

Jacob Blesses Joseph

Genesis 49:22-26

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This evening we will consider Jacob's blessing for Joseph. Jacob is an old man. He is near the end of his life. He is the patriarch of the family. And speaking for God, he pronounces blessings upon each of his sons. These blessings are also prophecies. Verse 28 tells us that each of these blessings was suitable to the son to whom it was given. So, there is a relationship between the way each of the sons had lived their lives and the blessing that he received.

This reminds us of the complex relationship between grace and responsibility in God's dealings with his people. The bottom line is that believers are all undeserving and all spiritually powerless in their own strength. Anything that is commendable in their lives comes from God's grace working in them. And yet that never comes without effort on their part. In order for us to do good things by the grace of God we still must do them. That takes effort and exertion. And then that effort and exertion is rewarded by God even though none of it was possible without the grace of God.

We see this complex relationship between grace and Joseph's own effort in Jacob's blessing upon Joseph. The story that had been told is largely about Joseph. Actually, it is largely about God, but it is largely through Joseph's life that God is revealing himself in the story. And Joseph is the human being in the story who lives the most godly and faithful life. Except for chapter 37, which portrays Joseph as an immature and foolish teenager, Joseph is always held up in a positive light. The story makes it clear that Joseph is what he is because God was with him. But Joseph is constantly portrayed positively. And at least one of the points of the story is that we can learn from Joseph's example to thrive in adversity - although the main point of the story is how God is working behind the scenes to preserve this family through whom he is going to bring about his saving purposes. There is no doubt that the

story reflects positively on Joseph and that his faithfulness to God and his usefulness in God's kingdom is an important part of the story.

We see the interplay of these truths in the blessing that Jacob pronounces upon Joseph. Joseph gets the blessing of the firstborn because of the way that he has lived his life. We know for sure that is Joseph who gets the status of firstborn because Scripture tells us in 1 Chronicles 5:2 that because of Reuben's sin of defiling his father's couch, the "birthright belonged to Joseph."

The significance of this is that Joseph was treated as the firstborn son. As the one who was treated as the firstborn son, Joseph received a double portion of the inheritance. The mechanism for accomplishing this was Jacob's adoption of two of Joseph's sons as his own. They would each receive 1/12 of the inheritance which meant that Joseph's line got a double portion. Being treated as the firstborn son also meant that Joseph had the status as the head of the family after Jacob was gone.

Now there is an anticipation of Jesus Christ here because Jesus is given the title of firstborn a number of times in the NT. In Romans 8:29, Jesus is called the "firstborn of many brothers." In Colossians 1:15 Jesus is called "the firstborn of all creation." So, Joseph's status as firstborn is an anticipation of Jesus' status as "the firstborn of many brothers" and "firstborn of all creation." Just as Joseph was given the honor of being the firstborn son, so Jesus holds that place of honor in the family of God. Jesus' status of firstborn, however, is much more exalted than that of Joseph for Jesus is the ultimate firstborn Son and he holds the place of highest honor in the family of God forever. Furthermore, while Joseph in his position as firstborn son inherited a double portion of the inheritance, Jesus inherited the whole thing. Hebrews 1:2 tells us that God appointed Jesus as "the heir of all things." And then Paul in Galatians 3:29 tells us that "If [we] are Christ's then [we] are heirs according to the promise."

So, you see how the picture that we get of Joseph as the firstborn who inherits the double portion is an anticipation of what God is working toward in this history. The significance of firstborn sons in the OT prepares the way for Jesus by providing concepts that helps us to

understand Jesus and his significance. The inheritance that Joseph receives is a double portion of the promised land. The inheritance that Jesus receives is the fulfillment of the promised land, which is the new heavens and the new earth. And those who believe in Christ and are thus united to him become fellow-heirs with him. The ultimate inheritance is life with God in the new creation. And that is why Joseph's story is also our story. In Joseph's story God is working toward Jesus Christ who will fulfill all the types and promises that are part of Joseph's story and so the principles that we learn from Joseph's story also apply to Christ's story of which we are a part if we belong to Jesus Christ.

