

Chapter 66.
Faith and Blessing
Genesis 48:1-22

Often when people of faith come to death, they see life with a greater clarity. As the poet Edmund Waller wrote:

The soul's dark cottage, battered and decayed,
Lets in new light through chinks that time has made.

We see this in an old barn whose roof and siding have begun to bow and sag so that shafts of light beam through like searchlights. This was certainly true in the life of the patriarch Jacob. His believing eyes afforded him a clear vision of the future for both himself and his sons. That is why he had demanded a double-oath from Joseph that he take his bones back to Canaan and inter them there—his eye of faith saw his people as one day returning to Canaan.

Thus as his death approached, old Jacob's soul rose above his material existence in Egypt to an exercise of faith so extraordinary that the New Testament's "Hall of Faith," Hebrews 11, selected it as the singular event that characterized him as a man of faith—namely, the blessing of Joseph's sons Ephraim and Manasseh. "By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff" (v. 21). Again, as earlier in his life, this would involve a surprising reversal that went against the natural order and expectations of this life.

Jacob's faith-blessing was occasioned when Joseph, his viceroy son, learned that he was ill (incidentally the first reference to illness in the Bible): "After this, Joseph was told, 'Behold, your father is ill.' So he took with him his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. And it was told to Jacob, 'Your son Joseph has come to you.' Then Israel summoned his strength and sat up in bed" (vv. 1, 2). With immense terminal resolve the dying patriarch sat up in his bed. And though there was no act other than the blessing recorded here, the Hebrews 11 reference describes it as worship. This is because to believe God's word, and to base everything in the future upon his word, is worship!

Adoption (vv. 3-13)

Joseph came to his dying father with his two half-Egyptian sons in expectation of obtaining the patriarch's blessing. Tellingly, Joseph's humble presence was itself an act of submissive faith because he had come to personally identify his boys with God's people. Such identification with the shepherd clan (so abominated by the Egyptians) would ultimately shut them off to Egyptian prominence. Joseph's presence with his sons was a by-faith exercise in downward mobility.

Promise recalled. As Joseph and Manasseh and Ephraim stood expectantly before Jacob, the patriarch recalled the promise that undergirded what he was about to do. "And Jacob said to Joseph, '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"' (vv. 3, 4). God had appeared to Jacob twice in Luz, the old name for Bethel. The first appearance was when Jacob was fleeing the wrath of Esau, and God gave him the vision of heavenly angels ascending and descending on his behalf—accompanied with the verbal promise of the land on which he lay and offspring like the dust of the earth (cf. 28:12-14). The second appearance was again at Bethel when he returned after a twenty-year absence, and it is the source for the terminology that Jacob used here (cf. 35:11-15).

Those monumental affirmations of the promise at Bethel echoed the words of the promise made to Abraham and to his father Isaac and reflect the creation commandment to be fruitful and multiply (cf. 1:28). The point of Jacob's recollections of the promises here is that as heir to those promises, he had the right to decide to whom they would go with his blessing. This was

a moment of immense power. Jacob's covenant recollections were redolent with faith that God would fulfill the promises through him.

Formal adoption. Having established his authority to bestow the blessing, Jacob then informed Joseph of his intentions. "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" (v. 5). The literal Hebrew reads, "Like Reuben and Simeon they will be to me" — that is, these boys would become the firstborn sons of Jacob. Ephraim and Manasseh would become not Jacob's grandsons, but sons number one and two. They displaced Reuben and Simeon!

First Chronicles 5:1, 2 describes what happened: "The sons of Reuben the firstborn of Israel (for he was the firstborn, but because he defiled his father's couch, his birthright was given to the sons of Joseph the son of Israel, so that he could not be enrolled as the oldest son; though Judah became strong among his brothers and a chief came from him, yet the birthright belonged to Joseph)."

What an astonishing revelation. Jacob claimed them as twice "mine" (Genesis 48:5)—replacements for the senior uncles. Joseph had other children besides Ephraim and Manasseh. What of them? Jacob anticipated the question before Joseph could ask. "And the children that you fathered after them shall be yours. They shall be called by the name of their brothers in their inheritance" (v. 6). In the future, his other children would be incorporated into the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh.

As we know, Joseph was the firstborn child of Jacob's beloved wife Rachel. And now Joseph's likeness to his mother (both he and his mother were unusually attractive) caused the dying old patriarch to recall an event painful to both himself and his son—the death of lovely Rachel (v. 7). As Jacob reminisced, his old frame coursed with emotion. As Barnhouse has it, "His mind was like an autumn when sun and shadows alternate across the valley. He had been out in the sun, and then came the clouds." Jacob spoke poignantly. "As for me, when I came from Paddan, to my sorrow Rachel died in the land of Canaan on the way, when there was still some distance to go to Ephrath, and I buried her there on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem)." Rachel had been the love of his life. He had worked fourteen years for her. And her untimely death cut her childbearing short and prevented his burying her in the family tomb. But now Rachel's firstborn son Joseph could extend her line by Joseph's giving his sons to Jacob as direct heirs.

