

Jacob Blesses Joseph (2)

Genesis 49:22-26

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Rev. Jerry Hamstra

This evening we will hear the word of the Lord from the second half of Jacob's blessing for Joseph. Last week we considered verse 22 which says that Joseph has lived a fruitful life and verses 23 and 24 which says that Joseph lived that fruitful life while dealing with difficulties and challenges. The last part of verse 24 and the first part of verse 25 say that Joseph was able to live the way that he did because God enabled him to do so and Jacob gives a number of names for God that should not be skimmed over, but rather considered. And then in verse 25 and 26 Jacob speaks of the blessings that God will grant to Joseph and his offspring.

It's easy to skim over the names of God when we encounter them in a passage such as this. But we should not do that because our purpose in life is to glorify God and enjoy him. One of the things that this implies is that we should savor what the Bible tells us about him. When the Bible describes God to us we should take the time to ponder what it is saying. In this case, Jacob does not just say that Joseph was able to stand firm in the face of attacks because God was with him. He says that Joseph's "bow remained unmoved; [and] his arms were made agile, by the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob (from there is the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel), by the God of your father who will help you, by the Almighty who will bless you...." In the space of two verses he refers to God as "the Mighty One of Jacob... the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel... the God of your father... [and] the Almighty..."

All of these names refer to the God who was helping Joseph to live a fruitful life while he was suffering as a slave and while he was separated from his father and his family. Jacob's words indicate that the God who was with Joseph and who helped him was a very amazing God.

It is interesting that as the story of Joseph is being told, God is mentioned from time to time, but much of the time he is not expressly mentioned. The message of the story is that God is working, directing all that happens, but that his presence and his involvement in Joseph's life is largely hidden. God is working behind the scenes.

And that is the case in our lives as well. God directs our lives. We know that from the Bible. But God's presence is usually not obvious. We do not see God. We know that he is at work directing our lives and the whole of history because the Bible tells us so. We only know that he is at work in our lives and in history by faith – faith in the words that God speaks to us in the Bible.

But now here in Jacob's blessing for Joseph, Jacob makes explicit what was largely implicit in the rest of the story. Here Jacob focuses the spotlight on the God who had been working behind the scenes and who had been helping Joseph to be fruitful during his long ordeal. He is "the Mighty One of Jacob." This name is often used of God when he is being described as the one who fights on behalf of his people. God in the Bible is often described as a warrior who wins battles for his people. Listen to how this name is used in Isaiah 49:25-26, "[F]or I will contend with those who contend with you, and I will save your children.... Then all flesh shall know that I am the LORD your Saviour, and your Redeemers, the Mighty One of Jacob." This is the God who enabled Joseph's "bow to remain unmoved" and by whom "his arms were made agile." The "Mighty One of Jacob" is a warrior who strengthens his people in battle. And this is what Jesus does for those who trust in him as well. So, when Paul tells NT Christians to put on the whole armor of God in Ephesians 6 he says "Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might."

Jacob also refers to the God who helped Joseph live a fruitful life as the Shepherd. Back in chapter 48:15, Jacob had referred to God as "the God who has been my shepherd all my life long to this day." Now he is saying that God has been Joseph's Shepherd as well. What a wonderful image is this idea of a shepherd to refer to God as the one who guides and cares for his people! "The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want, He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for

his name's sake" (Psalm 23:1-3). Notice that God as Joseph's Shepherd did not give Joseph an easy life. Joseph's Shepherd led him down some very difficult paths. But still he was with Joseph every step of the way and we see in Joseph's story how God was leading Joseph to a good place.

Jesus is our Shepherd. He tells in John 10:3 that, "The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out." And in John 10:11 he says, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." The God who was with Joseph is the God who became flesh and dwelt among us and who laid down his life for his sheep and who calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. This is who God is for his people even though he often leads them on difficult paths.

"The Stone of Israel" is less clear. It is true that God is sometimes called a Rock, but that is a different word in the Hebrew. The word that is translated "Stone" here refers to a stone that has been worked on by man to be used in the building or a memorial. The best guess is that Jacob is referring to the stone that he had erected at Bethel as a memorial of God reaffirming his promises to him. If that is so then Jacob is referring to God's faithfulness to his promises.

