

In the Beginning: A Study of Genesis

Session 12: "As He Was With Our Fathers" (March 27, 2022)

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Focus Verses: Genesis 48:1-16

Recommended Reading: Genesis 47-50



Lesson Summary:

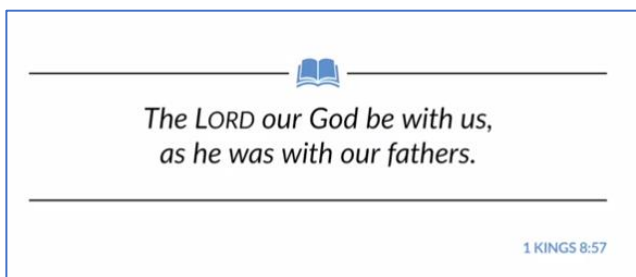
The book of Genesis ends with a very familiar theme: the relationship between fathers and sons and the handing on of faith from one generation to the next. In Genesis 48, Joseph blesses the two sons of Joseph. As we'll see, this blessing isn't just for them, but for the many generations that will follow, as a perpetual reminder to them that Egypt is not their true home and that they are a family whose lives are defined by hope in the future promises of God.

A number of years ago, I made a surprising discovery. At least it was surprising to me. It was when I was living in the city of Boston. Most days during the week, I would walk past this old cemetery that had a wrought iron fence around it. And on top of the fence, right in the middle, there was an emblem that turned out to be the seal of the city itself. Well, as you might imagine, I spent a couple of years walking past that fence without really paying any attention to the wording on the seal. But one day I stopped and looked at it and noticed a motto written in Latin, which turned out to be the motto of Boston:

"Sicut Patribus Sit Deus Nobis"

which would translate into English as "God be with us as he was with our fathers."

Now, that phrase sounded familiar, and I looked it up later and realized it's actually the quotation of something King Solomon says when he is blessing the people of Israel at the dedication of the temple.



Maybe that shouldn't have surprised me, but it did, because the Boston that I know is not a particularly religious city. To the contrary, it's quite secular. Nevertheless, the official motto adorning the seal of the city is a blessing uttered by King Solomon

thousands of years before the city of Boston was even founded.

And yet there's something very appropriate about it, isn't there? It's a fitting motto for a city in many ways, because what those words do is they bind together two realities - the past and the future.

Of course, they're focused on the future and the hope that the future will be safe and prosperous. But the basis of their hope lies in the past. In the past, God has shown himself to be faithful to us and we have prospered. Therefore, for that reason, we have confidence to move forward into the future with the prayer "may God be with us as He was with our fathers."

I mentioned this motto not because I want to talk about the history of New England or American cities, but because I think that the sentiment it expresses is very similar to the spirit that we find in the book of Genesis. Genesis is a book about the past. As I said in the very beginning, in the very first session of this study, this is a book about beginnings. That was true even when the book was first written. By the time the first Israelites read this book everything it talks about was already ancient history. But the purpose of Genesis is not just to tell us some interesting stories about the past.


The purpose of this book, much like the purpose of the rest of Scripture, is to enable the people of God to live by faith and by hope as we trust in the promises of God in the present.

And that's exactly the attitude we find modeled for us when we come to the end of this book.

In Genesis 48, after Joseph's brothers and his father have moved and settled in Egypt, Joseph is told that his father, Jacob, is ill. So he brings his two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, to see their grandfather. You could tell just how sick and frail Jacob's body is because it says in verse two that he has to summon all the strength he has just to sit up in bed. And in verse ten, we're told that Jacob's eyes are dim and he cannot see.

Interestingly, this phrase is the exact same phrase used to describe the condition of Jacob's own father, Isaac, back in chapter 27. Back when Jacob had tricked his elderly and infirm father to give him the blessing that was meant for Esau. It's hard to imagine that Jacob doesn't remember that day when Joseph shows up with his two sons. When Joseph walks in and Jacob struggles to sit up and he can't see who's in front of him because of his failing eyesight, how could Jacob not think back to that day, so many years ago, when he had walked into a tent seeking the blessing of his own blind and aging father Isaac?

But Jacob makes no mention of that day. Instead, he begins to reminisce about something else:



God Almighty appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan and blessed me, and 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.'

GENESIS 48:3-4

What Jacob is remembering is the experience he had in Bethel ... or as he calls it here by its Canaanite name "Luz" - where God spoke to him in a vision and repeated the promise to him that he had made to his father, Isaac, and to his grandfather, Abraham.

And that's noteworthy. It's noteworthy that this is what Jacob chooses to recall for Joseph and Ephraim and Manasseh. Because, if you remember, Jacob spent most of his life as a young man and as an adult fighting and scheming and doing whatever he had to do to get what he wanted. And now that his beloved son has come to see him, you might think that's


what Jacob would want to talk to him about, about how hard he'd worked and everything he had to sacrifice to get his family where they are today. But he doesn't. He doesn't regale Joseph with stories about his hard won success or give Joseph advice on how to follow in his footsteps.

