

Lesson 22

Genesis 46, 47, 48, 49, 50

Chapter 46

Even though Jacob's spirits revived, and he longs to see Joseph, God must urge him not to be afraid (vs. 3). Why might Jacob have been afraid to go down to Egypt? (Review Gen. 26:1-6 for help with this.)

Without God's reassurance, it is hard to imagine Jacob not being afraid to take this journey, as much as he longs to see Joseph. His family at last has a real if small stake in Canaan, which may be lost if they leave. Jacob may also remember an earlier famine when God told Isaac not to go to Egypt but to stay in the land God has promised, where God would bless him (Gen. 26). This was the land of the promise, for which Abraham had left Ur; it was also where God had spoken to Jacob and given him the promise. Leaving with his entire household may have seemed to Jacob like abandoning God's covenant or like leaving God's presence.

Another possibility is that Jacob remembered God's word to Abraham in Genesis 15, that his descendants would spend 400 years in a strange land before God brought them out again enriched. Perhaps this knowledge, too, contributed to Jacob's apprehension.

Afraid or not, Israel set out for Egypt, stopping first to offer sacrifices to God. Why do you suppose he chose to stop at Beersheba?

Beersheba had long been a place where the Patriarchs met with God. Abraham and Isaac had both lived and worshiped at Beersheba; it is where Jacob lived before he set out for Haran, running from his brother after stealing the blessing. Abraham made an oath there (Gen. 21:31-33) and called upon the Eternal God, and God appeared to Isaac and confirmed His promise at Beersheba.

This is the last time God speaks to one of the Patriarchs to confirm His promises. Does anything sound familiar to you about this exchange? (You might want to review Gen. 22:11; 26:23-25; and 28:15.) What effect does the repetition have?

God calls Jacob urgently, using his name twice as he did to halt Abraham's hand. "Jacob, Jacob!" He is making sure to get his attention. Jacob's response is worthy of note: like Abraham, he answers, "Here I am"—the reply of a servant. Whatever Jacob is feeling, he is all ears when God calls him. God's message is almost identical to the one he gave Isaac in an earlier night vision: I am God, the God of your father; do not be afraid; I am with you; I will increase your descendants (or make of you a great nation, as he says to Jacob). And the last time Jacob was leaving Canaan, that time for Haran, God met him similarly with a promise to go with him and bring him back. He repeats those two promises here.

All this repetition makes us follow it like a thread through the book: the same God who called Abraham and promised to make of him a great nation, also promised Isaac and now is promising Jacob. Even though things are taking a turn now, and the family is moving to Egypt, it is the same God who is leading and this is part of the same plan.

What four things did God promise Jacob, and how might they reassure him?

The four promises God made to Jacob were: (1) He would make Jacob into a great nation while he is in Egypt; (2) He would go down to Egypt with him; (3) He would surely bring him back again; and (4) that Joseph's own hand would close his eyes. God's words to Jacob are full of His loving care. They must have been a great reassurance, particularly in showing that the entire sojourn was God's idea to being with and that Egypt was actually where the next stage of His plan would be accomplished. Israel was going to Egypt not primarily to be saved from famine, but to become a great nation before God brought them back to the

land He had promised. And all the time, Jacob would be assured of God's presence even as God had been with him in Haran.

Why was Joseph so keen on presenting his family to Pharaoh as shepherds, a class of people who were “detestable to the Egyptians”? What did he hope to accomplish?

By emphasizing the fact that his family were shepherds, Joseph was able to settle them in a fertile area where they could prosper, and separate from the Egyptians so they could grow as a people under God. Joseph is showing wisdom and prudence, offering a solution that is best for both parties involved.

How are Pharaoh's graciousness and generosity and his regard for Joseph shown in these verses?

That Pharaoh met with Jacob's family at all surely shows he considers them worthy for Joseph's sake, even though they are part of a “detestable” class. Then, not only does he not make demands, Pharaoh gives them the very best land, a fertile area in the eastern part of the Nile delta. He also puts them in charge of his own livestock, (probably assuming that some of Joseph's brothers would share his administrative capabilities!) That job would gain importance later during the famine, when the Egyptian people turn their livestock over to Pharaoh in return for food.

Who takes the lead in Pharaoh's interview with Jacob (vss. 7-10)? Is this significant?

Jacob both initiates and ends this conversation. And where Pharaoh's question to Joseph's brothers had at least in part a selfish motive behind it, for he gained shepherds for his cattle, he questions Jacob only to determine his age—in effect honoring him for his many years. It is significant that Jacob greets Pharaoh and takes his leave by blessing the monarch. He is bestowing spiritual goodness on the one who has blessed them materially. This is yet another example of other nations being blessed by God's people.

