falling into deep pits.

If one thing is certain, it is this: God's grace and blessing do not press us down but lift us up. They may cause us to “die,” it seems—but in truth, they awaken us to real life. They don't hinder life but rather prune us in the best sense. God turns evil into good. And this, says Jacob to Joseph (verses 15 and 16), is how God will continue to act with you.

Jacob's blessing with crossed hands shows us where he has arrived at the end of his life. What a difference between the Jacob we meet here in his final days and the Jacob from before Penue! . In these final years, he has come to know himself. In a terrifying way, he had to recognize his own faults reflected in his sons' behavior. It humbled him, and here on his deathbed, he found peace in that regard. He sees how, behind it all, stood God's gracious and loving guidance.

Now, he really has only one desire: to pass this experience on to his children and grandchildren. He wants to recommend to them how

wondrous the guiding and saving hand of God truly is. This doesn't erase his pain. When he thinks of Rachel, tears still come to his eyes. But it seems he is now illuminated by this foreign, unexpected grace of God. Everything here speaks of reconciliation and peace. That's how it has become, that's how it will remain, and so he passes the blessing on. And he himself is included in the blessing—this is how God's saving work flows onward.

Let me conclude this chapter with a passage from Paul in 2 Corinthians 3, which offers a kind of summary of Jacob's story that we can apply to ourselves.

Paul writes:

“You are our letter, written in our hearts, known and read by everyone—not written with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God.”

There we see it. Now we understand why God worked so long and so deeply in Jacob's life. He himself became a living letter.

Perhaps the church of Christ in our time is in decline because we are not fully willing to go along with that narrowing path of God described at the start of this chapter. Perhaps we've acted too much like mail carriers—handing out letters from God to the world. But God doesn't want mail carriers. He wants living letters—written by the Spirit into the hearts of people, just as He did with Jacob.

Jacob first had to become a living letter himself—and only then could he pass on the message to his children. And the beautiful thing is: the God of Jacob is still the same today. He still writes such letters—after the pattern of Jacob.

Closing meditation

Help me to see in my life the lesson of Jacob's crossed hands, that grace indeed surprises and turns my plans. but it is always enriching and life-changing! Help me to pass it on to the next generation.

Chapter 10

Jacob's Final Letting Go

“I wait for your salvation, O Lord.” (Genesis 49:1–28)

“When Jacob had finished giving instructions to his sons, he drew his feet up into the bed, breathed his last, and was gathered to his people.” (Genesis 49:33)

Genesis 49 describes Jacob's death. What stands out is the tone of the chapter as a whole: in his final moments, Jacob is focused on one thing—passing on the blessing. And finally he set his heart on waiting.

Finally: bless and wait!

Jacob's last words made think of the last words of his greatest descendant: Jesus. We read in the final verse of the gospel of Luke : “While Jesus was blessing them, he departed from them.” (Luke 24:51)

Just as Christ ascended with hands raised in blessing, so Jacob leaves this world while blessing his sons. Each receives a unique word for the future.

A second striking feature is that Jacob does not look back, but forward. His posture is one of expectancy. He knows the danger of becoming like Lot's wife—frozen by the past.

And then comes the heart of the chapter:

“I wait for your salvation.” (v. 18). Everything in Jacob’s life seems to converge on this single confession. What does it mean?

Prophetic vision.

But let’s first look at the blessing. Jacob foresaw the future of all of his sons in images. Animal images. We know how it came out in real space, time and history. Between the blessings one senses: the future will not be rosy. Painful things will happen. There will be struggles. Sometimes judgment ! But God will work through them.

There are two particular promises that jump out: one for Judah and one for Joseph. To Judah, the promise is: “Judah, from you will come the Redeemer, Shiloh, the ruler who will shepherd Israel—and before whom the nations will bow” (verses 8–10), Judah is the lion!. To Joseph: “Joseph is a fruitful vine by a spring; the Almighty will bless you with overflowing, heavenly blessings” (verses 22–26). The images of the other sons are more somber. Issachar is a donkey, Dan is a snake, Naphtali a doe, Benjamin a wolf. But Judah is a lion, and Joseph is fruitful vine.

In general vine Jacob’s blessings aren’t sugar-coated. They are visionary prophecies. You could place the history of the Old and New Testaments alongside them. Salvation and judgment, heights and depths, light and darkness—all come together here.