No. Instead, he reminds Joseph of the promise that he was given at Bethel. Because by this point in his life, Jacob has finally come to realize that it was never his own effort or his own hard work that defined the course of his life, but it was rather that promise. God had made a promise. And that promise is what came to dominate and define his life.

And now as he's facing his death, he wants to remind his children of that promise. Not just because it was important for him, but because as they look toward the future, he wants this to be the thing that gives them hope; hope that defines their future and what they desire and what they anticipate.

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*Jacob's purpose is to claim the next generation for this way of life ... to turn the **memory** of [the promise at Bethel] into a **hope** ... His final task before death is to see that hope continues to be the main business of his family.*

 WALTER BRUEGGEMANN

The Family Business - HOPE

I think that's a fascinating statement - that hope is the main business of this family. But it's true, isn't it? I mean, think about it. What has been the central driving force of this family for the last three generations? What has guided their dreams and their decisions? What has kept them going even when the odds seemed to be stacked against them? It's this promise of God.

At times the promise has seemed implausible, even impossible. Abraham and Sarah were both geriatrics by the time that their son Isaac appeared. Jacob, the chosen one, had to flee for his life from his brother and then was later threatened by his Uncle Laban and some stranger at the side of a river. And years later, his beloved son Joseph was killed and stolen

from him. At least that's what he was told. And it seemed for a while like Jacob had given up hope. But finally, he has learned to trust the promise God made him, just as his father and grandfather did before him.

And now he's trying to pass that down to his children - to teach them how to hope and what to hope for. And once again, that hope is threatened. But this time the threat is different. In the past, the threat came from disappointment and grief, but now it's something else. Now the thing that threatens Israel's faith isn't difficulty or disappointment. It's actually contentment, because now they've settled in Egypt and they're living a life that's comfortable and prosperous.

The Threat of Contentment

Joseph has made sure that they all have land and they're well fed and protected. And, you know, it would be the easiest thing in the world for them to say, "You know what? I know that dad and grandad and great-grandad said that God plans to give us the land of Canaan. But, you know, Egypt is pretty nice. Maybe we should just settle down here and enjoy life. Maybe that's really the blessing that God wants to give us."

I don't know whether that thought was in their minds, but I do think that the author of Genesis is aware of this danger. Notice the comment he makes in chapter 47, right before Joseph brings his sons to see Jacob.



Thus Israel settled in the land of Egypt, in the land of Goshen. And they gained possessions in it, and were fruitful and multiplied greatly.

GENESIS 47:27

And it's easy to read that comment and take it as a cause of celebration. I mean, after all the hardship that this family has experienced, isn't it a good thing that they're doing so well? Isn't this exactly the kind of blessing God had promised? Well, yes, in a way it

is a good thing for them. But it also poses a danger. Because, as Leon Kass notes:



All this prosperity and increase will make it very difficult for Israel to return to the Promised Land when the famine ends. Why will Israel want to go back to the promises of the Promised Land from a place that already seems to fulfill those promises?



LEON KASS

The book of Hebrews in the New Testament talks about what it means to live by faith. And it says that *those who live by faith are like strangers and exiles on the earth seeking a better homeland.*

For that reason, one of the great dangers to faith is settling. Finding contentment in something other than that "better homeland." It's one of the dangers that Egypt will pose to the family of Jacob.

Will they continue to hope for the promise of God, even when things seem to be going well? Although he never says it outright, this may be a part of the reason why Jacob does what he does; when Joseph brings him his two sons. It's an odd scene, to be honest, because one of the first things that Jacob says to Joseph is:



And 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.

GENESIS 48:5

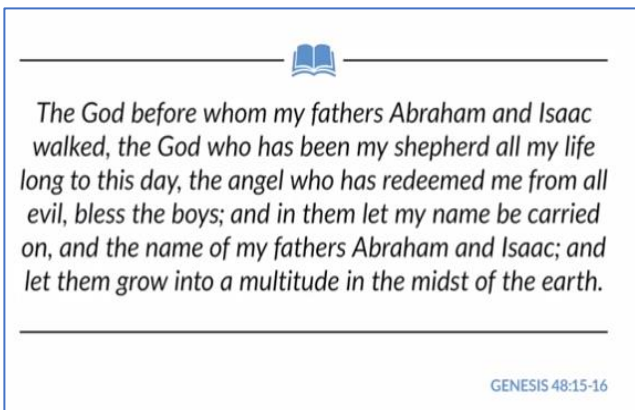
The implications are clear enough. Jacob is claiming Ephraim and Manasseh as his own, and he's saying that they will be treated as rightful heirs in the same way that Reuben and Simeon and the other brothers are. And if you're familiar with the history of Israel, you'll know that's exactly what happens. Ephraim

and Manasseh become tribes of Israel, just like the other ten sons of Jacob. So the implications of what's taking place are clear enough. The question is, why does Jacob do this?

