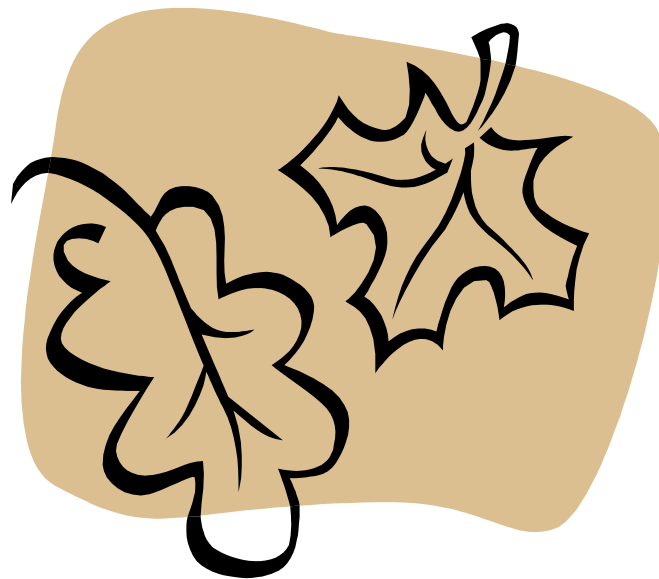


# AUTUMN LEAVES

## Volume 1



**Alasdair Gordon**

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## Foreword

I have much pleasure in presenting the first volume of my *Autumn Leaves*, consisting of items that I wrote as a young man and which I am now re-issuing in my own “autumn” years. The first two items “Beneath the Cross of Jesus” and “Consider your Verdict” are already available as separate pamphlets.

As in the case of previous re-issues of my older writings, I have resisted the temptation to carry out a major edit. The article on the “Fate of Judas” is unaltered and appears exactly as published. (It is also available as a PDF in the public domain.)

However, in the case of the “Hope of Israel” I have redacted the wording quite considerably. The original was a transcript of a spoken address and did not lend itself to easy reading. I have tried to retain the conversational style but hopefully I have taken out at least some of the verbosity!

As always, I trust friends will enjoy these contributions from my younger self and will also forgive their many shortcomings.

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# Beneath the Cross of Jesus

*Scripture Passage: Genesis 28: 10 - 22*

In the passage we see Jacob, one of the key characters in the whole book of Genesis. On closer examination, we see that he is in anything but a strong and happy position. Jacob had, in fact, done a very strong and dishonest thing: he had tricked his elderly father Isaac into thinking that he (Jacob) was his older twin brother Esau. As a result of this trickery, Isaac had given Jacob the unique and special blessing reserved for the first born.

The elderly and ailing Isaac was now near to his death and the angry Esau was planning to kill his brother as an act of revenge.

It seemed that Jacob could only do one thing and that was to take flight. His mother, Rebekah, sent him to her brother Laban, who lived at Haran. The hope was that if Jacob stayed with Laban for a while, Esau's temper might at least cool a little.

Esau was a physically strong man, a great outdoor type and hunter. Like Samson of a later date, his physical strength was not matched by strength of mind and character. In fact, Esau had already let himself down at an earlier stage by selling his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of soup (or *mess of potage* as it is called in the King James Bible). Jacob relied on the fact that Esau would soon forget about his trickery, even if he did not forgive the dishonesty.

Jacob, as a character was, we are told, a quiet man (Gen 25: 27) and had spent most of his time at home, just pottering about. Now he could do this no longer. He had to flee to Haran which was about three hundred miles away. It must have been a

long and lonely journey, oppressively hot during the day and bitterly cold at night, with no proper bed to lie on, just the hard ground. How lonely, tired and unhappy he must have felt at night when he laid down to sleep under the stars. And, of course, his guilty conscience and the fact that his present predicament was entirely his own fault would not have helped.

However, we must not forget one vital point. God was looking after Jacob - not, of course, that Jacob had done anything to deserve this, but then none of us ever does.

