

Jacob Blesses Ephraim and Manasseh

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The passage that we are going to look at this evening is about hope for the future when you are dying. It is about Jacob as he comes near the end of his life. He calls Joseph to his side and makes him promise not to bury him in Egypt, but to bury him in Canaan. And then chapter 48 is about Jacob blessing Manasseh and Ephraim, the two sons of Joseph. The overall perspective is that of a dying man who has hope for the future because of the promises of God. That is one of the wonderful blessings of the message of the Bible. The people of God die in hope because of the promises of God.

So, Jacob makes Joseph swear that when Jacob dies, Joseph will carry his body out of Egypt and bury him with his fathers in Canaan. This was important to Jacob because of the promise that God had made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob that he was going to give the land of Canaan to their offspring. This request of Jacob was an expression of his faith that God would keep his promise. He wanted to be buried in Canaan because he knew that one day his offspring would possess that land. He was counting on God keeping his promise beyond his lifetime into the future. Israel was now in Egypt, but God had promised that he would one day bring them back to the land of Canaan. So, Jacob wanted to be buried where he knew his offspring would one day live.

This hope was not simply for the physical land of Canaan, but for what it represented. And what it represented was salvation. The promises that God had made to Abraham were an elaboration of the promise that God had made to Adam and Eve that through the offspring of the woman he was going to crush the offspring of the serpent and thus overturn the curse of sin which is death. The promise of Canaan was part of the promise of the seed of the woman who was the hope for the human race. We do not know exactly how much Jacob understood about how these promises were going to be fulfilled, but the book of Hebrews tells us that the patriarchs “all died in faith, not having

received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar..." (Hebrews 11:13). It goes on to say that "they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one" (Hebrews 11:16).

Jacob's request to be buried in Canaan was an expression of this hope for "a better country, that is, a heavenly one." He would die believing that he would one-day dwell with God in that better heavenly country. And we are heirs of that same promise if we are followers of Jesus Christ and thus belonging to the spiritual offspring of Abraham.

What hope that is! It is the hope of eternal life. It is the hope of the city "whose designer and builder is God" (Hebrews 11:10). What a contrast with the hopelessness of the people who reject God! Some of them think that death is the end. Some of them have a false hope of heaven for every decent person. All of them will be horrified when, at death, they discover that they are in hell. Death is the end of any hope for them. But God's people who live by faith in the promises of God can die with a well-founded hope in a wonderful eternity that God has in store for them. Jacob had that hope as he was coming to the end of his life.

Well the rest the verses we are going to look at this evening address another aspect of Jacob's dying hope – hope for the future of his offspring. Let's work our way through the story and seek to understand its significance within the Bible and then also for us.

Jacob is ill. He will soon die. Joseph comes to see him with his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. Notice what is on Jacob's mind. The promises of God. Genesis 48:3-4, "³And Jacob said to Joseph, "God Almighty appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan and blessed me, ⁴and said to me, 'Behold, I will make you fruitful and multiply you, and I will make of you a company of peoples and will give this land to your offspring after you for an everlasting possession.'" And what is particularly on Jacob's mind is God's promise concerning many offspring and the promise of the land for them. Jacob is thinking of God's promise in connection with his offspring. As he contemplates this own death, his mind is occupied with the fact that God has made promises not only to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but to their offspring as well. He is thinking about the future for his children and his grandchildren and the generations to come. And he is thinking of them as heirs of God's

promises. He reminds Joseph of the promises that God had made to him concerning his offspring.

What a wonderful thing to be thinking of as he was coming to the end of his life! His children and his children's children were recipients of the same promises that had sustained him and had given him hope during his lifetime. This is a wonderful comfort for us as well as we contemplate our own mortality. The promises of God concerning the heavenly city are for us and our children and our children's children. These promises must be embraced by our children, but they are made to them. "For the promise is for you and for your children," Peter said in Acts 2:39. Sadly this does not mean that all of our children will embrace those promises, but it does mean that God has set them apart to receive those promises and many of them do and he does continue to work through the generations. After we die God will continue the line of promise from one generation to the next right until the end when he will bring his plan to completion at the return of Jesus.