The art of waiting.

As Jacob is busy giving each of his sons a prophetic word for the future—a word of blessing. suddenly comes this small sentence. “*I wait for your salvation.*”

What does this line in verse 18 mean? It is a short, powerful sentence that expresses Jacob's deep sigh. In the middle of the prophetic sayings with which he blesses his sons, this sigh bursts forth .

The Dutch word *heil* for salvation best captures the meaning of the Hebrew text. Not only rescue, but healing, wholeness , restoration. Indeed, it is this healing that we wait for – not just for himself but for all creation. This healing was promised to Abraham, came forth from Judah, brought into the world through Jesus. The old Jacob says: "For your salvation I wait, I long for it." It already casts its shadow of liberation here and now. Soon, it will culminate in the new heaven and the new earth, where righteousness will dwell. Then the seed of the Kingdom will have fully sprouted and grown into the tree of the Kingdom.

Waiting for what is to come

Jacob's entire being is now focused on waiting for God's salvation. This waiting for salvation is the only thing still alive in Jacob. His entire being has become focused on it. He waits with open hands for God's salvation.

Let me elaborate a bit here. Waiting feels difficult for us. For modern people, waiting feels useless. Wait !? We prefer to take matters into our own hands!

A text from a parable of Jesus might be helpful here. We read in Matthew 13: "When the servants of the owner saw the weeds sprouting up along with the good seed, they said to the farmer: 'Sir, shouldn't we pull it up right away?' But the master said: 'No, don't

do it. You would unavoidably damage the good grain. Let it grow until the harvest.” (Verses 28b–30a). Wait!

This is the wondrous effect of the seed of God's salvation. It must mature – and in the Bible, maturing and waiting are the same. Waiting means creating space for maturing. In the Bible, waiting is something completely different than what it means to us. For us, waiting is a waste of time. It seems pointless – you do nothing, you don't produce, you're not working, you're sidelined. That feels bad. And this applies even to the smallest forms of waiting: we almost always experience traffic jams or queues as a burden, or when we have to wait for our number to be called. This is even truer for the bigger forms of waiting: waiting to get into a university program, waiting for a child, waiting for a job. Waiting carries a negative connotation for us.

It's remarkable, then, to read in the Bible that waiting is actually one of the greatest things a believer can do in relation to God. The Bible speaks in Hebrews 11 about the heroes of faith in the Old Covenant. When you read this chapter, it's striking that they are all praised by God for one particular reason: that despite all adversity, they continued to wait. Abraham, Moses, Jeremiah, Daniel – none of them saw the promise fulfilled, but they all kept expecting it. They reached for it as though they could see the invisible – as if they already possessed it and only had to receive it. So in the Bible, waiting means: stretching yourself with every fiber of your being toward something.

The Hebrew word for waiting comes from the root for cord or string. A string is stretched. So, it really says: for your salvation I stretch myself – I reach out in tense expectation. According to the

Bible, this is not a waste — not pointless, unpleasant, or boring. No, it is the most important thing we can do. Because it creates the conditions for growth. It goes hand in hand with maturing. Those who direct their whole heart toward the salvation God is bringing into the world — grow because of it.

A small example: being sick is a form of waiting. It forces us into passivity. I once spoke with someone who had a serious liver illness and had to undergo a year-long treatment. He said to me: “Looking back, I wouldn’t have wanted to miss that year of my life. At first, it was terrible — lying in bed as a 40-year-old with all kinds of plans and projects I still wanted to accomplish. But I had to lie still. And then the Lord began to teach me things. I asked myself: Were the goals I was pursuing so fervently really worth it? Or had they secretly become my idols? What I had been constantly suppressing in my busyness came to light. Topics surfaced that I had buried deep in conversations at my bedside. Suddenly, I could process things I had previously ignored. There was space to make decisions. My entire list of priorities changed. I moved forward — enriched by that year.”

So, waiting means cleansing and being cleansed. Waiting means learning to process, making important decisions, and, with a tense string, longing for what God wants to do in your life. *Passive activity* — that’s what Francis Schaeffer called this attitude. Waiting is, in the first place, passive — it means letting God act, paying attention to Him, watching the seed grow in yourself and in those around you. At the same time it also means looking for it with all your being and actively participating, weeding the area around the seed, watering and pruning it, and enjoying the fruits when it blossoms. All of this is part of it. I hear this in Jacob’s statement:

“This is it — I wait for your salvation, O LORD.” The word LORD that he uses here is the covenant name — Yahweh — which was only revealed to Moses centuries later. It means: “I am there for you.”