Indeed, Joseph had been kept and sustained by the promise of God. Remember how at the beginning of the story God had given Joseph a couple of dreams that indicated that one day his family would bow down to him. He would not have known at that point how those dreams were going to be fulfilled, but they would have given him hope during his dark days as a slave that God had a plan for his life beyond his slavery. And he would have been sustained by the promise inherent in those dreams.

The people of God are people whose lives are sustained by the promises of God. And so, reminders of God's promises are an important part of his way with us. We have baptism and the Lord's Supper which are given to us in part to confirm to us the promises of God. Like Joseph we sometimes go through difficult times, but we have the promises of God that give us hope because we know that God has a glorious future in store for us.

Then Jacob refers to the God who had strengthened Joseph as “the God of your father who will help you,” and, “the Almighty who will bless you....” In both of these ways of referring to God the focus is on the covenant promises made to Abraham, and reaffirmed to Isaac and Jacob. In Genesis 35:11-12, God had said to Jacob, “I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply. A nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall come from your own body.”¹²“The land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you, and I will give the land to your offspring after you.””

The God who had been with Joseph and who had helped him to live a fruitful life in difficult circumstances was the God of his father and the God of his grandfather Isaac and the God of his great grandfather Abraham. And a number of times when God spoke to the patriarchs of the promise that he had made to them he referred to himself as God Almighty. When he was about to formalize the promise in a covenant, God said to Abraham in Genesis 17:1-2, “I am God Almighty, walk before me, and be blameless, that I may make my covenant between me and you and may multiply you greatly.” When God reaffirmed the promise to Jacob he said, “I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply.” So, when Jacob in his blessing to Joseph refers to God as “the God of your father who will help you,” [and] “the Almighty who will bless you...” he is thinking of the fact that God had referred to himself as “God Almighty” when he had reaffirmed those promises which drive the history of Israel, the history which leads to Jesus Christ.

The great promises of God are made by God Almighty. What an encouragement that is! Joseph had been sustained in his struggles by God Almighty. God Almighty is the God of the promises. No one or nothing is able to keep him from fulfilling his promises because he is almighty. That is a great comfort for us as those promises have not yet been completely fulfilled. They have been fulfilled in amazing ways in the history of Israel and in Jesus Christ, but their ultimate fulfillment is still before us in the renewal of all things when Jesus returns. The great guarantee behind those promises is that fact that the one who made them is God Almighty.

We will spend the rest of our time on the blessings that Jacob now pronounces on Joseph. These are recorded in verses 25-26. Joseph had been strengthened, "25by the God of your father who will help you, by the Almighty who will bless you with blessings of heaven above, blessings of the deep that crouches beneath, blessings of the breasts and of the womb. 26The blessings of your father are mighty beyond the blessings of my parents, up to the bounties of the everlasting hills. May they be on the head of Joseph, and on the brow of him who was set apart from his brothers."

The words "bless" or "blessings" are used 6 times in these two verses. God through Jacob is promising to bless Joseph and his offspring in a number of ways. We will spend the rest of our time this evening considering these blessings and what they mean for us. First, Jacob says that the Almighty will bless Joseph "with blessings of heaven above, blessings of the deep that crouches beneath...." This is an allusion to the fruitfulness of the earth as God created it. When God created he separated the waters above from the waters beneath. About this the Reformed Study Bible says about this, "During the second and third creative days, the watery deep is structured into a benevolent system of rain clouds and springs and rivers." This is behind the imagery of the first part of Jacob's blessing for Joseph when he speaks about the "blessings of heaven" and "blessings of the deep." The Reformed Study Bible says, "Blessings given mankind at creation were concentrated on Joseph." So, this part of the blessing has to do with plenty of rain and moisture in the earth so that the crops will grow.