This is the perspective of Psalm 103:15-18. ¹⁵"As for man, his days are like grass; he flourishes like a flower of the field; ¹⁶for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more. ¹⁷But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children's children, ¹⁸to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments." Our lives are short. But we are part of the family that bears the promise from one generation to the next as God works out his purposes through all the generations until he will usher in the consummation of his purposes in the new heaven and the new earth.

I know that it is painful to think of covenant children who are not walking with the Lord. There have always been some who have failed to keep the covenant and failed to do his commandments. That is a painful reality. But still there is the broader perspective of hope that the line of promise will continue through the ages until the end. Our lives are short, but they take their meaning from this history of the people of promise – a history that began before our time on earth and a history that will continue after our time on earth right to the end.

So, the dying Jacob is thinking about the promise that God had made to him concerning his offspring. And then in verses 5-7, we are told that he adopts Joseph's two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, as his own. The significance of this has to do with the inheritance. What this does is to treat Joseph as the first-born son. It means that Joseph's family gets a double portion of the inheritance. Jacob mentions that Ephraim and Manasseh will be treated as sons on the same level as Reuben and Simeon. But since Ephraim and Manasseh are both Joseph's sons it means that Joseph's line gets the double portion and Ruben's line and Simeon's line will each get a single portion. The effect of this is to take the firstborn status away from Ruben who is the firstborn son and from Simeon who is the second-born son and give it to Joseph who was one of the last sons to be born, but was the first son of Jacob's favorite wife, Rachel. The reason that Ruben was demoted from his firstborn status was that he had slept with one of his father's wives, Bilhah. 1 Chronicles 5:1 says, "The sons of Ruben the firstborn of Israel (for he was the firstborn, but because he defiled his father's couch, his birthright was given to the sons of Joseph the son of Israel, so that he could not be enrolled as the oldest son;" And the probable reason that the next 2 sons in the birth order, Simeon and Levi, did not get the status of firstborn was that they slaughtered all the men of the village of Shechem because the son of the head that village had raped their sister Dinah.

The significance then of Jacob adopting Joseph's two sons is in effect to treat Joseph as the firstborn. The effect of this hundreds of years later when the land of Canaan was divided up between the offspring of the sons of Jacob was that the tribes of Ephraim and of Manasseh would each get a portion of the land meaning in effect that the offspring of Joseph got a double portion.

Now this demotion Ruben and Simeon and the promotion of Joseph to the position of firstborn son is an example of the biblical principle that sin has consequences and there are blessings and rewards that come with obedience. Ruben and Simeon did not receive the blessing of the double portion of the firstborn son because of their sins. Joseph did receive it because of his faithfulness. That is an important biblical principle.

It does not mean that Joseph earned the status of firstborn. Joseph was a sinner worthy of death. He did not deserve being elevated to the status of firstborn. He deserved hell as we all do. He was saved by grace as all the children of God are. And yet the Bible does teach that sin has negative consequences and that obedience has positive consequences. It is significant that Reuben and Simeon's names are inscribed on the twelve gates of the heavenly Jerusalem. Revelation 21:12 says that the heavenly Jerusalem has twelve gates "and on the gates the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel are inscribed." Both Reuben and Simeon received their inheritance. And yet their sins still had consequences in their lives and in the lives of their offspring. Joseph received the double portion and they each received a single portion of the inheritance.

The same is true for us. Sin has consequences. The NT teaches that our final reward will be affected by how we have lived our lives. We are saved by grace. Jesus is the one who earned the inheritance on our behalf. We never deserve it. And yet Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:10, that "¹⁰... we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil." He is speaking to believers. Our final reward will be influenced by how we have lived as people saved by grace. That is what we see going on in this passage in which Jacob adopts Joseph's two sons as his own sons effectively giving Joseph the firstborn's double portion of the inheritance. Reuben and Simeon are bypassed for that honor because of their sin although they still do receive an inheritance because of God's grace.