On one particular night, Jacob laid down to sleep, with his head resting on a stone - a stone that we Scots like to believe is the Stone of Destiny - and he dreamt a truly wonderful dream. He saw a ladder stretched up between heaven and earth and upon this a ladder on which the angels of God were ascending and descending. At the top of the ladder was the Lord God himself. In the dream, the Lord spoke to Jacob and said:

*I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and your descendants; and your descendants shall be like the dust of the earth and you shall spread abroad ... and by you and your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed.*

Once more, God was reminding humankind, through Jacob, of his own great faithfulness. Jacob had not only fallen short, he had cheated. Yet God now renewed the Covenant through Jacob, the same Covenant that he had sworn to his father Isaac and his grandfather Abraham.

This is the extraordinary thing about the grace of God; it continues from generation to generation among those whom God chooses. And it is strange how God does choose, often selecting

the most unlikely and sometimes, in our perception, the most unsuitable people.

Everyone would have expected God's choice to fall upon Esau. He was, after all, the elder of the two. He was also strong and virile, quite different from his dull, plain brother. Everyone, parents included, would have taken it for granted that God would renew the Covenant through Esau. God's choice, however, lay with the younger brother just as his choice, throughout history, so often seems to lie in strange and unlikely directions.

Many years later, God sent the prophet Samuel (I Samuel 16) to take one of the sons of Jesse to be king over Israel. Jesse duly produced seven sons in turn, all of them strapping fellows, any one of whom outwardly would have made a splendid figure for a king. Samuel looked them all over very carefully and he knew in his heart that not one of them was God's choice to be king.

He asked Jesse if he had another son and it transpired that he had. His name was David, still only a slightly built teenager who was given all the odd jobs to do around the house and on the land. No one in the family even thought that he might be in the running to be king.

Samuel had the boy brought in and immediately discerned that this was God's (surprising) choice and anointed him king over Israel. It seemed so odd, to choose a mere slip of a boy to replace the mighty Saul who physically had stood head and shoulders above every other man. Of course, Saul had been a popular choice and perhaps at least some of his popularity had been due to his appearance. We all do tend to judge by outward appearances. As a king, however, Saul had turned out to be a great disappointment.

Notice too that God had put his ladder down into the life of Jacob at a time when there was the greatest need. To put it mildly, Jacob's life was in a mess and would have to be sorted out well and truly if he was going to be any use to God or man. If his life was not sorted out, he would be on the run, literally or metaphorically, for the rest of his life.

It was at this time, at his time of greatest need, that God in his great mercy and perseverance showed Jacob that there is indeed a ladder between heaven and earth. Even the most mundane and earthly experience, like sleeping with a stone for a pillow, could be sweetened and transformed by the fact that God is faithful, that his Covenant still stands and that he is a God who moves and works among his people.

So it is today, just as much as it has ever been. God is gracious, God is faithful, he keeps his promises and renews his Covenant with us in a marvellous way that is quite beyond our understanding.

When Jacob awoke out of his dream he was afraid: indeed, he was very afraid. *How awesome is this place*, he said (Gen 28: 17). He knew that he had been given a vision by God. He realised again that God was gracious and faithful to him, liar, twister and deceiver that he was. So Jacob took the stone that he had used as a pillow and set it on end like a landmark and testimony that God had truly shown himself in that place. He called the place Beth-El, meaning house of God.

(There used to be a church of Glasgow that had a Scripture text painted on the wall. That was not unusual, especially in the nineteenth century. The text chosen was that quoted in the previous paragraph except that it was taken from the King James Bible. So, when the congregation sat in their pews on a

Sunday morning, they could see the words *How dreadful is this place* above the minister's head!)

But then something surprising and even disappointing happens in the story of Jacob. Having passed through a profound spiritual experience and being assured of God's faithfulness, Jacob seems to spoil the moment by trying to make his own bargain with God.

*If God will be with me and will keep me in the way that I go and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God ... (vs. 20-21)*

In the following verse, Jacob (to be fair to him) does offer to give God back a tenth of everything he gave to Jacob. In other words he was attempting to strike a deal with God. He was not the first and certainly not the last to try to do this. There is always a real temptation to add an "if" even in our dealings with God. Many people throughout history and today believe that they can enlist in God's army on their own terms.

