

Genesis 47:27-48:22

Jacob's Final Days

Many years had gone by, seventeen years in fact. The famine that had ravished the land had finally ended and, it seems, Egypt had begun to prosper again. At least Scripture states that the inhabitants of Goshen were doing well. Jacob and his family had settled there at the invitation of Pharaoh. They had pastured their flocks and herds, and had escaped the worst of the agricultural reforms that Joseph had enacted. That is, they kept their money, livestock, lands, and freedom despite the famine. They had enjoyed the protection of the crown, and they had flourished.

But over those seventeen years, the aged patriarch's health had deteriorated even more. Now he was very old and feeble, and he knew his days as a sojourner on this earth were drawing to a close. Soon Jacob would be "gathered to his people" as Scripture so eloquently puts it (Genesis 25:8; 35:29). Knowing this, Jacob spent his last days making one very important request of his favorite son Joseph, adopting Joseph's sons as his own, offering a blessing to two special young men, and finally bequeathing his role as leader of the family to Joseph.

Jacob's Last Request

Our passage begins with a recapitulation of what had happened earlier in the narrative. "Now Israel lived in the land of Egypt, in Goshen, and they acquired property in it and were fruitful and became very numerous" (v. 27). But the fact that Israel/Jacob lived in the land of Goshen is supplemented with the encouraging news that they had flourished there. They "acquired property," "were fruitful," and "became very numerous" (v. 27). They were blessed both economically and reproductively. And this is the language of Genesis. Being 'fruitful' had long been both a command and a promise (Genesis 1:22, 28; 9:1, 7; 17:6, 20; 28:3; 35:11; 48:4). The fulfillment of the promise that God would make them a great nation in Egypt (Genesis 46:3) was beginning to be fulfilled.

But we must also be cautious when we read of the success of Jacob's family. Such possessions and prosperity, such connections to the royal house itself, could have presented them with the temptation to make them less dependent on God for their survival. After all, they were no longer sojourners. Now, they had become numerous and affluent. And we also know that, years in the future, their numbers and wealth would gain them the unwanted attention of a Pharaoh "who did not know Joseph" (Exodus 1:8).

Scripture is silent on the nearly two decades that passed. It simply records that "Jacob lived in the land of Egypt for seventeen years; so the length of Jacob's life was 147 years" (v. 28). We know as little about the last seventeen years of Jacob's life as we do about the first seventeen years of Joseph's life. Again a lesson in God's revelation that we would do well to remember when we do not understand all that God is doing. He does not tell us everything we want to know, but He does tell us everything we need to know.

Though he had often believed he might breathe his last before, now, it seems, Jacob now knew he really was dying. So,

²⁹when the time for Israel to die drew near, he called his son Joseph and said to him, 'please, if I have found favor in your sight, place your hand under my thigh now and deal with me in kindness and faithfulness: please do not bury me in Egypt, ³⁰but when I lie down with my fathers, you

shall carry me out of Egypt and bury me in their burial place.’ And he said, ‘I will do as you have said.’³¹ And he said, ‘swear to me.’ So he swore to him. Then Israel bowed in worship at the head of the bed” (v. 29-31).

Jacob wanted to be buried in the family tomb back in Canaan. This was the land first purchased by Abraham as a burial site for his wife, Sarah (Genesis 23:19). But Jacob realized that, obviously, he was powerless to make this happen himself. So he called his favorite son to him (and also the one son with the authority to carry out his request) and made him swear an oath to execute his will. He did so humbly saying “please, if I have found favor in your sight” (v. 29). Jacob couched his command in the form of a request. The details of the oath, “place your hand under my thigh” (v. 29), replicated the actions taken by Abraham when he had commanded his servant to find a wife for Isaac from the family settlement in Paddan-Aram, rather than allow Isaac to take a local Canaanite woman as his wife (Genesis 24:2-4).

We might wonder why Jacob wanted his remains to be buried in the family tomb in Canaan. It may have been mere sentimentality, but it might also be argued that Jacob recognized that though he had to live out his years as a resident of Egypt, he knew that Egypt was not the land of promise and that one day his people would return to Canaan. Indeed, God has so promised him as he had departed for Egypt (Genesis 46:3-4). For these Hebrews, Egypt was Noah's ark. That is, it served as a place of refuge during a time of great catastrophe, but it was never meant to be a permanent home. Jacob knew this, and he wanted to participate in God's plan to give His people the land of Canaan.