Well-grounded expectation

Finally: This is not just a tense expectation — it is also a well-grounded one. For ultimately salvation is rooted in blessing. I began by saying that Jacob, on his deathbed, was mainly focused on blessing. “It happened, as he was blessing them, that he departed from them.”

Jacob himself saw already fulfillment in his life time. Think of Josef. He received his beloved son back from death, so to speak. He even discovered that this son had become the deputy ruler of Egypt! He has seen the promised land. He knows: the blessing is underway. Later, the Lion of Judah will appear. Joseph’s story is a foreshadowing of Him. To Him the nations will submit (verse 10).

We have firm ground under our feet because of what God has already done through Jacob, Joseph, Judah, David, and Jesus. That’s why we celebrate Good Friday, Easter, and Pentecost — because of what He has already unfolded in history. This is the foundation of our hope for salvation

When will the final fulfillment of His promise come? In 2030? In 2050? Or even later? When will the bridegroom enter, so that we may go out to meet Him with our lamps burning? We don’t know. But as time goes on we make Jacob’s words our own: “”LORD, for your salvation we wait! The name he uses –Jahweh- means: *I am there for you.*

Closing meditation

At the end, Jacob let go of everything—yet he died in expectation. The art of letting go finds its fulfillment here. Lord help me to use my final energy in passing on faith, hope, and love to the next generation and to receive the gift of waiting!

Part III

The Art of Holding On

Introduction

The first part of this book on the art of letting go was written twenty-five years ago. In the 1990s, the theme of letting go was a central concern for many people. It was seen as an essential step in personal growth, deeply influenced by the lingering spirit of the 1960s, with its emphasis on freedom and emancipation. In the 1990s, letting go was seen as the path to freedom and maturity. It meant breaking free from restrictive patterns, claiming independence, and indeed in biblical language ‘shaking yourself free’.

But with the dawn of the new century, something shifted. The old, pillarized, closed-off society had disappeared, and in its place came the open world of our modern society. Where every one can feel free to be him/herself... but it did not really lead to a society where respect and the dignity of the individual man led to a better life. Quite the opposite. Instead of connectedness, loneliness grew—even among students. Optimism after the fall of the Berlin Wall gave way to crises: financial instability, climate change, terrorism, fundamentalism, and refugees. Many felt the ground moving beneath their feet. The call to “let go” began to sound too one-sided, even dangerous.

This question becomes even more pressing in a multicultural world. We rightly make room for other cultures, but how do we

navigate this space? In our eagerness to avoid offense, political correctness often urges us to loosen our grip on our own traditions. But we might, in doing so, risk losing sight of what is vital to preserve. Without clarity, accommodation easily turns into rootlessness. or sharper even feeling uprooted. Today, in our diverse and complex society, we face the difficult task of holding on both openness and rootedness The question today is no longer: What do we let go? But: What do we hold on to? We need discernment to see when letting go brings freedom, and when it leaves us uprooted. Too easily, traditions, practices, and even faith slip away.

Revelation 2:25 speaks clearly: “Hold fast what you have until I come!” Where Jesus once called people to let go, he now calls us to hold on. Without roots, liberation becomes emptiness. But what does holding on really mean?

Chapter 1

The Meaning of Holding On

Holding on is an art. Understood in the right way it is the gift of carrying on the good things of the past into the present. It is not just copying the past but digesting what had been received and gained by the preceding generations to make it work into our own time. That sounds easy but it is not. Holding on can easily degenerate into conservatism. Or it can flip over into the vacuum of libertinism. This always has to do with the kind of person one is. Holding on in the bad sense of conservatism is the easy way of dealing with the past. As life comes with new challenges you just copy the thoughts and lifestyle of the preceding generation. The character in the well-known series of Downton Abbey the head housekeeper Mr. Carson is a standard example. He is conservative, just like his grand- and great grand- father, and although the surrounding English class society is changing, he resists. His strong personality leads him to humiliate all who walk outside the boundaries set by tradition. Letting go becomes cruel if the underlying attitude is conservatism. True holding on, however, is a matter of connecting and not copying. Copying the past is not really loving although it many times comes in that dress or pretense. It does not give the inner connection that comes with love Connecting is understanding what was the underlying value of tradition and then applying it to your own life. Holding on is not clinging to the past but connecting.