But what is most interesting is God's response. He does not condemn nor does he condemn. He simply ignores these apparent conditions that Jacob seeks to impose. God has made his promise to Jacob. He brushes aside Jacob's attempts to keep control and simply allows him to proceed on his way, under-girded by the everlasting arms. So, in a real sense, God not only keeps his Covenant from his side, he also keeps it from our side as well.

To me, this is quite mind-blowing. God acts for man as our substitute. He did so supremely when, in and through Jesus Christ he bore our sins in his body on the tree. How much more convincing do we need of God's love and faithfulness?



Our course, God had in no way finished with Jacob at this stage. God had no intention of rejecting Jacob but the latter still had many lessons to learn. Some of these he would learn at the hands of his uncle Laban.

If Jacob was a deceiver, he was only a beginner and an amateur when compared with his uncle. Laban emerges as one of the truly dodgy characters of the Old Testament. He had made his money not by fair dealing and hard work (which the Bible commends) but by cheating, deceiving and taking advantage. Had he been alive today, I suspect that Laban would wear chunky jewellery, drive a flashy car, smoke cigars and live in an ostentatious house furnished in bad taste and filled with all the latest gadgets. Possibly he would have gold-capped teeth!

Oh yes, Jacob still had many lessons to learn. In fact, for many years, Jacob was in Laban's grasp. He was well and truly on the receiving end and getting a taste of his own medicine.

Fortunately, God sees possibilities in all of the people he has created and does not give up on any of them. He had invested too much in Jacob and his descendants to let him off the hook.

But let us just add one word of warning here. There could be a real temptation here to use God's grace as a kind of blank cheque to do exactly as we please. After all, God will do all the work for us? God indeed is gracious, but he is not mocked. By many standards it is indeed a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. Let us not yield to the temptation of taking his grace for granted or abusing it in any way. Just think how many times God has been gracious to you in the past. And if you are one of those who are still undecided, I urge and encourage you not to keep putting off your decision.

Maybe some readers are thinking that what has been said so far is very much rooted in the Old Testament and thus to the ancient world. However, we have one great and crucial advantage over Jacob. We stand on the other side of the Cross. For in the Cross of Jesus there is now a permanent ladder between God and man, between heaven and earth. This ladder goes beyond any dream. Jesus himself said:

*...you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man. (John 1: 51)*

Christ's life, work, death and resurrection and the fullness of his sacrifice upon the Cross - these are all factors that link heaven and earth and God and man in a way that was often hinted at in the Old Testament through vision, type and symbol. On our side of the Cross, the vision has become an assured reality.

It is a great comfort and security to know that Jesus Christ is the ladder, even in times of darkest despair and sheer loneliness we can know that there is this permanent ladder between heaven and earth on which the angels of God (whom we often encounter without knowing it) continually ascend and descend.

Beneath the Cross of Jesus  
I fain would take my stand  
The shadow of a mighty rock  
Within a weary land  
A home within a wilderness  
A rest upon the way  
From the burning of the noontide heat  
And the burden of the day

O safe and happy shelter  
O refuge tried and sweet

A trysting place where heaven's love  
And heaven's justice meet  
As to the exiled patriarch  
That wondrous dream was given  
So seems my Saviour's Cross to me  
A ladder up to heaven

Let us be clear in our own minds that the Cross of Jesus is no mere dream, it was - and it is - a reality in human history and experience. There is an old legend which states that the socket into which the Cross was fixed on Calvary marked the centre of the world. This is not true in a scientific sense yet this ancient perception illustrates a very important truth. In a very real sense the Cross is indeed the centre of world history. There is an old hymn that speaks on the Cross towering over the wrecks of time. The Cross certainly stands as a permanent judgment on sin but it also radiates the supreme love of God who spared not his own Son but delivered him up for us all.

