



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Let Go

Genesis 46:1-47:12

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One of the things you can't help but notice about the life of Joseph is how dramatically it points us to Christ. Joseph's reconciliation with his brothers, which we saw in the last chapter, foreshadows the reconciliation that Jesus has made possible for us. But consider that Joseph's story doesn't end with his being reconciled with his brothers in Egypt. They were in danger of death and through Joseph they were given life. But that wasn't the end of it. Joseph sent them home to deliver the good news to their father and to the rest of their family: Joseph, whom you thought was dead, is *alive*, he has been *exalted* to the right hand of Pharaoh, and he's ready to *receive* our entire family if we will only come to him.

Does the good news Joseph sent home with his brothers sound like some other good news we know? Joseph's offer of physical and earthly blessings in Egypt foreshadows the spiritual and eternal blessings that are ours in Christ Jesus. The bread that Joseph offered to his brothers foreshadows the bread that Jesus offers us each week as we come to his Table. But Joseph's commission of his brothers to carry the good news back to Canaan also foreshadows the commission that Jesus has given us: to declare to the nations the good news that he who was dead has been raised and is *alive*, that he has been *exalted* and now

reigns at the right hand of his Father, and that he will *receive* all who take hold of his offer of life by passing through the waters of baptism.

And yet that good news is not always easy to accept. It requires giving up the very things we've been clinging to for life and then when we've instead taken to clinging to Jesus, he sends us out to declare the good news to all those who are still clinging to false gods and to idols. Consider that when Pharaoh sent his invitation to Jacob, he also told him: "Have no concern for your goods, for the best of all the land of Egypt is yours" (Genesis 45:20). Christ calls us to do the same. But how much of our old "goods" do we keep dragging around with us, unwilling to give them up for the better things that are ours in Christ? Look now at Chapter 46 and notice how Jacob responds to Pharaoh's invitation.

So Israel took his journey with all that he had and came to Beersheba, and offered sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac. (Genesis 46:1)

Jacob headed down to Egypt, but he wasn't willing to give up his possessions. No doubt, he simply couldn't imagine the blessings that waited for him in Egypt. He's stepping out in faith, but it's a faltering faith. And we see this as he stops at Beersheba. This was effectively the southern border of the land God had promised to him. This was the line, which when crossed by his ancestors, had got them into trouble. To leave the promised land had always been to abandon the covenant. And so Jacob stops at the altar his father had built and he offers a sacrifice. His sacrifice is meant to open a line

of communication between himself and God. He may simply have been seeking God's blessing, but more likely, he was seeking confirmation that this was the right thing to do.

And God spoke to Israel in visions of the night and said, "Jacob, Jacob." And he said, "Here I am." Then he said, "I am God, the God of your father. Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for there I will make you into a great nation. I myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you up again, and Joseph's hand shall close your eyes." (Genesis 46:2-4)

Notice how God answers. First, he speaks to Jacob as the "God of your father". This is a new title, but it's appropriate as Jacob leaves the promised land behind. It's a reminder that this is the God of the covenant speaking to him—the same God who had made promises to Abraham and to Isaac. Those promises have not been forgotten. In that title alone God stresses to Jacob that his sojourn in Egypt is all part of his covenant plan. In fact, God connects Jacob's trip to Egypt with the very words he had spoken to Abraham the night he had established the covenant. Think back to that night when God had come to Abraham as the torch and the smoking pot, passing between the animal carcasses Abraham had cut in two, sealing his covenant. In Genesis 15:13 he had said, "Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years." No doubt there had been questions about this sojourn in a foreign land for four generations—ever since Abraham. Now God fills in the

gap, explaining that this trip to Egypt will fulfil what he had told Abraham in the beginning. This is all part of the plan. God is in control.

These were words of assurance to Jacob, but consider what they meant to later generations. As the Hebrews sat around their campfires in Sinai and during their wandering in the wilderness telling these stories, they were assured that their sojourn and their slavery in Egypt were all part of God's covenant plan. And consider too the Jews, living in exile in Babylon and then returning to the promised land, but still living under foreign rule—still in exile, even if in their own land. They were the ones who edited and compiled these stories—this history of the covenant people—and in God's assurances to Jacob that the exile in Egypt was all a part of his plan, they received assurance that their own exile was a part of God's plan too—that they had not been abandoned.

And notice, God tells Jacob: "I will go down with you to Egypt". As God was with Jacob throughout his life and even during his exile in Paddam-aram; as God was with Joseph during his years in slavery and in prison; God will continue to be with his people—even in a foreign land. God asserts his sovereignty over the gods of Egypt—invading their territory and setting the scene for the plagues and for the exodus.