On: why It matters

In today's multicultural world, it is very easy and even attractive to see worldview and lifestyle as relative. The ease with which we allow valuable traditions and practice even the faith of our fathers—to slip away, is alarming. We let go too quickly of traditions and deep-rooted relationships and as Eric Rosseel said : we change from formerly being pilgrims to nomads (see his *Nomads and pilgrims* Agora Kampen, 2000, p.13)

The two dangers of not Holding On

1. **Conservatism** – When holding on becomes mere copying of the past, it turns rigid. Like Mr. Carson in *Downton Abbey*, one resists change, clings to tradition, and excludes others. This form of “holding on” lacks connection—it imprisons instead of uniting.
2. **Liberalism** – On the other side, letting go of all tradition leaves people unmoored. Each generation must reinvent itself, often leading to loneliness and a deep sense of not belonging. As studies show, many young people today feel disconnected, without a foundation that binds them to others or to history.

True Holding On

Real holding on is not nostalgia or self-protection, but connection. It means receiving the good of the past, reshaping it for today, and living it out in a way that strengthens bonds—with our communities, with society, and with God. Without it, we risk fragmentation and estrangement; with it, we rediscover belonging and hope.

In short:

Holding on is not blindly going along, but influencing your surroundings.

Holding on is not restoration, but reformation.

Holding on is not conservative, but creative.

Holding on is not stubbornness, but pointing to what is truly one's own.

Holding on is not: reset!, but 'recycle'.

Holding on is not prideful, but humble.

Holding on is not a cramp, but a return to the first love.

Closing meditation

Stay a moment in silence.

Ask yourself: What makes me happy? Where do I have my deepest security? Do not I long for something more than the fashion of the day? Breathe out... and open yourself for God's presence and what He wants you to hold on.

Chapter 2

Holding on in a World of Brokenness

When people struggle to remain connected to their religious upbringing, the cause often lies less in the faith itself than in the environment in which they were raised. I have noticed for example that children of divorced parents often became “unchurched.” The issue was not the tradition itself, but the atmosphere of insecurity in their upbringing. Before moving on to the content of what we should hold on to, a self check is needed: if the call to hold on irritates me, it could be because it sounds as if someone drives me back into a setting that felt very unsafe. For them this paragraph could be helpful.

The importance of early attachment

Sue Johnson in *Hold Me Tight* (2015) explains how the first four years of life are crucial for building trust. A baby, utterly dependent, learns to feel safe through consistent reassurance and care. This secure base enables a child to give and receive love, and to develop a deep sense of belonging.

But when early attachment is unstable—through inconsistent or unpredictable care—lasting patterns of insecurity may develop. These often show up in relationships as alternating closeness and distance, dependence and avoidance. Such insecurity can also affect how people relate to faith and tradition: some cling tightly, others reject prematurely.

Attachment styles

Johnson distinguishes between secure attachment, which fosters trust and love, and insecure attachment, which often leads to fear, avoidance or conflict. Without a secure base, people may struggle with intimacy and belonging. In religious terms, this insecurity can appear as conservatism (clinging too tightly to tradition) or liberalism (breaking away too quickly).

By contrast, children who grow up in the safety of a loving family can both embrace their parents' values and, when the time comes, move beyond them. Their security enables them to live their own life in freedom.

LILA

Marilynne Robinson wrote a novel about this problem of a weaving error in the early upbringing and how it was healed. It has the title: LILA A neglected child, Lila, is rescued during the Great Depression (around 1929) She is taken along by a friend on a kind of survival journeys in Iowa. Through many wanderings Lila even ends up in a boarding house from which she flees, eventually arriving by chance in Gilead. There she meets an older minister whom she soon marries, and a special and beautiful relationship develops between them. where Lila, raised in insecurity by an unpredictable mother finds healing through the loving constancy of another person. This points in the direction of how healing can take place.