And we can apply this basic perspective to what we find in the actual blessing that Joseph receives as the firstborn son. Verse 22 describes Joseph as a fruitful bough. "Joseph is a fruitful bough, a fruitful bough by a spring; his branches run over the wall." Joseph is compared to a fruitful tree or a bush or a vine. His life has been fruitful. In his life he has been blessed by God, and through his God-enabled effort he has led a useful life in the service of God and, so he is called a fruitful bough.

This gives us insight into our purpose in life. Soon after he created them, God said to Adam and Eve that they were to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. That fruitfulness certainly included having babies, but it was more than that, for later on, God told them to work and keep the garden. God's task for human beings is to live fruitful lives that bring him glory. That is a multifaceted task. It certainly does include having and raising children if God gives you that calling, but it includes much more than that. It means being productive in our lives in one way or another for the glory of God.

Now fruitfulness and holiness go together in God's world. Reuben was not being fruitful when he defiled his father's bed. Simeon and Levi were not being fruitful when they slaughtered a whole bunch of men to get revenge for the rape of their sister. But Joseph was fruitful. He was fruitful because he was a diligent worker in Potiphar's house. He was fruitful when he was a helpful prisoner in the jail where he ended up after he had been wrongly accused of sleeping with Potiphar's wife. And he was fruitful when he was elevated to second-in-command in Egypt because of his wisdom in managing the resources of Egypt in times of

plenty and in times of famine. But all this fruitfulness was rooted in his relationship with God. God was with him.

Now Jesus is the ultimate fruitful vine. God sometimes referred to Israel as a vine, but she ended up producing bad fruit. Isaiah 5 refers to this. In Isaiah 5:2, Isaiah says that God “looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.” But Jesus is the new Israel. Jesus did everything that Israel failed to do. And so, Jesus speaks of himself as the true vine in John 15. Certainly, Jesus produced fruit in his own life, but the emphasis in John 15 is that Jesus as the vine produces fruit by the life that he gives to his people. Jesus says in John 15:5, “I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.”

So, we come to our calling to bear fruit through the life that we receive from Jesus. Joseph is described in our text as a fruitful bough. And surely the story is saying to us that we should be fruitful boughs as well. The NT makes it clear that we do that through Jesus Christ. But what is the fruit that we should be producing in our lives? Well, we can think of the fruit of Joseph’s life. The John 15 passage also answers this question. After speaking about bearing fruit through abiding in him, Jesus speaks about keeping his commandments. That is an important biblical way of thinking about fruit – keeping the commandments. The NT also speaks about the fruit of the Spirit. Galatians 5:22–23, “²²But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.”

The idea of producing fruit is a broad topic in Scripture. It refers to fruitful lives to the glory of God. Fruitfulness is growing in a Christ-like character. It involves seeking to grow in keeping God’s commands which involves refraining from sinful attitudes and actions and nurturing God-honoring attitudes and actions. It involves doing good works. Ephesian 2:10 says, “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” So being fruitful is a lot of things. It is nurturing godly character and it is living life to the glory of God. It involves the way of life that the Bible calls us to live.

This is a biblical way to think about our lives. Are we living fruitful lives? We have seen recently that our everyday lives are to be fruitful in the sense of doing our work and rest and play to the glory of God. We are to eat and drink to the glory of God. But fruitfulness also involves loving and serving other people. It involves private, family and corporate worship. It involves being a partner in the fulfilling the great commission. It involves serving the church. The fact that Jacob refers to Joseph as a fruitful bough, confronts us with the question of whether that would be an appropriate expression to describe our lives.

And this is serious business because the Bible makes it clear that God is looking for fruit in our lives. We need to seriously ponder how Jesus deals with this topic in John 15. It is an encouraging passage because it tells us how we can bear fruit through the life that comes from Jesus as the true vine, but it is also a sobering passage because Jesus places significant emphasis on what will happen to those who do not bear fruit. In verse 2, he says, "Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away...." In verse 6, Jesus says, "If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned." In verse 8, Jesus says that it is by bearing much fruit that we prove that we are his disciples, implying that if we are not bearing fruit we are not his disciples.

This is Jesus who is speaking here. This is the Jesus who died so that we might be forgiven and renewed. This is the Jesus who says, "Come to me all who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). It is this Jesus who says if we do not bear fruit in our lives we will be like branches that "are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned." The Bible is a very serious book. The things it deals with are matters of life and death, heaven and hell. And while there are lots of comforts in it, there are also lots of warnings. And we ignore those at our peril.

