

The Joseph Story | Broken Family/Beautiful Plan The End of Jacob's Journey (Part Two)

Genesis 48

November 3, 2013

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. ² When it was told to Jacob, "Behold, your son Joseph has come to you," Israel collected his strength and sat up in the bed. ³ Then Jacob said to Joseph, "God Almighty appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan and blessed me, ⁴ and He said to me, 'Behold, I will make you fruitful and numerous, and I will make you a company of peoples, and will give this land to your descendants after you for an everlasting possession.' ⁵ "Now 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. ⁶ "But your offspring that have been born after them shall be yours; they shall be called by the names of their brothers in their inheritance. ⁷ "Now 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; and I buried her there on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem)."

⁸ When Israel saw Joseph's sons, he said, "Who are these?" ⁹ Joseph said to his father, "They are my sons, whom God has given me here." So he said, "Bring them to me, please, that I may bless them." ¹⁰ Now the eyes of Israel were so dim from age that he could not see. Then Joseph brought them close to him, and he kissed them and embraced them. ¹¹ Israel said to Joseph, "I never expected to see your face, and behold, God has let me see your children as well." ¹² Then Joseph took them from his knees, and bowed with his face to the ground. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ But Israel stretched out his right hand and laid 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. ¹⁵ 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, ¹⁶ The angel who has redeemed me from all evil, Bless the lads; 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."

¹⁷ When Joseph saw that his father laid his right hand on Ephraim's head, it displeased him; and he grasped his father's hand to remove it from Ephraim's head to Manasseh's head. ¹⁸ Joseph said to his father, "Not so, my father, for this one is the firstborn. Place your right hand on his head." ¹⁹ But 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." ²⁰ He blessed them that day, saying, "By you Israel will pronounce blessing, saying, 'May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh!'" Thus he put Ephraim before Manasseh. ²¹ Then 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. ²² "I give you one portion more than your brothers, which I took from the hand of the Amorite with my sword and my bow."

We've been looking at the long, concluding section of The Book of Genesis...and this section began with the words "These are the generations of Jacob..." – meaning, "this is the story of the family of Jacob".

We've seen that this family is a broken family...with multiple marriages and parental favoritism and sibling rivalry and incest and deceit and domestic violence...and GUILT...not "Father Knows Best" or "Leave it to Beaver"...This family has issues.

And even though we've titled this long section, "the Joseph Story" BECAUSE, he was the favored son of the twelve...but the section also addresses Judah (the son God had chosen to lead – the head of the tribe from which the Messiah would be born) and ALSO...don't forget old Jacob. He's been alive all these years when Joseph was away – kidnapped and sent into slavery in Egypt...AND, as we saw last week, Jacob has now come back into the spotlight...has gone DOWN to Egypt himself (though NOT BY himself...God went down WITH Jacob)...AND IN TODAY'S READING, Jacob has now lived in Egypt some 17 years... and is sick and dying...and the camera...moves OFF Joseph...and back to old Jacob.

He is, after all, the most frequently mentioned character in the Book of Genesis (more than Isaac, Joseph or even Abraham). He is, humanly speaking, the main character of Genesis. And NOW, with the spotlight on Jacob we're forced to remember...his long life...that took up so much of this book.

I want to think about what God has DONE to Jacob over all these years, how Jacob's changed and aged well...AND how Joseph (for all that he's endured) is still not where Jacob is. So let's look at:

#1 – Jacob's Noteworthy Anatomy

#2– Joseph's Problematic Proficiency

I have to acknowledge my debt to a Scottish minister named Sinclair Fergusson for pointing out the significance of Jacob's anatomy in this scene.

If Martin Scorsese or Ron Howard were directing a movie of this scene, they may begin by zooming in on Jacob's eyes... Those eyes have seen a lot in his day... We remember when Jacob saw Esau coming with his armies from FAR AWAY and must have thought, "Uh oh! We're all gonna die" Genesis 33: "Then Jacob lifted his eyes and looked, and behold, Esau was coming, and four hundred men with him" (It turned out, Esau just wanted to hug Jacob) – all that his eyes had seen!