Joseph readily assured his father that he would do as he had been asked. Having heard Joseph's promise to have him buried in Canaan, Jacob then worshipped his God. Since we know that Jacob was very weak and feeble, he must have needed Joseph's help to get out of bed and kneel to pray. While some have thought that this bowing was a further fulfillment of the dreams of Joseph, I think this moment is too sincere and intimate for such an interpretation. Besides, Joseph had already seen his dreams fulfilled sufficiently. He did not need further affirmation. Instead, it seems Jacob genuinely gathered his strength and bowed in worship.

Jacob Adopts Ephraim and Manasseh

Sometime later, a servant (it may have been one of his brothers, but then I think he would have been mentioned by name) rushed into Joseph's presence and told him that Jacob's time was near. Well aware of the family rituals that marked the passing of one generation to the next, Joseph was ready. “Now it came about after these things that Joseph was told, ‘behold, your father is sick.’ So he took his two sons Manasseh and Ephraim with him” (v. 1).

We can learn two things from this account. First, Joseph continued to reside in Egypt proper and administer the country on Pharaoh's behalf. That is, he did not move to the family settlement in Goshen and resume his life as a shepherd. Second, we know that Manasseh and Ephraim had been born before the famine began (Genesis 41:50-42). The seven year famine, during which the family had relocated to Egypt, and the seventeen years Jacob resided in Egypt meant the sons were about twenty years of age. They were not boys, but young men.

Jacob knew this was not simply a visit to his aged father. He knew this was the moment when the patriarch's blessing would be given to the next generation. Jacob well remembered the importance of the father's blessing. Indeed, he had gone to great lengths to obtain it (Genesis 27:5-29), stopping at nothing short of deceit to do so. He also remembered that the blessing of the father was irrevocable (Genesis 27:36-37). Joseph was aware that this would be the time when his father would bless his sons, and he wanted to engineer that blessing according to what he thought was appropriate.

The interview, as recorded in Scripture, bears some resemblance to a formal audience. "When it was told to Jacob, 'behold, your son Joseph has come to you,' Israel collected his strength and sat up in the bed" (v. 2). Though unstated, Jacob seemed to know why Joseph was there. In fact, Scripture records that Jacob was told only that Joseph had come to see him. Nothing is said about Joseph's sons. Yet, Jacob also knew that this was not just another visit to the dying patriarch. This was the formal blessing of the next generation. So, once again, Jacob "collected his strength and sat up in the bed" (v. 2).

Jacob made a speech that he had probably been rehearsing in his mind for some time in preparation for this occasion.

³Then Jacob said to Joseph, 'God Almighty appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan and blessed me, ⁴and He said to me, "behold, I will make you fruitful and numerous, and I will make you a multitude of peoples, and will give this land to your descendants after you as an everlasting possession"'" (v. 3-4).

Jacob's health might have been failing, but his memory was still intact. He began by recounting a particular encounter with God. Referring to Him as "God Almighty," Jacob told of the promise he had then received. As recorded at the time, God had said,

¹¹I am God Almighty;
Be fruitful and multiply;
A nation and a multitude of nations shall come from you,
And kings shall come from you.
¹²And the land which I gave to Abraham and Isaac,
I will give to you,
And I will give the land to your descendants after you" (Genesis 35:1-12).

Jacob focused on God's promise of seed, because he was about to include Joseph's two sons into that blessing. He also referenced the promise of land, perhaps to remind Joseph of his earlier promise to return Jacob's body to Canaan after he had died. Though I am certain he had told Joseph this story before, such an occasion as the passing on of the patriarchal blessing was often used to recount a patriarch's encounters with, and testify to the faithfulness of, God (Genesis 24:7).

Having recalled the past, Jacob then turned to the future.

“⁵Now your two sons, who were born to you in the land of Egypt before I came to you in Egypt, are mine; Ephraim and Manasseh shall be mine, as Reuben and Simeon are. ⁶But your children that you have fathered after them shall be yours; they shall be called by the names of their brothers in their inheritance. ⁷Now as for me, when I came from Paddan, Rachel died, to my sorrow, in the land of Canaan on the journey, when there was still some distance to go to Ephrath. I buried her there on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem)” (v. 5-7).