When we stand beneath the Cross of Jesus we, like Jacob awakening from his dream can certainly say *How awesome is this place.*

I take, O Cross, thy shadow  
For my abiding place  
I ask no other sunshine than  
The sunshine of his face  
Content to let the world go by  
To know no gain nor loss  
My sinful self my only shame  
My glory all, the Cross

Hymn composed by Elizabeth Cecilia Clephane

## Consider your Verdict

*Then what shall I do with Jesus, who is called Christ?*  
(Matthew 27: 22)

Compared with many other officials in the higher Roman establishment, Pontius Pilate was not the most important figure. He was a Provincial Governor which certainly meant that he had power of a kind but his power was very general and, no doubt, his chief difficulty in administering his Province of Judea lay in the fact that he was, as it were, between the devil and the deep blue sea.

He had the somewhat unenviable task of trying to placate the (often resentful) Jewish authorities who had very considerable influence over the common people. Indeed, for being able to stir up a mob at short notice, they were in a very much stronger position than he was.

And then Pilate had a virtually unworkable working relationship with Herod, the Tetrarch of Galilee. The two men were sworn enemies, although, somewhat chillingly, they became friends after they had both washed their hands of Jesus (Luke 23: 12).

Then again, Pilate had to consider his own position in respect of the authorities in Rome and to make sure that he did everything according to the book. In other words, he had to cover his own back.

Yet, in spite of everything, Pilate (unknown to himself at the time) was destined to have his name perpetuated in the history books for all time coming. On the occasion when the Jewish leaders brought Jesus to him, he did not have much time to think or even to make up his mind. More than likely, he had heard something of this Jesus character. All of Jerusalem had

heard how he had ridden into the city a few days earlier, accepting the praise and acclamation of the crowds, who had spread the road with palm branches. Then, he had caused a minor riot in the Temple precincts by over-turning the tables of the money changers. And it was reported that he had even said that if the Temple was destroyed, he could rebuild it in three days. It is almost impossible to think that Pilate had not heard something of this mystery man from Galilee.

But then, Pilate was somewhat wrong footed. Jesus was arrested under cover of darkness and brought before Pilate without any prior warning. He found himself confronted not only by Jesus but, more threateningly, by a gang of influential people who were sure that he must be guilty.

Pilate, then, had to make up his mind. Was there any real threat to national security? Was this man who he claimed to be? Was it true what his enemies said against him? Had he been victimised and used as a scapegoat to cover something else? Or had this Jesus just been foolish and got in out of his depth? There were, after all, plenty of self appointed "messiah" figures and wonder-workers around Galilee at the time, most of them harmless cranks who could safely be ignored. And Passover time tended to bring many of these crazy people out into the open.

Then, again, if Pilate did take the side of the Jews, how would that affect - for better or for worse - the tricky and abrasive relationship between him and Herod? Jesus, after all, came from Galilee and came under Herod's jurisdiction.

Sooner or later we all find ourselves in a position that is not entirely dissimilar from that of Pilate. Jesus of Nazareth stands before us with all the startling claims that he makes: that he is the Saviour of the world, the Son of God, the way, the truth

and the life. We do not have unlimited time to make up our minds. Is Jesus the real thing or is he not?

I well remember in my very earliest days of working in full-time ministry, people would often tell me that they had "nothing against" the church or the Christian message but that they did not really have the time to devote to the matter. Maybe they would have more time when the work situation changed or when the children grew up or ...

My response is (and I want to express this sensitively and in a pastoral context) that we will never actually have more time than we do now. Time is something that we make, rather than something we have.

Almost certainly, Pilate had no idea just how great the responsibility was that lay on his shoulder on that day. He would have known that the fate of one man lay in his hands. That, for him, was nothing particularly unusual. He had the power of life and death. He also knew that his own position would not be strengthened in the eyes of the crowd if he brought in the "wrong" verdict. Yet he must also have been aware that Roman law was known for its fairness and impartiality. (Well, that at least was the theory.)

What we must all face and understand is that our own verdict on Jesus is not something that only affects ourselves. There is an increasing tendency to see faith as almost entirely a personal and private matter. To speak about it is perceived, in some circles as unacceptable as taking our clothes off in public. But if we do actually accept that Jesus is the Christ, the Saviour, the Messiah - that he is the one who is the way, the truth and the life, is this a matter that only affects us personally? I would suggest otherwise.