Meditation: resting in safety

Find a quiet place and take a few deep breaths. Notice the ground beneath you. Let it remind you that you are supported. Bring to mind a moment, however small, when you felt safe and cared for. It

might be a parent's touch, a friend's voice, or simply the warmth of the sun on your face. Stay with that memory for a while. Allow the sense of safety to settle into your body. Picture a presence—gentle, steady, trustworthy—who simply holds you as you are. Carry with you this awareness: holding on and letting go both become possible when we rest first in the deep safety of being loved, most deeply by the One who called you into life!

Chapter 3

A Key Challenge in Our Society

Yesterday I was in Delft. My grandson studies werktuigbouwkunde (mechanical engineering), and my wife and I had a meal at the marketplace in the city center, just in front of the church where all the members of the House of Orange are buried. One might expect that the statue in the middle of the square would depict one of the Princes or Queens of Orange. But as you come closer, you discover that it is a statue of Hugo de Groot, the great jurist.



Statue of Hugo de Groot¹

1. photo by M.M.Minderhoud

I found this very moving. Of course, one could say it is simply because Hugo de Groot was born in Delft—and that is true. Yet William of Orange was murdered only a hundred meters away from that very spot and is honored as the Father of the Fatherland. So why is Hugo, and not William, standing in the center of the square?

For me, the statue of Hugo de Groot, standing in the marketplace directly before the church where the House of Orange rests, makes a powerful statement: this city, this nation, is not ruled by power, but by law. Hugo de Groot is, after all, internationally recognized as the father of European law. The House of Orange played its role in governing through the exercise of power, but Hugo represents the rule of law—the foundation of a just society.

Being in Delft made me deeply aware of one of the great dangers of our time: the rise of autocratic rulers—in Russia, in China, and even in the United States. One of the essential values of our European and Western civilization is the separation of power. Alongside the legislative and executive powers, there is the judicial power, which ensures that all authorities act according to the rule of law. Today, this very structure is under threat. When we speak about holding on, this is one of the key points.

Yet the problem goes even deeper. The values of the European world—summarized in the Declaration of Human Rights and in our constitutions—are often misunderstood and therefore in danger of being undermined. These values should be recognized for what they truly are: the fruits of Christianity. One could even say they are the fruits of the fruits of the Gospel's preaching.

Now that faith itself is crumbling, these fruits too are in danger of decay. Therefore, I wish to recall them once more, one by one, to help everyone be watchful and hold on to them! But even more importantly, the true call is not only to hold on to the fruits, but to the roots from which these fruits have grown.

A deep spiritual renewal is needed to sustain this “holding on.” As we read in the prophet Micah, and as we will later see in the biblical model of Esther, the call remains: “To act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.”

Europe today faces both psychological and social challenges of holding on. In the midst of refugee crises and cultural shifts, Europe has forgotten that its deepest values are not merely the fruits of progress, but rooted in the Christian faith. Enlightenment and secularism have weakened confidence in God, leading to uprootedness and confusion.

The survival of European civilization depends on recognizing and holding on to these seven biblical pillars:

1. History as a line, not a cycle – History has meaning because there is a purpose and direction, and hope because God is the Alpha and Omega and will bring a wonderful final fulfillment at the end.
2. Human calling – Humanity is tasked not to escape the world, but to shape it for God’s purposes.
3. Meaningful work – All work, whether manual or intellectual, is part of God’s calling and therefore valuable.

4. The dignity of man – Every person has inherent worth, created in the image of God, a principle under threat today.
5. Social structures – Government (the King under the law (Deuteronomy 17:19), education, and democracy were built on biblical foundation.
6. Moral order – Shared moral values, monogamy, shaped by the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount, undergird society.
7. Socio-political values – Justice, care for the poor, equality, freedom, and human rights grow from biblical revelation.

Today, Europe wants to enjoy the fruits of these pillars without remaining rooted in God. This detachment leads to relativism, nihilism, and fragility. True renewal is only possible by returning to the roots—a humble walk with God, trust in Christ, and obedience to His Word.

As Micah 6:8 reminds us: *“What does the Lord require of you? To act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.”*

In short

Holding on is not about clinging to the past in fear, but faithfully preserving what God has entrusted to us so it may bear fruit in the future. The seven pillars are not human achievements; they are gifts from God’s hand, meant to shape a flourishing society. Yet without the root of faith, even the strongest structures collapse.