But now maybe they're very watery...unable to focus and staring off into nowhere because he's all but blind...like his own father, Isaac was blind, on that fateful day when Jacob stole the blessing.

And when Joseph brings his sons (btw about 20 yrs old) when Joseph brings Ephraim and Manasseh to be blessed... to ensure that even though they were born in Egypt that they're STILL considered part of this big family...and Jacob's EYES can't see them.

But then you come to what would Rembrandt made the focal point of his rendering of this scene, the very center and brightest point in the painting (1656): Jacob's hands, stretched out to bless the sons of Joseph and he places the right hand on the younger child – NOT the way it's supposed to be done – against protocol! Father, move your hand!

You may remember that the first time we meet the word, "Jacob" in the Bible, THIS hand is also mentioned. In the moment the twins were born, Esau and Jacob, we read "And afterward Esau's brother came forth with his HAND holding on to Esau's heel, so his name was called Jacob..." (Gen 25.26) He was named, "Snatcher", "Grabber" or "Usurper" because his hand held the heel of his twin brother at birth.

He used those hands to stir that red lentil stew that he used to take advantage of his hungry brother (25).

Later, he covered these same hands in goatskin, to deceive his own blind father. He used those hands to wrestle the angel...And these hands had to hold that multi-colored coat, Joseph's supervisor's uniform that was covered in blood and the cold heartless sons deceiving with the words, "We found this; please examine it to see whether it is your son's tunic or not." (Gen 37.32)

And then, with those hands, Jacob the father bereft of his cherished son, who is, in his mind, dead and eaten by wolves, Jacob takes those hands and tears his clothes and refuses to be comforted and his eyes are a fountain of tears.

And NOW those same eyes are almost blind and those same hands are extended to his grandson's heads to bless them.

But think also of Jacob's legs. His grandsons are now kneeling or maybe sitting on his bed by his knees. The old man needs help standing... but those legs haven't been all that strong for a long time. It was in that wrestling match with the angel that Jacob came away with a permanent limp (32). All his life, whenever he traveled (which was a lot!) always picture him LIMPING. It was God's gift to him so that he would never forget his own weakness and would always have to lean on God's promise and God's strength the way people lean on a cane or crutch.

And finally consider old Jacob's mouth, so often misused to deceive but now He uses that mouth to tell his story to Joseph and his sons, the story of God's faithfulness ...how he met

God at Bethel or Luz (as it was called) and the vision of the ladder or doorway from the physical world into the spiritual world...angels coming and going on this stairway/portal.

His mouth that had often lied and manipulated is now telling how God had given him true love in Rachel, Joseph's mother...and how she'd died...and was buried in Bethlehem...and then how Joseph was taken from him and given up as dead..."But now, God has allowed me to see you AND YOUR SONS...and I will adopt them as my own so that they will get the inheritance of sons...This will be YOUR DOUBLE portion, Joseph."

And then, with his mouth, he prepares to bless these sons; Jacob refers to the God of his fathers as the "God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day" It's the first time in the Bible that God is described as a shepherd (and we remember that the Egyptians LOATHE shepherds).

And then as Jacob extends his hands, to bless his grandsons (and give them the elevated status of SONS) he deliberately places his right hand on the head of the younger son...and Joseph blows a gasket. That's NOT the way it's DONE. That's against protocol...not orderly...not traditional...not conventional. It's NOT going to happen - NOT on MY watch!

Joseph has become a VERY proficient manager. Joseph has managed the resources of Egypt and saved the world...Joseph is a savior and he knows how these things work! AND he reaches out and snatches the hand of Jacob whose name means "snatcher" – that's ironic.

And it's a deeply disrespectful move...but he just can't help himself because this is simply NOT the way that blessings work!

And one reason I'm ok with describing Joseph this way, like a bit of a control freak, is that in the last chapter (and we skipped it last week) Joseph settles his people in Goshen (the gated community in the gently rolling hills of East Egypt, full clubhouse access and townhomes starting in the low 200s!) Jacob settles his family there and gives them all the food they want...Meanwhile most of Egypt is starving and he's collecting all their money (probably making his boss, the Pharaoh very happy!) and then he collects all their livestock... and then he collects all their land and then conscripts/drafts all the Egyptians as slaves of Pharaoh...And he does that because HE'S THE CONSUMMATE manager... He has learned to rely on protocol and to depend on his own gifts and proficiency ...and he is really GOOD!