And in God's promise to Jacob that he would bring him up again from Egypt, he points back to the promise made to Abraham in Genesis 15:14: "I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall

come out with great possessions." God has a greater purpose. Jacob could only see his family's deliverance from famine, but God was looking at a much bigger picture in which Egypt provided a safe place for the covenant family to grow into the covenant nation. This is the last time God will speak directly to his people. Not until he meets Moses at the burning bush, four centuries later, will God speak to his people. And so here he sums up his covenant promises and gives them his assurance that he is and will continue to be with them.

And so with God's reassurance, Jacob crossed the border, leaving the promised land and heading towards Egypt. Verses 8-23 list the children and grandchildren of Jacob who went down to Egypt with him, beginning with the sons of Leah, then those of her maid, Zilpah. The list then goes on the sons of Rachel, and then to those of her maid, Bilhah. And it concludes in verses 26 and 27:

All the persons belonging to Jacob who came into Egypt, who were his own descendants, not including Jacob's sons' wives, were sixty-six persons in all. And the sons of Joseph, who were born to him in Egypt, were two. All the persons of the house of Jacob who came into Egypt were seventy.

It's interesting that the language used to describe Jacob and his family going down to Egypt parallels the language that was used earlier of Noah and his family going into the ark. Both the ark and the sojourn in Egypt are part of God's redemptive plans. The list isn't so much a genealogy as it is a list of "charter members" of the

covenant family. Er and Onan are included despite having been killed long before the journey to Egypt; Joseph and his sons, who were already there are included; and ten sons of Benjamin, who was only about thirty years old at the time, are listed. But it's in the way the storyteller finesses and manipulates this list to fill out the number *seventy* that we see the importance of it. It's a symbolic number: seven times ten, perfection times perfection. In other words, no one was forgotten; God's plan is working out perfectly in accord with his will.

And as the family arrived in Egypt, Jacob sent Judah ahead to meet Joseph. Judah, the one who was responsible for separating Jacob from his son, is now the one who makes the arrangements for their reunion. As much as Joseph is in the spotlight in these last chapters of Genesis, we see Judah being transformed and beginning to take on his role as leader of the covenant family, preparing the way for his descendants to lead the covenant nation.

He had sent Judah ahead of him to Joseph to show the way before him in Goshen, and they came into the land of Goshen. Then Joseph prepared his chariot and went up to meet Israel his father in Goshen. He presented himself to him and fell on his neck and wept on his neck a good while. Israel said to Joseph, "Now let me die, since I have seen your face and know that you are still alive." (Genesis 46:28-30)

Our English translation's "Joseph prepared his chariot" is subdued compared the Hebrew's "Joseph hitched his chariot". Joseph was

excited. The image we're given is of the great vizier of Egypt excitedly rushing out to hitch his own chariot so that he can go to meet his father. When he and Jacob meet they weep over each other in joy. And then Jacob speaks his own *Nunc dimittis*. Think of old Simeon in St. Luke's gospel, waiting each day in the temple for the coming of the Messiah. He had been promised that he would see the Saviour before he died and on that day when he encountered Joseph, Mary, and their baby he sang out:

*Lord, now lettest thou thy servant
depart in peace,
according to your word.
For mine eyes have seen
thy salvation,
which thou hast prepared
before the face of all people;
to be a light to lighten the
Gentiles,
and to be the glory of thy
people Israel.*

We sing those words in Evening Prayer, but they were prefigured long before Simeon, on that day when Jacob was reunited with his son and God's promise was fulfilled.

But on being reunited with his brothers, Joseph also gives them instructions for their meeting with Pharaoh. Look at verses 31-34:

Joseph said to his brothers and to his father's household, "I will go up and tell Pharaoh and will say to him, 'My brothers and my father's household, who were in the land of Canaan, have come to me. And the men are shepherds, for they have been keepers of livestock, and they have brought their flocks and their herds and

all that they have.' When Pharaoh calls you and says, 'What is your occupation?' you shall say, 'Your servants have been keepers of livestock from our youth even until now, both we and our fathers,' in order that you may dwell in the land of Goshen, for every shepherd is an abomination to the Egyptians."

Why does Joseph tell them to say that they're shepherds—other than that it's the truth—and why were shepherds an abomination to the Egyptians? We don't have any evidence that the Egyptians despised shepherds as shepherds. What's most likely is that the settled and urban Egyptians didn't trust nomadic foreigners. They would have been right to distrust foreign nomads. About a century later, Egypt was invaded by large number of Semitic peoples called Hyksos, who were also shepherds. The Hyksos took control of Egypt and held onto that power for two centuries. Joseph may have wanted his family to be associated with these people so that the Egyptians would keep them on the fringe. This was God's plan after all: to put the covenant family in a place where they would not be assimilated and lose their identity.

Joseph's brothers say exactly what he tells them to say to Pharaoh and in 47:5-6 we see his response:

Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Your father and your brothers have come to you. The land of Egypt is before you. Settle your father and your brothers in the best of the land. Let them settle in the land of Goshen, and if you know any able men among them, put them in charge of my livestock."