Closing meditation

Let us ask: What am I holding on to? Is it traditions, habits, or ideals detached from their source—or am I holding to them as being rooted in the Scriptures. Lord, help us not only to cherish the fruits of our civilization but to remain rooted in You. Teach us to hold on—not with fear, but with faith. May our lives reflect justice, mercy, and humility and hope in a world of despair shadowed by death.

Chapter 4

Learning to hold on: Esther's example

Esther is the name given to Hadassah, a Jewish girl not yet twenty years old, by King Ahasuerus when she was brought before him. The meaning of this name is at the same time the key to understanding the whole book. The name Esther is double-layered.

On the one hand, it was a Persian pet name the king gave to his new wife. After Queen Vashti was dismissed, beautiful young women were gathered from across the empire. When Hadassah appeared, the king renamed her Esther—probably something like “my little star.” A tender name, a name to shine under in the palace.

But in Hebrew letters, the name speaks differently. Esther means “the hidden one,” from the verb *le-hastir*, to conceal. Thus, the name carries two worlds at once: in the eyes of Persia, a little star; in the heart of Israel, one who is hidden. This double meaning is no accident—it mirrors the structure of the entire book, where God's name is never mentioned, and yet His hidden presence guides every event.

The hidden one

We see this theme already in chapter 2. Twice it is emphasized that Esther kept her background a secret. She was chosen, favored, and lifted up, but her deepest identity remained hidden until crisis demanded its revelation. She embodies the tension of the whole

story: living openly in the world, admired for her beauty, yet carrying a concealed identity that cannot remain hidden forever.

This brings us to our own time. After the Second World War, theologians in Europe asked: Where is God in this time? The church had become a shrinking minority, tempted to hide, integrated into culture, valued perhaps, but with its true distinctiveness—its belonging to God—muted or ignored. The question becomes unavoidable: When must we step out of hiding? There are times that history itself calls us to reveal who we are, and to bear witness to our origin and our calling.

Product of time and chance?

How this becomes a challenge in a dangerous world becomes clear in the second great thread of the book: the casting of the lot. In chapter 3:7 Haman casts the *pur*—again and again—until the day is chosen for the annihilation of the Jews. In a world where God seems hidden, human beings feel abandoned to chance, to time, to fate. “Everything is the product of time and chance,” say the philosophers. But behind this cloak of randomness sinister figures rise—just as Haman rose to power. Enraged that Mordecai, a Jew, would not bow to him, this descendant of Agag (cf. 1 Samuel 15), the old enemy of God’s people, forges a dark plan: the first holocaust in history. The lot decides the day—the 13th of Adar—when every Jew is to be annihilated. And what of God? His name is not spoken. Not God, but the lot, seems to rule.

For such a time as this

But then something happens. We are now in chapter 4. The turning point occurs between chapters 4 and 5, somewhere in the middle

of the book: Mordecai comes into the picture. As soon as Mordecai hears of Haman's plans, he tears his clothes and puts on sackcloth and ashes. In this way he draws the attention of those in the palace where Esther lives. They pass the news on to her: "Your foster father is walking around in sackcloth," and she immediately sends a servant to him, after which the conversation begins that prepares the turning point of the whole story.

Mordecai wants Esther to act. He says: "Go to the king and plead for mercy. Make it known that you are one of His people." Then begins Esther's inner struggle, full of fear and doubt: "It is suicide," she says, "to go to the king unbidden, especially since I have not been summoned for thirty days. Anyone who approaches uninvited is put to death." That almost never ends well... To this Mordecai responds with his masterful answer:

*"Do not think that you alone will escape because you are in the king's house. If you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that **you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?**"*

For Esther, this question was deeply personal. She must have asked herself often: Why has this happened to me? Orphaned young, taken into exile, then carried away into the harem of the king—why her? In chapter 4 Mordecai voices the turning point: "Who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:14). The cry beneath it is universal: Why? Why? Why? I feel like a plaything of fate!

Yet the story of Esther insists that even in the silence, even in the concealment, God is at work. Esther—the little star, the hidden one—becomes the living parable of God’s hidden presence. At the right moment, she steps from concealment into revelation, and in doing so she becomes the instrument of deliverance.