So next we come to the part of the story where Jacob blesses the two sons of Joseph. Jacob asks Joseph to bring his two sons to him so that he might bless them. First let's consider the significance of this blessing. This blessing was not a wish. It was a pronouncement. Jacob is the head of the people of the promise at this point. He is speaking for God at this point. I found a good expression of this idea in a sermon by a guy named Sam Brown on this passage as well as chapter 49. The quote references chapter 49, but the idea applies to the blessing that Jacob pronounces on Ephraim and Manasseh as well. He says, "And as he [Jacob] blesses each of his sons in chapter 49 his words are not mere wishful thinking;

because he speaks as the head of the covenant people, the words are prophetic. Jacob speaks the very words of God; the substance of which God would bring into reality as the Story of Redemption moves forward.”

This, by the way, is also true of the blessings that ministers, as those called to speak for God, pronounce upon the people of God at the end of a worship service. They are not prayers. They are pronouncements. Through the minister God is saying to his people, “I will bless you and keep you. My face is shining upon you and I my grace is upon you. I am looking upon you in favor. And I give you my peace.” That is not a hope or a request. It is what God is actually saying to his people.

But getting back to our text, what is the blessing that Jacob pronounces on the two sons of Joseph? It is recorded in verse 15-16. ¹⁵“And 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 long to this day, ¹⁶the angel who has redeemed me from all evil, bless the boys; and in them let my name be carried on, and the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac; and let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth.””

By this blessing Jacob was passing on the promises that God had made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. These two would be included as the heads of two of the twelve tribes of Israel. Together with the other sons they would carry on Jacob’s name, Israel, and the promises that God had made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. And as we saw when we considered Jacob’s adoption of Joseph’s sons, the effect of this was to give Joseph the status of the firstborn. And the way that this was fulfilled is that Joseph’s posterity accounted for 2 of the twelve tribes.

Now it is interesting to consider the significance of this blessing in the light of the fact that these two young men were rich kids. They were the sons of the second most powerful man in Egypt. They would have been living in a fancy house. They would have been educated in the best schools. They had the potential to become prominent members of Egyptian society along with their children through the generations. By this blessing, they were being presented with their calling to be the heads of two of the twelve tribes of Israel. In terms of worldly success

and glamor that was a demotion. If wellbeing is associated with money and stuff and status, they had all that as people of wealth and status in Egypt. This blessing meant that they were being called to take their place among the family of the promise which was doing well in Egypt but had nowhere near the wealth and status that was available to them had they decided to live their lives as Egyptians rather than Israelites. But the fact that their offspring were counted among the twelve tribes of Israel meant that they must have valued the blessing that Jacob had pronounced upon them, more than the wealth and status that they could have had as Egyptians.

What Hebrews 11 says of Moses would also apply to these two sons of Joseph. Like Moses, they chose “rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. [They] considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for [they were] looking to the reward.”

And there is some similarity with our situation as covenant people. God blesses us with the promises of salvation. That is the meaning of our baptism. It is a tremendous blessing, but it is not a this-worldly blessing. It has nothing to do with this-worldly wealth and status. And to embrace those promises is to embrace our identity of the people of promise rather than the people of the world. It does not necessarily mean poverty but it does mean belonging to the people who according to Paul does not include many of the “wise according to worldly standards,” or “powerful,” or “of noble birth” (1 Corinthians 1:26). To choose to be part of the people of God is to identify one’s self with a people whom the world despises and often persecutes. We follow a Saviour who was crucified and who calls us to take up our cross and follow him.

We do not embrace covenant blessings for wealth and status in this world. It is a way that is considered foolish, weak, low and despised by the world. We are promised that we will be hated by the world. But the blessings are spiritual: the forgiveness of sins, new life in Christ, a desire to live not for ourselves but for Christ, and “an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for [us]” (1 Peter 1:4). That is what we see happening to these two rich boys in our text.