But there is also great comfort and encouragement in connection with this idea of bearing fruit. This whole imagery of fruit on a vine or fruit on a tree conveys the idea of gradual growth. Fruit appears on vines or trees gradually. It takes time. It does not come all at once. It begins small and grows. One of the struggles that we have as Christians is that there is so little fruit in our lives. And then we hear a warning like Jesus'

warning in John 15 and we wonder whether we are among those who are not producing fruit. We must be careful to discern between producing no fruit and the struggle of a believer who is discouraged by the small amount of fruit in his life. The difference has to do with the longing of our hearts. There is a difference between a person who is just living for himself and this world and the person who is discouraged because his or her life is not as fruitful as he/she would like it to be. Jesus says, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied" (Matthew 5:6). Zechariah 10:4 teaches that we should not despise the day of small things. And the imagery of fruit itself suggests gradual growth.

And Jesus tells us how we can produce more fruit. In John 15 he tells us that we produce fruit by abiding in him, by abiding in his word and by abiding in his love. The ESV Study Bible has a helpful explanation of what it means to abide in Christ. "Abide in me means to continue in a daily, personal relationship with Jesus, characterized by trust, prayer, obedience (see v. 10), and joy." Abiding in Christ is trust and dependence and prayer and time in his word. It means investing in our relationship with Jesus which means faithfully using the means of grace, the word of God, the sacraments and prayer. This is how the life that is in Christ comes to us and it is how the fruit gradually grows in our lives.

So, Joseph was a fruitful bough. Jacob in his blessing upon Joseph mentions that as a positive thing and when we consider the concept of fruitfulness in the Bible we can see that Joseph is being held up for us an example. Jesus makes it clear that by means of the life that he provides to his people, we are also able to live fruitful lives to the glory of God.

Next Jacob picks up on significant theme that is illustrated by Joseph's life. Joseph's fruitfulness happened in the context of hardship and suffering and opposition. Listen to the next 2 verses, "²³The archers bitterly attacked him, shot at him, and harassed him severely, yet his bow remained unmoved; his arms were made agile by the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob."

Jacob is not speaking literally here. Joseph was not literally attacked by archers. Jacob is referring to the attacks that Joseph suffered, first from his brothers who sold him into slavery in Egypt and then by Potiphar

who believed his wife's lie that Joseph had tried to rape her and sent Joseph into prison. This is the context in which Joseph lived a fruitful life. He was hated by his brothers. He was separated from his father and younger brother. He lived in the hopelessness of slavery. And even after he was made second-in-command in Egypt he was still separated from his family. And yet through all of that suffering Joseph lived a fruitful life in God's service.

In this he also anticipates Jesus. Jesus who was the perfect expression of human fruitfulness also produced the fruit of a life well-lived to the glory of God in the face of opposition and suffering. As Isaiah prophesied concerning him, "He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.... (Isaiah 53:3). Jesus suffered a great deal of hard and opposition in this life. Almost from the beginning of this public ministry, he was constantly being attacked by the religious leaders of the Jews. Eventually it led to the crucifixion. And through it all he faced satanic opposition as well. We have the account of the temptations from Satan at the beginning of his ministry. But no doubt those attacks continued. In Luke's account of Jesus' temptations in the wilderness we read, Luke 4:13, "¹³And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time." This makes it clear that Jesus faced satanic opposition throughout his ministry and not just at the beginning.

And the NT makes it clear that the same holds true for the followers of Christ. Jesus said to his disciples that following him meant taking up their cross. That refers to persevering in the face of opposition and hardship. Jesus also said, John 15:18, "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you." Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 3:12, "¹²Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted," We see a pattern here don't we? From Joseph to Jesus to us. The life of fruitfulness is lived under attack. The context in which we are called to live fruitful lived is a context of opposition. And from the storyline of the Bible we know that behind all that opposition is Satan himself. And from the story of Job we learn that Satan can use loss and hardship and sickness to try to get us to resent God rather than love and serve him. So, we can include suffering of all kinds as the context in which God is calling us to grow and live fruitful lives.