When Mordechai said : May be it was for a time like this, Esther revives. Suddenly, it is as though a small ray of light falls into this incomprehensibly cruel world. Could there be a plan after all? this little word is enough, Suddenly she rises. It seems as if these words have shaken her awake. She says: “Go, gather all the Jews... Fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish”.

The star

So too with us. We may shine in the world like stars, but we also carry a hidden identity. The question is whether we will reveal it when the time comes—when God calls us to step out of hiding and stand with His people. Esther’s name is our mirror:

- The hidden one—called to keep faith until the moment of revelation.
- The star—called to shine in the world.

Esther has ten chapters. In chapters 1-5, all the lines lead downward: God is hidden, dark clouds gather over God’s people. We see only the underside, the tangled knots of the woven tapestry. But right in the middle comes the turning point in chapter 5. When Esther approaches the king clothed in her finest royal garments and stands at the entrance of the hall—you may be sure

her heart was pounding and her forehead wet with sweat...then she sees the king standing there, “she won his favor,” and he extends his scepter to her. And she becomes a star!

The tapestry reversed

We know how it ends: from that moment on, everything is reversed. Esther may dine with the king, and very shrewdly she asks for a second banquet where Haman himself is present. The tension rises... That very night the king cannot sleep, and he has the chronicles read aloud at court. It turns out that Mordecai has never been rewarded for saving the king’s life. He summons Haman and asks him: “How should the man be honored whom the king delights to reward?”

Haman thinks the king is speaking of him and invents a magnificent display of honor—which then falls entirely to his enemy Mordecai. Suddenly the great Haman must himself run through the city as a servant, proclaiming before Mordecai: “This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!” Thus the proud are humbled, and the lowly are exalted.

This, of course, also applies most especially to Esther. At the second banquet she reveals her identity, and Haman is hanged on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai. And on the 13th of Adar—the very day chosen by lot, by Pur, for destruction—the tables are turned once and for all. The weak are rescued, and the arrogant enemies of God are brought low. God’s hand becomes visible!

The tapestry, which we at first saw only from the back as a tangle of threads, is turned around, and the pattern becomes clear! Not

Pur, not the lot, but God rules! As the English put it so beautifully: not history, but His Story! From that time until today this is celebrated in the Jewish feast of Purim.

The turning point: from Letting Go to Holding Fast!

Look now at Esther: the wonder of the book of Esther is this, that the turning point in the story mirrors the turning point I have described in the second part of this book: from letting go to holding fast. In Esther's life, everything is shown in one person: what happens before the moment of the "turning point," and what happens after.

1. Before the turning point

The first four chapters stand in the light of letting go. She was an orphan. She had to let go of so much. First her parents, then her freedom and independence, then her uncle—her trusted guardian with whom she could build her life and finally she lost even her deepest identity as a daughter of Israel the covenant people of God. Yes, when we think of this story it might at first glance look like a fairy tale, a simple girl who from humble beginnings suddenly becomes queen! Something like a Queen Máxima story—but the reality was entirely different. There was no question of a free choice; she was simply taken away and locked up in the harem of the king to serve the whims and desires of a man she had never met, and whose word had absolute power over her.

2. The turning point

The turning point comes at the moment Esther reveals her true color as she returns to her real identity. We read this in Esther 4.

This is the best biblical example of what later on Jesus commanded: 'hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your (real) crown'.

The heart of Esther's deep struggle made me think of Gethsemane, where Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane also realized what it would cost him.. It cost Esther her life to step forward. She too recoiled in fear: "Father, let this cup pass from me".

Esther had to step out of hiding, and for her that meant the risk of death. In a very unique way Esther foreshadowed in the way she saved Israel the path along which Jesus saved all lost children of Adam. In a way we are called to go in their footsteps. It is an appeal to us. I hear:

Stick your neck out above the crowd!

Step out of hiding,

And then He will do the same!

Here, in a few sentences, is what holding on means. To hold on, in Esther's case, is to say: here I am, loyal to the people of God and relying fully on His promises. To stick your neck out at the risk of execution. Courage means accepting that risk.

Esther could only do this thanks to her deep attachment to her upbringing. Without Mordecai she could not have begun. The legacy of parents is the foundation for the salvation of the people through Esther's confession. Esther could only do it in solidarity with her attendants and her people, who fasted and prayed with her (4:16). The social factor is very essential. We must together form a fist against the weak spirit of our time, which under the

guise of political correctness has let the values of a Christian culture be squandered into the Christian West.