Jacob adopted Joseph’s two sons. This might seem strange to us, since we think of only orphans or foster children as being in need of adoption, and Joseph was very much alive and involved in their lives. But to think this way is anachronistic. Jacob was elevating Joseph’s sons from grandsons, to sons. Just as his two eldest sons Reuben and Simeon, so now Ephraim and Manasseh were able to consider Jacob as their father. This made them fellow heirs with their uncles. What their uncles thought of this act, Scripture does not record.

Jacob’s purpose may also have been to legitimize the two young men, whose birth in Egypt might have brought into question their portion in the inheritance of God’s promises. To remove any such doubt. Jacob took the sons as his own. Remember, too, that Jacob had fifty-one other grandsons in Egypt. This also can be seen, then, as one final act of favoritism toward his favorite son. Finally, we can see that this elevation was for Ephraim and Manasseh alone. Jacob made it clear that “your children that you have fathered after them shall be yours” (v. 6). Only Joseph’s first two sons were included in this arrangement.

Jacob concluded this speech with a remembrance of Rachel. This part of the conversation may seem disjointed, but two things might be considered. First, we might see this as yet another reminder to have Jacob buried in Canaan, since he spoke of Rachel’s death and burial. Second, it might be thought that since Rachel died giving birth to Benjamin, she was denied the opportunity to bear Jacob further sons. By adopting Ephraim and Manasseh as his own, Jacob had increased Rachel’s offspring to four.

Glancing from Joseph to the two young men who had also entered the room, Jacob, it seems, did not at first recognize them. “When Israel saw Joseph’s sons, he said, ‘who are these?’” (v. 8). This can be explained by either Jacob’s deteriorating eyesight, or the fact that the young men lived with their father away from Goshen and perhaps had not visited their grandfather for some time. Likely it was a combination of both. Another option may be that this was part of the formality of the adoption and blessing itself. Like a pastor who is marrying a couple, the question “who gives this woman to be married to this man?” is not prompted by ignorance. It is simply a part of the ceremony.

But Jacob understood that he was vulnerable. After all, he had taken advantage of his father’s poor eyesight to steal the patriarch’s blessing (Genesis 27). However, in this case there was no deception. There was no need for it. “Joseph said to his father, ‘they are my sons, whom God has given me here’” (v. 9). In other words, these were the two young men whom Jacob had just adopted. And we cannot overlook the fact that Joseph, like others in the patriarchal narrative, counted his children as a gift, and a blessing, from God. Their birth was not the work of Joseph’s wife, Azenath, but rather the work of God.

Upon hearing it declared that these were Joseph's two sons, Jacob

“⁹said, ‘bring them to me, please, so that I may bless them.’ ¹⁰Now the eyes of Israel were so dim from age that he could not see. And Joseph brought them close to him, and he kissed them and embraced them. ¹¹And Israel said to Joseph, ‘I never expected to see your face, and behold, God has let me see your children as well!’ ¹²Then Joseph took them from his knees, and bowed with his face to the ground” (v. 9-12).

Once the two young men were directly in front of Jacob, he could recognize them. His vision was not completely gone. He hugged them and kissed them. He praised God that though “I never expected to see your face . . . God has let me see your children as well!” (v. 11). Like Joseph who gave credit to God for the birth of his sons, so now Jacob gave credit to God for allowing him to see and embrace them. Though Jacob had once complained to Pharaoh that “the years of my living abroad are 130; few and unpleasant have been the years of my life, nor have they attained the years that my fathers lived during the days of their living abroad” (Genesis 47:9), he had lived to see and hold his grandsons, a blessing neither Abraham nor Isaac ever enjoyed.

That Joseph “took them from his knees” (v. 12) need not be taken literally. After all, these two sons were about twenty years old, and there is no way to conceive of the aged and frail Jacob supporting their weight on his knees. The text likely means that the boys stood by Jacob’s knees as he rested in bed. After pulling them back, then Joseph “bowed with his face to the ground” (v. 12). Though in his dreams Joseph had seen his family bow before him, it was now Joseph who bowed before his father at the end. Though he was the second most powerful man in Egypt, Joseph never lost respect for his father nor did he ever cease to be gracious toward him. Certainly, Jacob was overcome with emotion, and we may assume that Joseph and his sons were as well.