Joseph met the approaching famine with forethought, saved up grain until it couldn't be measured, and then parceled it out fairly and prudently so there would be enough for all who needed it for the duration of the famine. What was the end result of his plan (whereby he sold the grain first for money, then livestock, land, and finally in exchange for the people themselves) for Pharaoh? For the people of Egypt? For the nation of Egypt? For Jacob's family?

It is no wonder that Pharaoh treated Joseph's family with such magnanimity when we consider that as a result of his program, Pharaoh owned everything in the land: all food, money, livestock, and land, and a fifth of what anyone produced on that land. (All with the exception of the land owned by the priests, whose food was allotted regularly by Pharaoh and who therefore had no need to sell their land.)

The people of Egypt sold everything to Pharaoh including themselves, yet they also were helped in that their lives were saved from starvation. They did not actually become slaves in the way that Joseph had been a slave, but more or less became tenants of Pharaoh—who fortunately for them was a benevolent dictator. The terms of their sale of the land were the same as their tax during the years of abundance, 20%—the difference being that they no longer owned the land that they farmed.

The nation of Egypt benefited from stability under Jacob's wise direction and may have enjoyed an increased influence among the neighboring countries, which had to come to her for food.

All this was a tremendous boon for Israel. In addition to providing them with plenty of food, rich land to live in, and room to grow, Joseph's stable administration and Pharaoh's protection allowed them to grow in safety. In the end, it ensured that God's plan would be carried out: the family would become a nation.

Read Genesis 47: 28-31

We are not told why Jacob's family remained in Egypt after the famine, but vs. 28 says they are still there 17 years after arriving. Even so, Jacob KNOWS that his true home is with his fathers in Canaan. After getting Joseph to swear that he will take him out of Egypt to bury him in Canaan, the last sentence reads “Israel bowed himself upon the head of his bed.” What is he doing?

Jacob is ending his life in worship, turning his thoughts toward God and His promises. He has faith, even though he can't see the outcome, that God will carry out His plan—which includes bringing back to Canaan not just the person of Israel but also the nation that will bear his name.

What is Jacob's first order of business on his deathbed? Explain what he tells Joseph in vss.1-7.

It is time for Jacob to pass on the blessing and the birthright. His words in chapter 49 will make it clear that Reuben, Simeon and Levi have forfeited their right to the position. Judah, next in line in age, will be blessed but only secondarily to Joseph, the first-born son of Jacob's beloved wife Rachel.

Now Jacob reminds Joseph of the Covenant promise he received from God, and blesses him through his sons with the double blessing normally reserved for the first-born. He takes the sons on his knees and adopts them as his own, seemingly to replace any sons Rebekah might have had, had she lived longer. Any future sons of Joseph would be counted under Ephraim and Manasseh in their inheritance.

Jacob refers to Ephraim before his older brother Manasseh (vss. 5,20) and deliberately crosses his hands so as to give Ephraim the greater blessing (vs. 14). Why did he do this? Do you see any irony here?

Unlike Isaac, who confused Jacob and Esau in his blindness, Jacob does not mistake whom the blessing will go to. Heb. 11:21 tells us that Jacob blessed the sons of Joseph "by faith." God has obviously told him that Ephraim will be blessed over his brother Manasseh although both will be great. [As it happened, Ephraim would become the leading tribe for at least three centuries, and during the divided Kingdom would be the most powerful tribe in the North. Because of this, "Ephraim" often was used to refer to the Northern Kingdom as a whole (cf Hos. 5; 11:12).]

Even though Isaac was tricked into blessing the younger son and Jacob acted purposefully to do the same thing, God's purpose was worked out in both situations, within the context of man's freedom.

What is the essence of the blessing Jacob gives to Joseph through his sons?

In essence, it is the blessing of God's Covenant promise. The names of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob will be perpetuated through Joseph's descendants, who through Ephraim and Manasseh will be great and grow into a multitude of nations. They will possess the land that God has promised as an everlasting possession. In earnest of this, Jacob gives Joseph the land that he owns in Shechem. History bears out the details: Manasseh's allotment of land will include Jacob's plot of land, and when the Davidic kingdom is divided into Judah and Israel, Israel (the Northern Kingdom) is often called Ephraim: thus Jacob's name (Israel) is lived on through his grandson.

Jacob's words to his three oldest sons, Reuben, Simeon and Levi, are more like curses than blessings. What will be their fates? (Read also Josh. 19:1,9 for Simeon's ultimate allotment of land, and Josh. 14:3-4 and Num. 35:2-3,6-8 for Levi's.)

Reuben will lose the pre-eminence due to him naturally as the first-born, because he slept with Bilhah, his father's concubine (Gen. 35:22). This was tantamount to an attempt to claim his father's authority and position for himself. His descendants will be characterized by indecision.