Many scholars believe that the principal details of the interaction between Jacob and Joseph and his sons in verses 8-13 are specifics of a formal adoption process that began in verse 8 with Jacob's question, "Who are these?"—a question that functioned in a way similar to the question that begins modern-day marriages—"Who gives this woman to be married to this man?" The ceremonial response, "Her mother and I do" is paralleled by Joseph's ceremonial response. Following this, Jacob's kiss and embrace of the boys were significant gestures in the adoption process (v. 10). Lastly, Jacob's removal of his sons from his knees and bowing with his face to the earth was a consummating gesture of the adoption (v. 12).

This done, "Joseph took them both, Ephraim in his right hand toward Israel's left hand, and Manasseh in his left hand toward Israel's right hand, and brought them near him" (v. 13). Joseph's positioning of his sons made it convenient for his nearly blind father to place his right hand (the hand symbolic of action and power) on the head of the firstborn Manasseh and his left hand on Ephraim's head. The immense importance that this had for Joseph is seen in the precision of the language, with the repeated use of "right" and "left" seven times in combination.

Blessing (vv. 14-20)

Here the drama intensifies as we follow every movement: "And Israel stretched out his right hand and laid it on the head of Ephraim, who was younger, and his left hand on the head of Manasseh, crossing his hands (for Manasseh was the firstborn)" (v. 14). Joseph, momentarily dumbfounded and speechless, was unable to respond as his father intoned the patriarchal

blessing in a threefold invocation of God's name that recalled God's faithful dealings with his people.
And 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 long to this day, the angel who has redeemed me from all evil, bless the boys; and in them let my name be carried on, and the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac; and let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth." (vv. 15, 16)

Such a lovely blessing in the name of the God who walks with, shepherds, and redeems his people.

Jacob's new sons had been mightily blessed!

Reversal

But now Joseph had recovered his wits. And he was not happy. Joseph did manage to control his language in deference to his father's age and infirmity. But his anger is indicated by his reflexive action, because the phrase "he took his father's hand" (v. 17) describes a firm grip, and his abrupt command, "Not this way, my father" (v. 18) exudes exasperation.

Joseph was appalled. His father had transgressed every tradition from the Nile to the Euphrates. Joseph knew his sons intimately, and there could be no logical reason for Jacob to elevate Ephraim over Manasseh. All Manasseh's years had been lived with the privilege and expectation of the firstborn. As Manasseh's father, Joseph had worked to instill firstborn character and a requisite sense of responsibility in his oldest boy. This humiliation was an undeserved wound. Why had the old man crossed his hands? Was it because of his near-blindness? Or was it his inveterate, heel-grabbing perversity?

In any event the deed was done. Blessings once uttered could not be undone (cf. 27:34-37). Since Isaac's unwitting blessing of Jacob could not be reversed (though Jacob had deceived his father), how much more immutable was Jacob's deliberate blessing of Ephraim over Manasseh. Jacob could not reverse it, even if he wanted to. And he did not wish to change a word—because the blessing did not originate with him, but with God. He was only the messenger. His crossed hands of blessing were an act of profound faith. That is the divine assessment. "By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff" (Hebrews 11:21).

It had taken Jacob a lifetime of divine discipline to learn that he must only speak and do the word of God. Now he dared to trust God and believe his plans were best. He dared to do God's will despite the wishes of his illustrious, godly son. Jacob had "cast his anchor into the will of God forever" (Barnhouse).

Reversal confirmed. So now the faith-driven, old patriarch calmly continued with his right hand firmly placed upon the head of the younger son.

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." So he blessed them that day, saying,

"By you Israel will pronounce blessings, saying,
'God make you as Ephraim and as Manasseh.'"

Thus he put Ephraim before Manasseh. (vv. 19, 20)

The two boys' names would become the proverbial formula for invoking blessing—code words for wondrous destiny. And both sons were astonishingly blessed. Manasseh would become "a people," but Ephraim would become "a multitude of nations." In Egypt and at the exodus,

Ephraim and Manasseh were great tribes indeed. At one time the name Ephraim was used as a synonym for the kingdom of Israel. However, in the long run both tribes would apostatize, and the tribe of Judah would take on the mantle and ascendancy. Psalm 78 describes their tragic demise (cf. 2 Kings 17).