Jacob, on the other hand, is seasoned and he's been mellowed by God's work in his life over these many decades. And he's not much into protocol and control. He sees that God has His own plan...and that our schemes and control and power-plays often get in the way (BTW – how do think all those Egyptians felt about Joseph's people when the famine ended and the Egyptians were thin and penniless and Joseph's people were fat, had all the jobs and lived in that gated community? Joseph's proficiency was paving the way for Israel's enslavement!)

But Jacob looks at his proficient son with real compassion. “Joseph, you’re competency is getting in the way... I know, you’re trusting in your gifts instead of trusting the Giver, I know, you can’t see like I can see. (see 19)”

Funny, because, Jacob can’t see at all – he’s blind – but he actually sees more clearly than Joseph.

And so, the blessing continues...Joseph doesn’t get it... but he will. At this point, he’s an unbelieving believer...but God won’t leave him there.

See, in the same way we look at Jacob’s deathbed anatomy and it tells the story...so the hymn writer, Isaac Watts, bids us look at Jacob’s Savior:

“See from His head, His hands,
His feet; Sorrow and love flow mingled down;
Did e’er such love and sorrow meet?
Or thorns compose so rich a crown?”

Look at the deathbed anatomy of Jesus Christ – it tells an even better Story!

Jacob is no longer a snatcher... he’s a sheep...he’s been led and he’s been redeemed. Despite his attempts to make things happen (often things that God had PROMISED would happen!) but despite his cajoling and controlling, Jacob looks back on his life and sees that God was working all things for Jacob’s good...God was never depending on Jacob – and God doesn’t need Joseph and his proficiency...but Joseph has lost sight of the Story!

Joseph’s proficiency is getting in the way. He relied on managerial prowess to keep his people in that good neighborhood and well fed and well employed... and Joseph, unwittingly has done great harm and has become the snatcher that Jacob used to be! At this point, he’s an unbelieving believer...but don’t worry, God won’t leave him there.

Jacob on the other hand, is fixated on the Story, the God who has guided him through his whole life and the God whose presence of angel or appearance rescued Jacob again and again. Because, in this moment of clarity, on his deathbed, BECAUSE he’s focused on the Shepherd and Redeemer – that’s why he blesses the least likely. He has seen it with his blind eyes that God doesn’t respond to our competencies and controllings – we respond to His plan, His rescue, His leading, His faithfulness.

AND FOR US: the anatomy of Jacob is noteworthy but the anatomy of our Redeemer and Shepherd speaks with power to change us – “see from His head, His hands, His feet sorrow and love flow mingled down”

Are you a bit of a control-freak? Is trusting in your own competence and ability robbing you of peace and preventing you from blessing others?

THINK OF and BELIEVE ON Jesus Christ – His eyes that once were full of tears and blood and sweat as He dies in the place of sinners...those eyes are described in Revelation as being like a burning fire (Rev. 1.14) – able to see into our souls and sort us out.

HIS HANDS were the only ones strong enough to keep all the Law of God and able to perfectly love people and love God – He put those hands to the plow for US, He obeyed His own Law for everyone who believes Him.

And those same hands were strong enough to carry our sin and were then torn by the nails that held Him to the cursed tree...He was cursed so we could be blessed...The angel/the incarnation of God, Jesus Christ, who redeemed me from all evil.

When this is our focus, as it was for Jacob, we can give up the snatching and manipulating and controlling and the attempts to use our gifts and competencies to power over people. Instead we can become “blessers” like Jacob, we can represent Jesus Christ to the people around us; we can take up the Cross and give away our lives for others.

When we receive Him and begin to believe...when we are like Jacob, the BELIEVING believer, then we can follow the Shepherd who became a Lamb for us...**AND** we follow with a limp.