Jacob Blesses Ephraim and Manasseh

Having witnessed their adoption, Joseph now moved his sons forward to receive Jacob’s blessing.

“¹³And Joseph took them both, Ephraim with his right hand toward Israel’s left, and Manasseh with his left hand toward Israel’s right, and brought them close to him. ¹⁴But Israel reached out his right hand and placed it on the head of Ephraim, who was the younger, and his left hand on Manasseh’s head, crossing his hands, although Manasseh was the firstborn. ¹⁵And he blessed Joseph, and said,

‘The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked,

The God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day,

¹⁶The angel who has redeemed me from all evil,

Bless the boys;

And may my name live on in them,

And the names of my fathers Abraham and Isaac;

And may they grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth” (v. 13-16).

Joseph had risen from his bow and once again ushered his sons forward. He did so deliberately, with Ephraim at his right and Manasseh at his left. That way, when Jacob reached out his hands to bless them, Jacob’s right hand would fall on Manasseh and his left on Ephraim. Since that was the birth order of the

two boys, it would signify the greater blessing (signified by Jacob's right hand) falling on the older, Manasseh.

Joseph was clearly not trying to manipulate the situation here. He was simply acting in accord with the customs of his people. By placing the young men in front of his father in this way, he was trying to help the poorly sighted Jacob discern which of them ought to receive the superior blessing. Joseph had apparently overlooked the fact that when Jacob spoke of his grandsons he had said Ephraim and Manasseh (v. 5) even though he had mentioned his own sons (Reuben and Simeon) in the appropriate birth order.

To everyone's surprise, I assume, Jacob crossed his hands when he gave the blessing. He ignored the customs of primogeniture, and thus Manasseh joined the long list of first-born sons who were passed over in favor of another (Cain, Ishmael, Esau, Reuben, Zerah). Some of these (Cain, Esau, and Reuben), had forfeited their right as firstborn by their actions. Others (Ishmael and we may presume Zerah) had done nothing of themselves, but simply had not been chosen by God to continue the family line as firstborn. Since we know of nothing Manasseh had done to preclude him from being the firstborn, we can only conclude that God had somehow revealed to Jacob that He had chosen Ephraim to take that favored position.

The blessing, itself, while directed at Joseph, was intended for his sons, and it contained certain standard elements. First, Jacob acknowledged his God. This was the God of his family; the same God Who had guided his grandfather and father. This was the same God Who had walked with Jacob to Paddan-Aram and accompanied him into Egypt. It was the same God Who had saved Jacob from evil (v. 15-16). Jacob began his blessing with the testimony of the faithfulness of his God.

But it was also the faithfulness of his father and grandfather that was referenced here. Abraham and Isaac had walked with God. "Walk" was the language of the covenant.

“¹Now when Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him,
‘I am God Almighty;
Walk before Me, and be blameless.
²I will make My covenant between Me and you,
And I will multiply you exceedingly” (Genesis 17:1-2).

It was a blessing for Jacob to be able to recall the faithfulness of his father and grandfather. They had left a legacy that was invaluable.

But when he spoke of his own relationship with God, Jacob did not focus on what he had done but rather on what God had done. God had “been [his] shepherd all [his] life to this day” (v. 15). God had “redeemed [him] from all evil” (v. 16). Jacob knew the importance of the attention of a faithful shepherd. He was a shepherd himself. He knew that the attentions of a good shepherd were required for the flocks to be safe and to flourish. The desert landscape was a desolate and dangerous place. Only under the protection of a good and faithful shepherd could the flocks hope to survive.

The blessing Jacob offered was twofold. First, there was the blessing of name. That the name of Jacob, and that of Abraham and Isaac, live on in them was a blessing of the covenant. It was intended to include these two young men in their rightful place as part of the community of promise. The second blessing was that of seed. This was a frequent promise to the patriarchs and, here, Jacob invoked that promise on Joseph's sons.

But suddenly, it seems Joseph realized that his father had crossed his hands. Why he had not noticed this immediately Scripture does not say, or it may have been that Joseph was waiting for the generic blessing on both sons to be over before correcting his father as he proceeded to the specific blessing for each son.