God through Jacob was conferring upon them a blessing of inestimable value. But it was not very impressive from a worldly perspective.

Now the text makes a big deal of the fact that Jacob crossed his arms so that his right hand was on the younger son and his left hand was on the older son. Joseph had positioned the boys so that the firstborn was on Jacob's right and the second-born was on Jacob's left, but Jacob insists on crossing his arms so that his right hand would rest on the head of Ephraim (who was the younger son) and his left hand would rest on the head of Manasseh (who was the older son). The result of this was that the younger son would receive the greater blessing. When Joseph tried to correct his father Jacob said, "I know, my son, I know. He also shall become a people, and he also shall be great. Nevertheless, his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his offspring shall become a multitude of nations."

What is the significance of this? Well it is a pattern in Genesis. In a number of significance instances, the younger is chosen instead of the older. Abel instead of Cain, Isaac instead of Ishmael, Jacob instead of Esau, Perez instead of Zerah and now Ephraim instead of Manasseh. What is the significance of this pattern?

It is to emphasize sovereign grace. It is to emphasize God's choice. God does not do what human conventions dictate. He wants to demonstrate the principle of election by his sovereign choice. Paul explains this for us in Romans 9 in connection with Isaac being chosen over Ishmael and Jacob having been chosen over Esau. In Romans 9:11 we are told that God does this sort of thing, "in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls..." And in verses 15-16 Paul continues his explanation of why God chose the younger over the older, "¹⁵For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." ¹⁶So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy."

So, God does this to demonstrate that he does not operate according to human expectations, but according to his own will. He delights to exercise his sovereign prerogative. So, in these stories in Genesis, God chooses the younger over the elder simply to demonstrate that he will

distribute his blessings as he pleases and he is not obligated to follow human conventions and expectations.

This is the point of election unto salvation. God chooses some to be saved and others he passes by. This choice is never based on any reason in those who are chosen. God does not choose some people for salvation because there is something about them that he likes. God does not choose some people for salvation because they somehow stand out from others as being more worthy. He chooses some over others simply to demonstrate his sovereign prerogative to choose some and not choose others. That is the point of those striking words, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and will have compassion on whom I have compassion."

Why do you think that the whole idea of election is hated by so many people? It is because it crushes human expectations and human pecking-orders and emphasizes the Godness of God at the expense of anything that humans might do to recommend themselves to God. It emphasizes that God is the potter and we are the clay and God has the right as the potter to make one pot to demonstrate his mercy and another pot to demonstrate his justice and his wrath. It means that we exist to fulfill God's purposes and he will do with us what he wills. And one of the characteristics of those whose hearts have been humbled by God is to exalt the sovereignty of God who "has mercy on whomever he wills, and [who] hardens whomever he wills" (Romans 9:18).

But in spite of all that no one who comes to Jesus for forgiveness and renewal will be turned away. The same God who says that "he has mercy on whomever he wills and hardens whomever he wills" also says just a few verses later in Romans 10:12-13, "¹²For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. ¹³For 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.'" The same "God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

The doctrine of election illuminates the glory of God in one way by showing his absolute right as the great potter to do what he wants with the clay. He makes some for salvation. He makes others for damnation.

But the doctrine of the free offer of the gospel illuminates the glory of God in another but compatible way. It shows that God is “merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin....”

The fact that in our text the greater blessing went to the younger son is part of the Scripture witness that emphasizes the God distributes his blessings according to his sovereign will and he is not beholden to anyone. That shows us something important and glorious about God. If this were not so God would not be God. This is an important part of the glory of God. And yet we distort this truth horrible if we ever give the impression that this means that God is hard and cruel and that he is ever unwilling to receive and forgive and adopt those who turn to his sin seeking forgiveness and renewal of life. This is the glorious God we love and adore. He is God. He will have mercy upon whom he will have mercy. But at the same time, “[W]hoever comes to me [says Jesus] I will never cast out” (John 6:37).