Then Jacob speaks of "blessings of the breasts and of the womb." This too is related to the blessings of creation. In Genesis 1:22 God blesses the animals and says, "Be fruitful and multiply..." And in Genesis 1:28 God blessed mankind and says, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth...." So, God is blessing Joseph with the blessings that he gave to humanity before the fall. In the blessings that he pronounces upon Joseph he is alluding to the blessings given at the time of creation.

Verse 26 says, "The blessings of your father are mighty beyond the blessings of my parents up to the bounties of the everlasting hills. Jacob is saying that the blessings he received surpassed that of his father and

grandfather. He seems to be alluding to his many wives and children and his prosperity. And he was passing on that blessing to Joseph. “[U]p to the bounties of the everlasting hills.” That is a way of referring to hills and mountains covered with crops and forests. Moses in his blessings upon the 12 tribes recorded in Deuteronomy 33 makes clear what Jacob means here. He writes that the tribe of Joseph will be blessed with “the finest produce of the ancient mountains and the abundance of the everlasting hills.”

Then Jacob ends with a prayer, “May they be on the head of Joseph, and on the brow of him who was set apart from his brothers.” The blessings that Jacob has spoken were a pronouncement – a promise from God, but Jacob also prays for their fulfillment.

Now you will notice that these blessing are this-worldly blessings – blessings of rain and good crops – blessings of many offspring for people and for animals. These are blessings having to do with prosperity and flourishing in the promised land. These blessings are looking forward to the land of Canaan which, we are repeatedly told, was a land flowing with milk and honey. We have similar blessings pronounced upon the people of Israel in Deuteronomy as well as other places in the OT. Listen to these words from Deuteronomy 7:12–15, ¹²“And because you listen to these rules and keep and do them, the Lord your God will keep with you the covenant and the steadfast love that he swore to your fathers. ¹³He will love you, bless you, and multiply you. He will also bless the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground, your grain and your wine and your oil, the increase of your herds and the young of your flock, in the land that he swore to your fathers to give you. ¹⁴You shall be blessed above all peoples. There shall not be male or female barren among you or among your livestock. ¹⁵And the Lord will take away from you all sickness, and none of the evil diseases of Egypt, which you knew, will he inflict on you, but he will lay them on all who hate you.”

Now notice that this blessing is conditional on obedience. There is always a conditional aspect to God’s promises. Even though salvation is by grace and God’s dealings with us are rooted in grace, there is always a conditional aspect in that we are called to trust and obey. We have

noticed these blessings that Jacob pronounced upon his sons were very much affected by the way that those sons had lived their lives.

But what I would like us to focus on is the this-worldly nature of these blessings. The blessing that Jacob pronounced upon Joseph was abundant crops and many babies and general flourishing in this life. That was the nature of the blessing that God promised to Israel before she entered the promised land if she would keep his commands.

What is the application of this for us? Does this mean that if we are obedient to God we will be blessed with prosperity and this-worldly success? Do these texts support the prosperity gospel that teaches that God wants his people to experience wealth and affluence? What are we to make of these OT passages that speak about God's blessing in terms of health and prosperity and success?

One thing that we have to keep in mind is that these blessings were always given in the context of the covenant relationship between God and his people. All of these this-worldly blessings would only be experienced within the context of the relationship between God and his people. The overall picture that these blessings give is not just material prosperity, but prosperity while living in the land with God as their God. In the blessings that Jacob pronounced upon Joseph, all of these blessings come in the context of Joseph's relationship with God. The God who had been with Joseph throughout his life and had enabled him to live a fruitful life would continue to be with Joseph and his offspring in the future. These blessings though they are material in nature are rooted in the fundamental covenant blessing which is that God is the God of his people. These material blessings are the inseparably related to the covenant relationship between God and his people.

The second thing that we have to keep in mind when interpreting these promises of material blessings in the OT is that they are part of the typology of the OT witness to Jesus Christ and what he would accomplish. The picture of life in the promised land with God dwelling in the midst of his people and the people experiencing material prosperity and wellbeing draws on the garden of Eden and is a foreshadowing of the new creation where the curse of sin has been overcome through the life and death and resurrection of Jesus.