But here, in Jacob's handling of Ephraim and Manasseh, we see the crossed hands of blessing—and thus we clearly understand at the end of Jacob's life and the book of Genesis that God's grace must never become captive to position or privilege or heredity or expectation or tradition or convention or disposition. God's grace is sovereign. It cannot be tamed. The economy of grace operates on its own principles—humbling human wisdom and exalting the unlikely, so that the last are often the first, and the first last.

This is repeated again and again in Genesis. In primeval history, the older brother Cain had his offering rejected, while that of the younger, Abel, was accepted. Then with the line of Seth, the even younger brother became the chosen line (cf. 4:25-5:8). In patriarchal times, young Isaac was chosen over Ishmael (cf. 17:18, 19). Then Jacob was chosen over Esau (cf. chap. 27). Jacob's son Joseph was chosen over his older brethren (cf. 37:5-7, 9). And now Ephraim was chosen above Manasseh. Indeed, the last are often first, even for Christ. "He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:11-13).

The crossed hands of blessing tell us that grace typically surprises. "But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God" (1 Corinthians 1:27-29). This is what makes the gospel so wild and wonderful. Because no one is beyond God's grace, the proudest, baddest, meanest man in town can, and often does, find grace. There is a wildness to God's mercy!

And when it comes to living a life of faith, the crossed hands of blessing provide essential wisdom. Marcus Dods, Victorian-era principal of New College Edinburgh, comments about our common experience:

Again and again, for years together, we put forward some cherished desire to God's right hand, and are displeased, like Joseph, that still the hand of greater blessing should pass to some other thing. Does God not know what is oldest with us, what has been longest at our hearts, and is dearest to us? Certainly he does: "I know it, My son, I know it," He answers to all our expostulations. It is not because He does not understand or regard your predilections, your natural and excusable preferences that He sometimes refuses to gratify your whole desire, and pours upon you blessings of a kind somewhat different from those you most earnestly covet. He will give you the whole that Christ hath merited; but for the application and distribution of that grace and blessing you must be content to trust Him.

All this calls for faith, both for salvation and living. Just as Jacob pulled back from trusting his own wisdom and predilections and trusted God's word, so must we. God calls us to trust in him alone. This is what old Jacob did in the last hours of his life—and this is where he experienced the pleasure and praise of God as recorded in the "Hall of Faith" found in the book of Hebrews.

Gift (vv. 21, 22)

And what of Joseph's faith?

It was remarkable. In giving his two sons to Jacob, he was virtually consenting to their being rejected in respect to a future and position in Egypt. By identifying his sons with the despised shepherding people, Joseph sealed them off from ascendancy. It was madness from the perspective of the Nile. But like his father Jacob, Joseph believed the word of promise—that God was building a great people who would one day return to the land of promise. Though Joseph apparently lived out his career as viceroy of Egypt, there is no record of any of his children attaining rank during the next four hundred years in Egypt. Thus, by faith Joseph lived without currying the favor of Egypt. In this he was very much like the future Moses, who is also celebrated in the Hall of Faith: "By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called

the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward" (Hebrews 11:24-26). Joseph had made a similar choice, and he did it with like faith.

And understanding this, we understand something of the significance of Jacob's gift to Joseph. "Then Israel said to Joseph, 'Behold, I am about to die, but God will be with you and will bring you again to the land of your fathers. Moreover, I have given to you rather than to your brothers one mountain slope that I took from the hand of the Amorites with my sword and with my bow'" (vv. 21, 22). This "mountain slope" is almost certainly a reference to a plot in the land of Shechem inside the promised land. The Hebrew for "one mountain slope" is literally "one Shechem"—so that it can be translated, "And I, I give Shechem to you—O one above your brothers—which I took from the hand of the Amorites with my sword and my bow." Jacob had purchased a plot of land from Hamor, the king of Shechem, for a hundred pieces of money (33:19) and had never approved of the subsequent violence with which his sons had taken Shechem, though their violence (his sword) made the land de facto doubly his to give. Joseph accepted from his father the plot in Shechem in faith. And when Joseph died, his bones were carried out first in the exodus, and after the conquest of Canaan, Joshua buried them in Shechem—which was in Ephraim, the land of the blessed son (cf. Joshua 24:32). Genesis 48 gives a remarkable portrait of an old man who took full charge of his own death. His faith on his deathbed was the singular triumph of his life. And there, while he did nothing that today is commonly referred to as worship, as there was no prayer or song, he intensely worshiped. This is because we worship when we, by faith, trust God for all of life and give ourselves to him (cf. Romans 12:1, 2). By faith Jacob crossed his hands in worship and blessed his adopted sons as he surrendered his life and the future of his people to God's word. And his sunset faith unleashed the wild grace of God to do its wondrous work in the generations to come.

Preaching the Word - Preaching the Word – Genesis: Beginning and Blessing.