But at the deepest level it is about her trust in God: if I perish, I perish. She goes the road entirely alone. She has to do it, she takes the risk. In this way she is a foreshadowing of Jesus, who did this for us all.

3. After the turning point

The effect is remarkable: to put it in one sentence: at the moment that Esther steps out of her hiding – which was also in her name, the hidden one – God steps out of His hiding.

Was that not the signature of that time? God hiding His face?

Here we touch upon something very profound and wondrous in the kingdom of God. The Holy and Almighty One makes Himself dependent on human beings. He waits until they take that radical step of trust in Him, creating the space He needs in order to bring about salvation.

That step led to the delivery of the people. Thanks to Esther's action, the tables were turned, the cruel Haman was hanged, and the Jewish people were given the right to defend themselves. In our own time—when the Jews (after one of the greatest persecutions of their history) were given the right to defend themselves, although always with respect for law and justice as an indispensable condition.

Our time resembles that of the Babylonian exile: God's people becoming a disappearing minority under foreign powers; God hiding His face. Voices cry out: Where is He in this time? Where

can we find Him? The question is: Who hides? Is it He—or is it us? Where are the Esthers of this time?

Esther was a teenager, not yet twenty, who after her parents' death found herself in a long captivity asking: Why me? Where is He when I need Him most? She did not yet understand what He was asking of her until she could no longer remain silent. She revealed her true colors and became a ray of light in a dark chapter of Israel's history.

So I am convinced that God will use little people. Everywhere places of light and deliverance break through where we as disciples of Jesus trusting in God, will reveal who we truly are. When we are holding on to our roots also in difficult circumstances He will be there!

Consider in your own life where that point may lie of which Mordecai might say to you: Who knows but that you have come to this moment for such a time as this? Who knows whether this very circumstance has been given to you, so that here and now you may bear witness to where your last anchor lies? And who you really are! Who knows how this calling, or this marriage, or this incident has been given to you so that here and now you might shine light?! Something you never could have done without this experience?

In other words: God is waiting for you! God is at work in your life. You are precious in His eyes. Hold fast, and you will be held fast.

He may seem hidden, but He is not. He waits for you—until you give Him the space to act. He waits for your deed, perhaps even for that moment when everything within you screams in protest: “No, Lord, not this!” The act of faith, like Peter stepping out on the water, is

what He is waiting for. That is Esther. That is the way by which the Lord brings salvation—through the narrow gate by which God works, where He makes the small great and the great small!

Whoever dares to rise above the grainfield, He will use. Those who learn to know Him in His work will become the Florence Nightingales and the Bonhoeffers of our time.

In short: how do we learn the art of holding fast?

By attaching securely, by socializing, by self-recognition, by daring to rise up and act decisively! Self-recognition, courage, and deed.

I close with a quote from the philosopher Kierkegaard, who once said: “With God it is the reverse of how it is with people: People must first get to know one another before they can trust each other, but with God you must first trust Him, and only then will you truly come to know Him.”

Meditation: “For such a time as this”

There are seasons when God seems hidden — when the heavens are silent, and faith feels like speaking into an empty room. Our time is not unlike Esther’s: the faithful are few, the noise of empires loud, and the presence of God veiled. And yet, it is precisely in such hiddenness that His work ripens.

Esther’s story is not one of triumphal confidence but of trembling obedience. She was young, orphaned, and far from home — yet chosen. Her greatness began not in her strength, but in her “yes” spoken from weakness. Only when she dared to act, to step into the risk of faith, did she discover that God had been at work all along — quietly, invisibly, faithfully.

Lord, show me what fear keeps me from stepping out in faith?
What silence have I mistaken for safety? For God still waits – waits
for courage to come in action, for faith to step out onto the
uncertain waters.

And when I do let me too find that the hidden God is no longer
hidden at all. You are the One who meets me in my trembling, who
turns my small act of trust into a place of light.

“For such a time as this”. This moment – this challenge, this calling,
this sorrow – may be precisely the place where God helps me to
hold on where his hidden purpose breaks through.

So I pray:

Lord, teach me the art of holding fast – to You, to who I am in
You, to the courage to act when the heart falters.

Let me like Esther find that You were never absent, but only
waiting to be revealed in the space my faith makes for You.