“¹⁷When Joseph saw that his father placed his right hand on Ephraim's head, it displeased him; and he grasped his father's hand to move it from Ephraim's head to Manasseh's head. ¹⁸And Joseph said to his father, ‘not so, my father, for this one is the firstborn. Place your right hand on his head.’ ¹⁹But his father refused and said, ‘I know, my son, I know; he also will become a people and he also will be great. However, his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his descendants shall become a multitude of nations.’ ²⁰So he blessed them that day, saying,

‘By you Israel will pronounce blessing, saying,
May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh!’

And so he put Ephraim before Manasseh” (v. 17-20).

Joseph wanted Jacob's primary blessing to fall on his firstborn. We do not know if there was mere tradition, or if Joseph, like his father, had a favorite son. And Jacob had assumed that since his father had crossed his hands to bless the two young men, he could not clearly see which was which. We do know, however, that Jacob was not mistaken. He knew exactly what he was doing. When Joseph physically, but gently, tried to rearrange Jacob's hands so they were as he wanted, Jacob “refused and said, ‘I know, my son, I know’” (v. 19). Jacob was not mentally incapable of knowing his own mind. He reassured Joseph that Manasseh “also will become a people and he also will be great,” but “his younger brother shall be greater than he” (v. 19). We must understand that this was not simply Jacob's preference. This was God's sovereignty in choosing.

Jacob Bequeaths His Patrimony

Jacob concluded his interview with Joseph with a final announcement. “²¹Then Israel said to Joseph, ‘behold, I am about to die, but God will be with you, and bring you back to the land of your fathers. ²²And I give you one portion more than your brothers, which I took from the hand of the Amorite with my sword and my bow’” (v. 21-22). He knew he was dying, so he reminded Joseph of what he had learned throughout all his trials, that “God will be with you” (v. 21). Jacob certainly knew that God had been with Joseph throughout his many trials in Egypt. They must have talked about such things. But Jacob also knew that God would keep His promises to bring the patriarch's family out of Egypt one day (Genesis 46:4). He wanted to assure Joseph of that as well.

In full confidence of this promise, Jacob bequeathed to Joseph double the allotment of land that his other brothers would receive. This was one final example of Jacob favoring Joseph, though perhaps in this case it was justified by the fact that Joseph had suffered many hardships because of his brothers and he had saved the family from starvation.

Though he possessed only a burial cave in the promised land, and was dying several hundred miles away, Jacob had complete confidence in God's promise. That this involved land taken from the Amorites implied that there had been some military encounter with those people which was not recorded in Scripture. As a result of that engagement Jacob, it seems, came into possession of territory, or at least the right to shepherd his flocks there. But having departed to Egypt with his entire family, it was very likely that the Amorites had retaken the land for themselves. Also, we might note that the term 'Amorites' may be a generic term for the people of Canaan, as is "my sword and my bow" (v. 22) which was a common phrase for the instruments of war.

Some commentators take this narrative to reference the attack on the men of Shechem, after the rape of Dinah, as the time at which Jacob conquered the Amorite. This seems unlikely, since we know that Jacob took no part in the action and, in fact, had disapproved of what the brothers had done (Genesis 34:30). Furthermore, after the encounter Jacob moved his family away (Genesis 35:1-6). He did not take on additional grazing lands.

Takeaways

As I reflect on this passage, I think of a godly man's spiritual legacy. It was a blessing for Jacob to be able to recall the faithfulness of his father and grandfather. They had left a legacy that was invaluable. Jacob had undoubtedly seen them in worship and praising their God. Certainly he had heard time and again the stories of how God had protected them both from outsiders and from themselves. Jacob had grown up surrounded by *El Shaddai*.

We also see that, in Jacob's final days, he worshipped and remembered the promises of his God. There is no reason to think this was a new behavior on Jacob's part. He, too, had "walked with God" throughout his lifetime. Such is the lesson for us. All of these men, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had their failings. We see them recorded in Scripture. Their families knew of them too. Yet, that did not keep these patriarchs from struggling through life trying to align themselves with God's sovereign will. For me, I think this has been *the* great reminder from our study of the patriarchs in Genesis. Walking with God, trying to live a godly life in spite of ourselves, is the battle we all must fight. And fighting that battle, despite the times we fail and the bumps and bruises we take along the way, is a legacy we can leave to those who know us.