

## The Ability to Bless

January 18, 2009

Purpose: To help us appreciate how the rich heritage of faith is passed from generation to generation

Key Bible reference: Genesis 48

Key Verse: Genesis 48:19 *But his father refused, and 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."*

Background Reading: In Genesis 35-47, we read of God's covenant with Jacob at Bethel (Genesis 35:9-15); the birth of Jacob's youngest son, Benjamin (Genesis 35:16-18); and the death of Jacob's wife Rachel (Genesis 35:19). Jacob then settles in the land of Canaan where his father and grandfather before him had been aliens.

Chapters 37 and 39-47 of Genesis tell the story of Joseph, son of Jacob and Rachel. Jacob favors Joseph over his other sons, and this causes trouble between Joseph and his brothers. The brothers make it appear that Joseph has been killed when in actuality he has been sold to some traders who in turn sell him into slavery in Egypt.

While living in Egypt, Joseph becomes the slave of Potiphar [POT-uh-fuhr], an official of Pharaoh's court. Though Joseph comes to be trusted by Potiphar, Potiphar's wife wrongly accuses Joseph of trying to seduce her; and he is sent to prison. With God's help, Joseph is able to interpret the dreams of some government officials while he is imprisoned.

Pharaoh is told of Joseph's ability to interpret dreams, and the ruler summons the prisoner. Pharaoh is so pleased with Joseph's gift of interpretation and his practical advice that he puts Joseph in command of his kingdom (Genesis 41:40). Joseph even takes an Egyptian name and an Egyptian wife. The two children born of this marriage are named Manasseh, meaning "to forget" (relating to Joseph forgetting all his former hardships), and Ephraim, meaning "to be fruitful." These sons figure prominently in this lesson.

A famine occurs throughout the region; but thanks to Joseph's planning, Egypt has plenty of food. When Jacob learns that there is grain available in Egypt, he sends his ten older sons there to buy some. When the brothers arrive, Joseph recognizes them; but they do not recognize him. Joseph tests them, accusing them of being spies, in order to find out about the rest of the family back in Canaan. He insists that they go to Canaan and return with the youngest brother, Benjamin.

Eventually, the brothers persuade Jacob to let Benjamin return to Egypt with them. When Joseph sees his younger brother, he is overcome with emotion and excuses himself to another room to weep (Genesis 43:30).

Joseph's final test of his brothers involves having his silver cup secretly put into Benjamin's bag. Shortly after the brothers leave Egypt, Joseph's steward confronts them about the theft. Naturally, they profess innocence. The punishment will be slavery for the one in whose bag the cup is found; the rest will be set free. Joseph is testing them to see if they will let Benjamin become a slave while they go free.

When the cup is found in Benjamin's bag, Judah begs Joseph to be put in Benjamin's place because their elderly father, Jacob, would not be able to bear losing his youngest son after having lost his son Joseph. Joseph is so moved by the change in his brothers' attitude that he discloses his true identity to them.

The key to the stories of Joseph is found in Genesis 45:5: "Do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life." What the brothers had intended for evil, God turned into good. God had been guiding and controlling the events all along.

When the brothers return to Canaan and tell their father that Joseph is still alive and holds a position of authority in Egypt, he is bewildered. Once convinced of the truth, Jacob and all his household set out immediately for Egypt to be reunited with Joseph.

Because of this journey, the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob settle in the land of Egypt and eventually, under another pharaoh, become slaves there. It is God calling their descendants out of slavery in Egypt many years later that becomes the pivotal event in the history of Israel. (For further information, see the Book of Exodus, which continues this story.)

Before Jacob dies in Egypt, he has two final wishes: One is that he be buried with his father and grandfather in Canaan. While living, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had been sojourners or "resident aliens" in the Promised Land. Their burial in this land of promise plants the seeds for the later fulfillment of the promise in the generations to come. Jacob's burial in Canaan anticipates the day when his descendants will return from Egypt to possess the land of promise.

Jacob's second wish is to bless his grandsons: Joseph's sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. Genesis 48 tells how Jacob calls Joseph and Joseph's two sons to his bedside. In verses 3-5, we read that Jacob adopts the two boys as his own, referring back to the promise that God had made to him at Bethel (Genesis 35:9-12). This promise was that his descendants would become a great nation and that they would possess the land. There is a clear connection between this promise and Jacob's adoption of these two grandsons.

We must remember that Jacob (later named Israel) represents the whole nation of Israel. His twelve sons (of whom Joseph is one) each represent one of the twelve tribes of Israel. Early in its history, the tribe of Joseph split into two tribes named after his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. They became very powerful tribes in the northern kingdom of Israel, with Ephraim being predominant. "Ephraim" is often referred to in the Old Testament as a synonym for Israel, the Northern Kingdom (see Isaiah 7, Hosea 4-14, and Zechariah 9-10).

Jacob's act of claiming these two grandsons as his own sons explains why Manasseh and Ephraim became the leaders of tribes even though they were not the natural sons of Jacob. Through the adoption of these two grandsons, Jacob makes them members of his immediate family and thus representatives of the "twelve" tribes along with his own sons.

Genesis 48:8-11 gives a touching portrayal of the elderly, almost blind Jacob embracing his two young grandsons—a scene reminiscent of Isaac's deathbed blessing of Jacob recorded in Genesis 27. Jacob comments to Joseph on the irony that he had lived for so long assuming Joseph was dead, and now he gets to see both Joseph and Joseph's sons. What an unexpected blessing this must have been for Jacob!

Joseph then takes the children from his father's lap and places them in front of Jacob for him to bless them. Joseph puts Manasseh, the older one, on Jacob's right and Ephraim, the younger one, on Jacob's left. The right hand was the symbol of honor and authority, and tradition would say that the older son should receive the blessing of the right hand.

Jacob, however, crosses his hands when he blesses the boys and places his left hand on the head of Manasseh and his right hand on the head of Ephraim. This switch signifies the future position that the tribes will have: that Ephraim, although the younger, will eventually become the stronger tribe, having precedence over the weaker yet older tribe of Manasseh.

In the blessing itself Jacob refers to the God of Abraham and Isaac. Such a reference links the God whom he worships with the God of his ancestors. Jacob also refers to God as "shepherd" (Genesis 48:15) and as "angel" (Genesis 48:16). The shepherding image in the Bible is one of care, compassion, and sustenance. The notion that God is Jacob's "angel" of redemption refers back to Jacob's experience of God as deliverer.

In sum, Jacob's blessing is on both the children. It is a blessing that God might grant them many descendants and a full and prosperous future for the tribes they represent. However, the blessing of the right hand falls on Ephraim, thus making his tribe the tribe of honor.

Genesis 48:17-18 presents Joseph's objection to his father's act of putting Ephraim ahead of Manasseh. But Jacob reaffirms that he has purposely done this because the tribe of the younger son will be greater than the tribe of the older son (Genesis 48:19-22). Once again, we see that God is doing the unexpected.

Genesis 50:20, near the closing of the Book of Genesis, repeats the central theme of the Joseph story: What Joseph's brothers had meant for evil, God had transformed into good. Since Joseph ended up in a position of leadership in Egypt, he was able to provide for Jacob's family during a time of famine. Although the brothers had intended to harm Joseph and get rid of him by selling him into slavery, God had transformed the evil human machinations into a force that brings about good.

Prayer: We are heartened, our God, by the utter humanness of the great forebears of our faith. If you can use them, we believe that you can also use us. But we are also challenged by their faithful obedience, for they always returned to their call even after turning away. Most of all, we are awed by your constant care for them. We ask nothing more than that for ourselves. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

## Credits

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