Jesus makes the same point in the parable of the vine in this connection. Jesus says that his Father is the vinedresser and “that every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.” So, if you are bearing fruit the Father prunes you so that you bear more fruit. From this we see that not only does Satan send hardship into the lives of God’s people, God does so as well. In fact, the same hardship can be allowed by God and used by Satan as was the case with Job. God the Father and Satan can be behind the same suffering, but for opposite purposes. Satan wants us to be discouraged and curse God. God uses the suffering like pruning so that we will produce more fruit.

So, you see what Jacob observed about Joseph’s fruitfulness is part of a significant theme in Scripture. Fruitfulness happens while the arrows are flying. You would think that it would be more conducive to the production of spiritual fruit if we lived in quietness and peacefulness. But this is not so in God’s vineyard. In God’s vineyard those who are fruitful get pruned so that they will produce more fruit. Using the imagery of our text, fruitfulness happens while we are under attack – while the arrows are raining down upon us. Paul uses this very imagery in Ephesians 6:16, “¹⁶In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one;” And this is why James writes in James 1:2–3, “²Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, ³for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.”

Notice how this idea is expressed in Jacob’s blessing for Joseph. Let me read the three verses again, Genesis 49:22–24, “²²“Joseph is a fruitful bough, a fruitful bough by a spring; his branches run over the wall. ²³The archers bitterly attacked him, shot at him, and harassed him severely, ²⁴yet his bow remained unmoved; his arms were made agile by the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob (from there is the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel),” This gives us a vivid picture.

Joseph is standing there with all these arrows being shot at him. And “yet his bow remained unmoved; his arms were made agile by the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob.” Joseph is being attacked, but he is shooting back. But he is not shooting back with the same kind of arrows that are being shot against him. He is not shooting back evil for evil, but

he is shooting back good to overcome the evil. Joseph shot back by trusting in God and submitting to God's providence. He shot back by doing his work as unto the Lord even when he was in slavery and in prison. He shot back by enduring in service to God even as he was in what looked like a hopeless situation that he would never get out of. This is what Jacob is referring to when he says that Joseph's bow remained unmoved. His way of attacking the evil that had been done to him was by living the most fruitful life for the glory of God under the circumstances.

All the suffering that he endured was a tremendous temptation to become bitter or to give up or to become preoccupied with his suffering. That is always the temptation when we are suffering and that is exactly what the devil is trying to achieve. But Joseph is being held up for us as an example of standing firm in the face of suffering. And the NT echoes this idea when it speaks of the importance of endurance and perseverance in the face of trials. For instance, listen to what Paul prays for the Colossians in Colossians 1:10–11. He prays that God would enable them "... to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; ¹¹being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all **endurance** and patience with joy;"

So, there you have it – the gospel according to Jacob. The life of blessing is the life of fruitfulness by the grace of God. The text and the story as a whole, emphasize that Joseph lived as he did because God was with him. Our text says that Joseph was able to stand firm against the archers who so bitterly attacked him "by the hand of the Mighty One of Jacob." In our text Joseph is being blessed. We will look more closely at the blessing next time.

In a way, God through Jacob is saying to Joseph, "Well done good and faithful servant." These verses are a commendation of Joseph for a life well lived. Joseph is a "fruitful bough." Joseph stood firm in the face of opposition and adversity. "[H]is bow remained unmoved; his arms were made agile by the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob." The Lord in this blessing is commending and rewarding Jacob for a life well lived.

And so, we come back to what I said at the beginning. We have a wonderful interaction between God's grace and Joseph's effort. Joseph does nothing without the grace of God. And yet he is commended and blessed for his efforts. And so, it is with us in and through our relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

Without Christ we can do nothing. But we are encouraged to give the effort to live fruitful lives with the assurance that by abiding in Christ we are strengthened to produce fruit. That takes effort on our part. We must work. We must struggle. We must endure in the face of opposition and suffering. The Bible certainly does not say that the Christian life is an easy life.

And yet in spite of the fact that it is all of grace, our efforts are rewarded and if we are faithful we will hear the words – "Well done, good and faithful servant." What a wonderful motivation that is to give our all to be fruitful as servants of God.