It is part of the Christian duty to bear witness to others. This is not just by saying or using certain words. I have seen examples of Christian people "witnessing" to others in an insensitive and inappropriate way, often by saying the right thing at the wrong time. It can, of course, be off-putting if we ram our beliefs down the throats of other people. Also, there is such a thing as casting pearls before swine. And, to be fair, we Scots tend not to wear our hearts on our sleeves and it does not come naturally to us to share our faith openly with others. Yet sometimes - and I say all this more to myself than to others - we can miss opportunities that come our way.

It is said that deeds speak louder than words. People will look at us. If they know that we are Christian, they will tend to judge not only the church but also the Gospel by the way in which we speak and act. What kind of image do we project? What kind of attitudes do we present? Do our neighbours, those with whom we work and people we meet actually *know* that we are Christians?

To put it another way, if you or I were on trial for being Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict us?

Do other people see something of the light of Christ shining through us? (Again, I say this more to myself than to others.) If not, why not? Even the smallest Christian fellowship covers a surprisingly wide radius of occupations, backgrounds and interests. We may think that we have very little influence on others. Yet that can be a misperception.

Pilate found that no matter how hard he tried, he could not get rid of the problem of Jesus - which is what he would have wished to do. Pilate sent Jesus off to Herod, hoping that the latter would deal with him. Herod promptly sent him right back to Pilate.

Then Pilate thought of another way in which he might overcome the problem. There was a tradition that every year at Passover time, one prisoner would be pardoned and released. This year a man by the name of Jesus Barabbas was earmarked. If Pilate released Jesus the Christ instead of Jesus Barabbas this might neatly solve the problem. But the people were not having it.

Pilate even produced the meek and lonely figure of Jesus in the hope that they might take pity on him. Yet, this seemed to inflame the crowd even more. In fact, the more that Jesus became like a lamb to the slaughter, the more his enemies seemed to become as ravening wolves. In short, Pilate found that whatever ruse he tried, he simply could not get rid of the "problem" of Jesus.

All Pilate wanted was to find a solution that would be acceptable to Rome, to the crowd and to the Jewish authorities. He was not the first or was he the last person to realise how difficult it is to please everybody and cover one's own back at the same time.

Perhaps it was the cry that is recorded in John's Gospel (19: 12) as coming from the crowd that clinched the matter for Pilate: *If you release this man, you are not Caesar's friend.*

We do not know what was in Pilate's heart. We can only surmise. Perhaps he was just a little sorry for Jesus. Maybe he even found Jesus interesting. Certainly this Jesus was no run-of-the-mill criminal. However, at the end of the day, for Pilate, Jesus was not worth even the possibility of getting into any real personal trouble. Pilate did not think Jesus was worth this any more than the crowd thought Jesus worth exchanging for Barabbas, a notorious brigand.



Pilate tried to get out of the whole issue by washing his hands in public. What a silly man! He could maybe wash his hands but he could not wash them of Jesus.

But let us bring this back to ourselves. It is all very well to speak of Pilate and what he did with Jesus. But what do *we* do with him? That is a far more searching question. We may find that we do not immediately cope with Jesus. It is certainly not that we wish Jesus any harm; in fact, the opposite applies. We too can find Jesus an interesting character. Maybe we read at least some of the New Testament and even some books about him. The difficulty comes when the presence of Jesus seems to cause trouble for us. In some quarters the very name of Jesus is like fire cast upon the earth.

Our commitment to him may get us into trouble at work when we take a stand on what we believe to be Christian ideals and principles. He may get us into difficulties with friends and even members of our own family who will not understand or possibly disapprove. But, whatever happens, we cannot wash our hands of Jesus.

There is a sense in which Jesus is always standing before us, asking for a verdict. The psalmist reminds us (Psalm 139: 7 - 9):

*Where shall I go from your Spirit?*

*Or where shall I flee from your presence?*

*If I ascend to heaven, you are there;*

*If I make my bed in Hell, you are there*

*If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost part of the sea ...*

It does not matter where we go or where we try to escape to; God still graciously and consistently confronts us in the person of Jesus Christ. In a very real sense, in his great forbearance and

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