Some scholars have suggested that maybe Jacob is motivated by his grief over Rachel, whom he mentions; the wife that he most loved. And maybe what he's doing is adopting Joseph's sons kind of as Rachel's, so that she would have the legacy of more children. That may be.

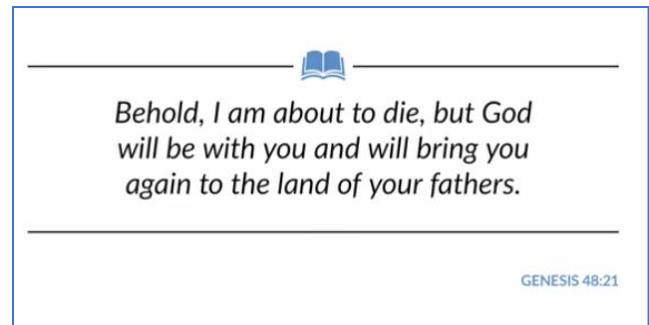
A better interpretation, I think, is to see what Jacob is doing here as a reminder to his children of who they really are and of what the hope is that defines their family. Ephraim and Manasseh were born in Egypt. Jacob mentions that. But the children of Israel are not Egyptians. They don't belong in Egypt, regardless of how well they may be doing there at the present. So Jacob adopts Ephraim and Manasseh as his own, as a reminder that no matter where they were born, they aren't Egyptians. They are members of a family who have been promised a better home.

Notice, too, what Jacob says when he actually blesses them.



His hope for them is that they will carry on the legacy of their family, that they and their children and their children's children will be a people whose lives are centered on the hope and promise given to Abraham. And as a way of inducting them into this life of hope, Jacob talks about the past. He talks about how God was with his father and grandfather, about how God had shepherded and protected him and redeemed him from evil.

And how does Jacob end this blessing to Ephraim and Manasseh?



God will be with you and will bring you again to the land of your fathers.

That is what Jacob wants Ephraim and Manasseh to remember. Yes, you were born in Egypt. Yes, Egypt is pleasant and easy and you are enjoying your life. But don't forget who you really are. Don't forget the promise of a land and a home that was given to your fathers. Don't forget how God was with them, how he kept his promises to them; how He provided for them and redeemed them. And know that just as he was with them, he will be with you.

Those aren't the last words in the book of Genesis. But I find them in many ways to be a wonderfully fitting conclusion to this book.

Lives Defined By a Promise

I also find them very relatable - because you and I, we may not live in the land of Egypt. We may not want the same things that Ephraim and Manasseh wanted. But as Christians, we too are a people whose lives are defined by a promise.

- The promise of a better future.
- The promise of a new heavens and a new earth.
- The promise of a day when our bodies will be transformed.
- The promise of a day when all our fears and sorrows will be banished away.
- And we will finally know what it means to truly be at home.

And just like Ephraim and Manasseh and all those other children of Israel, it's easy for us to forget that - and to forget God's faithfulness in the past and forget how God kept his promises and to settle for

something else. Maybe not a house on the Nile River, but, you know, we've got our own versions of Egypt. That's a real danger.

Just take a look at the city of Boston. Boston was originally settled, of course, by the Puritans who established the Massachusetts Bay Colony. And these Puritans, they were diligent, hard workers and they prospered. But as a historian named Andrew Delbanco has observed, the hope that defined their lives wasn't just personal being or material prosperity.



They were, for the most part, animated by their hope in the Bible's promise of eternal life. And that might be one of the reasons that they chose the motto that they did.

"May God be with us as he was with our fathers."

Because they saw themselves as a kind of pilgrim people who shared the hopes and dreams of those who went before them. But over time that changed. Over time, the citizens of Boston felt more and more at home in the prosperous lives that they'd built for themselves and thought less and less about divine promises.

And now the motto that once defined the city seems to be little more than a nostalgic reminder of how things once were. Of course, in saying that, I'm not trying to criticize Boston. It's a wonderful city, and I loved living there. But I do think that we can learn something from its history, something that is close to the heart of the book of Genesis.

What Genesis teaches us is that the life of God's people is fundamentally a life founded on and driven by hope. Hope in the promises of God. And no matter how difficult or implausible those promises may seem, God keeps his word.

Our task is simply to remember:

Remember what he promised.

Remember how he has been faithful in the past and live with the knowledge that, as Hebrews says, we are strangers and exiles upon the earth seeking a better homeland.

And remember that God will be with us just as he was with our fathers.