Simeon and Levi are cursed for their violence (remember their behavior at Shechem in Gen. 34). They will be divided and scattered: Simeon eventually was absorbed into Judah and Levi was dispersed among the other tribes as priests. They received no tribal allotment, but were given 48 cities from other tribes, which ensured the even dispersal of the leaders of worship [Note: there is no mention of the priestly character of Levi until Deut. 33:8-11.]

It is a kind of poetic justice that when six of the 48 cities were designated as cities of refuge, Shechem was included among them.

What does Judah's blessing reveal about his tribe? In whom is this blessing fulfilled? (For help with this question, read Isa. 9:6-7; Micah 5:2; Matt. 2:6; and Rev. 5:5.)

Jacob's blessing of Judah announces that his tribe will rule over those of his brothers. It will be settled and prosperous and strong. The picture of the lion cub suggests sovereignty, strength and courage. Most important, the image of the scepter points to a universal king who will come from Judah and reign "until he comes to whom it belongs."

The initial fulfillment of this prophecy is found in the kingdom and dynasty God establishes in David. "He ... to whom it belongs" was traditionally believed by the Jews to point to the Messiah. The verses from Isaiah and Micah, among others, flesh out this picture and point to the eternal ruler on David's throne coming from Bethlehem, a town in Judah. Christians, of course, identify this figure as Jesus Christ, the child born in Bethlehem and the "Lion of the tribe of Judah," the "lamb slain" who comes to reign in righteousness and justice on David's throne forever.

[Note: I Chron. 5:2 regards the birthright as Joseph's, and Jacob's special blessing on Joseph and his sons supports that. But if Joseph thus received the double blessing and inheritance (and through his sons was made steward of the promise) and acts as tribal head during his lifetime, it appears that Jacob assigns royal leadership among the tribes to Judah. This ambiguity may point ahead to the divided kingdom, which will be ruled by Ephraim in the North and by Judah in the South.]

How does the description of Jacob's burial highlight the greatness of Jacob?

The prescribed number of days of mourning for a Pharaoh was 72. That the Egyptians spent 70 days in mourning for someone of a "detestable" class of shepherds and not of their people surely says something about their regard for him. The great company sent by Pharaoh to Canaan to pay their respect, and the reaction of the Canaanites, also suggest that Jacob was highly esteemed in Egypt.

What was Joseph's brothers' main concern once their father was dead? Are you surprised? What can explain their fear?

Sadly, Joseph's brothers' first thought when their father died was that Joseph would now take his chance for revenge. (Remember that Esau, out of respect for his father, planned to kill Jacob once Isaac was dead.)

Given Judah's change of heart it may be surprising of him, but it should not come as a shock because none of the brothers have apologized to Joseph directly. Even now their plea for forgiveness is motivated by fear and couched in terms of their father's request.

We are not told why they suspect Joseph of harboring plans of vengeance; perhaps it is because they would hold the grudge themselves. In that respect, their reaction reveals their own nature. But there is another possibility as well: If they have never truly forgiven Joseph for the things that drove them to sell him in the first place (being the favorite, getting the coat, telling his dreams, and informing on them), they may not be sorry they treated him as they did. Recognizing you have done wrong and deserve punishment does not mean you repent of the deed. And the heart that cannot forgive another, cannot receive forgiveness in return. This is why Jesus says in Matt. 6:15, "But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins." Such a heart is too hard to receive mercy—and their assumption that Joseph will make them his slaves shows that they do not expect mercy. In the words of the Catechism, "...this outpouring of mercy cannot penetrate our hearts as long as we have not forgiven those who have trespassed against us....In refusing to forgive our brothers and sisters, our hearts are closed and their hardness makes them impervious to the Father's merciful love; but in confessing our sins, our hearts are opened to his grace (2840)."

What was Joseph's response to this belated apology? How do you account for the difference between Joseph's attitude and that of his brothers?

Joseph weeps at their hard hearts and their fear. Nonetheless he offers them tender reassurance, forgiveness and comfort. He shows no trace of bitterness or spite and seems astonished that they think he would punish them. "Am I in God's place?" he asks.

Joseph, because he knows and trusts and fears God, is able to look beyond his brothers' sins and see that God transformed the injustice into good. The brothers have a human, selfish perspective and are filled with guilt that doesn't allow them to look to God.

Read Heb. 11:22. Out of all that could be said of Joseph's life, what does the author of Hebrews record as proof of his faith? Explain why this is faith.

In his dying words, Joseph spoke of the Exodus and instructed his brothers to bury him in Canaan, their promised home. St. Paul says that he did this "by faith." Faith was necessary because he was looking forward in hope, confident of something that could not be seen, the fulfillment of God's covenant with his family. It is faith that enables us to believe God's promises even though circumstances or physical evidence is against them. Faith believes things that can't be seen and acts as though they can, because those things are founded on God.