And then Joseph presents his father. Picture Jacob, 130 years old, being helped into Pharaoh's audience chamber by Joseph, perhaps dressed in new finery, but looking awkward and out of place in it and still stinking of sheep.

Then Joseph brought in Jacob his father and stood him before Pharaoh, and Jacob blessed Pharaoh. And Pharaoh said to Jacob, "How many are the days of the years of your life?" And Jacob said to Pharaoh, "The days of the years of my sojourning are 130 years. Few and evil have been the days of the years of my life, and they have not attained to the days of the years of the life of my fathers in the days of their sojourning." And Jacob blessed Pharaoh and went out from the presence of Pharaoh. Then Joseph settled his father and his brothers and gave them a possession in the land of Egypt, in the best of the land, in the land of Rameses, as Pharaoh had commanded. And Joseph provided his father, his brothers, and all his father's household with food, according to the number of their dependents.

This is a remarkable scene. Old Jacob enters Pharaoh's presence, probably supported or maybe even carried by his sons. Pharaoh has blessed Jacob with the best of Egypt, but Jacob proceeds to bless Pharaoh in return. We see his faith in God's promises at work. Abraham's family was to be a blessing to the nations. Jacob knew that. And here we see him fulfilling God's covenant as he gives his patriarchal blessing to the king of Egypt. In God's economy,

this simple shepherd, who was head of the covenant family, outranked the great king. And on some level, in faith, he knew it and fulfilled his calling to be a blessing to the nations. In faith, Jacob trusted that God knew what he was doing: that he was—and is—sovereign and that his plans are for the ultimate good of his people

Brothers and sisters, Jacob reminds us—as we’ve seen all along—that we need to have a wide view of God’s providence. I was thinking this week of the last stanza in Frederick William Faber’s well-known hymn “There’s a wideness in God’s mercy”. The words of the hymn express the incomprehensible depths of God’s love for sinners, finishing with the words, “For the love of God is broader than the measure of man’s mind.” God’s loving plans are beyond the mind of mere human beings to fathom. The more we come to know God through his Word and the more we experience his loving grace in our lives, the deeper we explore the depths of his love, but ultimately there is no way for any of us to fully plumb its full depth.

There’s a very real sense in which God’s love is a great unknown. And since we struggle to trust that which we do not know, we too often struggle and fight against God’s love—against his plans, his providence, his sovereignty. He promises us the best he has to offer, but all we can see is what we’ve currently got in our hands. And so we choose to trust what we know. Like Jacob invited to live on the hospitality of the king of Egypt and yet carting his worthless goods all the way from Canaan, we hold onto what we’ve got. And

because our faith is so tightly clenched on what we can see, we never take hold of the better things God has for us that we can’t see. As C. S. Lewis wrote, “We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.”¹

We experience things in life that, from our limited perspective, are hard to reconcile with what we know of God’s love. The little child being pulled away from the fun of making mud pies in the slum might kick and scream. He has no concept of what awaits him at the sea. And of course when he gets there he can’t imagine why he put up such a fuss and why he was so attached to his mud pies. And so with us. Brothers and sisters, God has revealed enough of himself—of his love, his wisdom, and the perfection of his goodness—that we can trust him. And so let us trust him. Let us be ready to walk away from our mud pies when he calls, knowing that even if giving them up is hard and even if the path to the seaside is even harder, that better things await us in his love. Let us remember that God not only walks with us through our trials and temptations and our sufferings and sorrows, but that he is leading us to ultimately to glory.

And brothers and sisters, remember that our calling is the same as Jacob’s: to bless the nations through the proclamation of the good news that Jesus Christ is

Lord. How can we proclaim the good news if we haven’t, ourselves, grasped hold of it? Jacob could only bless Pharaoh by trusting in God’s good plan, by giving up his mud pies and receiving the gift of a holiday at the sea. But once he stepped out in faith and once he had experienced the goodness of God, then he could fulfil the commission that God had given him. Again, so with us. So long as we lack the faith to trust God, so long as we refuse to submit fully to his lordship, our witness will never be what it should be. So long as we insist on glorying in the mud, our witness to the world will only be an absurd proclamation of the goodness of mud. We witness what we hold dear and what we trust. Think about that. Does your life and your faith witness earthly things and the sinful desires of the flesh or does it witness heavenly things and the kingdom of God?

Let us pray: Loving Father, we confess that we are often so set on what we can see that we are unwilling to accept in faith those good things you offer that we haven’t yet seen. Strengthen our faith, Lord. As we study and mediate on your holy Word, as we live in covenanted community with each other in your church, as we partake of the grace offered in your Sacraments, and as we experience your goodness in our lives, build up our faith in you that we might follow where you lead and be always assured of your presence with us and your unfailing goodness. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

¹ *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Macmillan, 1942=9), page 2.