We know this to be so because of the way in which the NT interprets the fulfillment of these blessings. When the NT speaks about blessing it is speaking about eternal life in Christ which will come to its climax in the new creation. We see hints of the new creation in the healings that Jesus performed and in the miracles of huge amounts of wine or huge amounts of food. The language of blessing in the NT is focused on belonging to the kingdom of God and of living out the characteristics of kingdom citizens. Think of the beatitudes. This is how the blessings of the OT begin to be fulfilled for those who belong to Jesus' kingdom.

According to Jesus the poor in spirit are blessed for "theirs is the kingdom of heaven." And "those who mourn" and "the meek" and "those who hunger and thirst for righteousness" and "the merciful" and "the pure in heart" and "the peacemakers" and "those who are persecuted for righteousness sake." And what are the blessings? "The kingdom of heaven," being "comforted," "inherit[ing] the earth," being "satisfied," receiving "mercy," seeing "God," being called "sons of God," "the kingdom of heaven" and a great reward in heaven. (Matthew 5:3-11).

The blessings of the OT were material blessings, but at the heart of them was the relationship with God. The material blessings are symbols for the blessedness of belonging to the kingdom of God. They will be literally fulfilled in the material blessedness of the new heavens and the new earth. But in the NT the focus of the blessedness is on the relationship with God through Jesus Christ which is at the heart of all true blessings.

Consider some of the other NT verses that speak of blessing for the followers of Jesus. In Matthew 25 we are told that believers who gave food to the hungry and hospitality to the stranger will one day hear the words "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." Paul quotes David from Psalm 32 in Romans 4:8, "Blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin." In Ephesians 1:3 Paul writes, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places...." And in Revelation

19:9, "Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb."

So when we think of the blessings that Jacob pronounced upon Joseph, we must understand them in the light of the typology of the OT and how that typology is fulfilled in the NT. But the heart of both the types and the fulfillment in Christ is belonging to God and being right with God. In an article on blessings and cursing in the Bible one scholar writes, "NT teaching echoes the OT view of blessing and cursing as relational. The ultimate and only important blessing is that of belonging to God, being part of his people, a member of his family. The only real curse is being out relationship with God, outside of the community of blessing. In temporal contexts both blessings and curses can be described in material terms, but their material dimension is secondary. Although bad things can and do happen to those who belong to the kingdom, those who are part of God's people cannot be under the curse; rather they are blessed." (*New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*).

The fact is that material blessings in the NT are very much a secondary concern. There are many warnings addressed to the rich. There are many comforts for the poor. We are told not to lay up treasures for ourselves on earth, but rather in heaven. We are pilgrims passing through and we are to look for "the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God." The hope of the whole Bible but with greater clarity in the NT is "a better country, that is a heavenly one." The greatest blessings are peace with God through Jesus Christ, belonging to the family of God, having God as our Father and Jesus as our elder brother and the satisfactions of living not for ourselves, but for the one who gave his life for us and who rose from the dead.

Jesus gives us the perspective we should have on material things. Matthew 6:33 "But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you." Our heavenly Father knows what we need, and Jesus assures us here that he will provide. "All these things will be added to you." Paul tells us in 1 Timothy 6:6-8, "6But godliness with contentment is great gain, 7for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. 8But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content."

Most of us have received much in the way of material prosperity. And we can be thankful for that. But it is not necessarily a blessing. It is also a temptation. Paul also writes in 1 Timothy 6, verses 9-11, "⁹But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. ¹⁰For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs. ¹¹But as for you, O man of God, flee these things. Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness."

Prosperity is only a blessing if it is not too important to us. It is only a blessing if it is less important to us than God and his kingdom. It is only a blessing if we are generous with it. It is only a blessing if we are not greedy and self-indulgent. It is only a blessing if we are seeking first the kingdom of God.

The fulfillment of the types is much richer than the types. The land flowing with milk and honey was a type of the blessedness of the kingdom of God. That blessedness is what Jesus died to achieve for us: a loving relationship with God rather than alienation from God, living for God rather than living for self, seeking to be more like Jesus which is life rather than going our own way which is death.

Let us treasure the blessings that are ours in Christ and let us enter more and more into the enjoyment of them.