

Epitaph 4-13-08

Genesis 48

Our journey through Genesis is drawing to a close as the life of Jacob ebbs away. As we read the text, it sounds like Jacob must be nearing his last hours, but from the context I don't believe that is the case. The sons of Joseph are still small enough to sit on his knees. It sounds to me like only a year or so after he arrived in Egypt, for Joseph's sons were born during the years of plenty. (Genesis 41:50) They were two years into the famine when they moved, and the passage sounds as if Joseph had not yet introduced his sons to their grandfather. It would be hard to imagine that for 17 years Jacob had not met his grandsons. All this leads me to believe this account was inserted here, though it took place during the years of famine. If it was in Jacob's last year, the boys would be in their 20s. It's not likely they could sit on frail Jacob's knees at their age.

Jacob was ill, and at his age, they thought he might die. So Joseph took his sons to meet their grandfather. Jacob pulled himself together and sat up. ³ *Jacob said to Joseph, "God Almighty appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan, and there he blessed me*

He began to share with Joseph his epitaph. In a few sentences he would sum up the highlights of his life. It is an exercise I think we should all do periodically, not in a morbid way, but to reflect on what has really been important to us. What has God shown us? What really matters to us in an eternal sense? (Proverbs 11:4) He didn't have a lot of energy for extra words. He had to sum up his life in a paragraph. Could you do that? What would it say to others?

I love to read biographies of people who were totally devoted to God. One of my favorites is Charles Cowman. He was bright, energetic leader who went to Japan in faith that God would provide his needs as he ministered the word of God to those who had never heard the Gospel. He literally wore his heart out reaching nearly every home in Japan and parts of Korea and China with the Word of God in their own language. After many years of ministry, he was sent home with a weak heart and expected to die. (Matthew 16:24)

Bedridden, he ministered to people by mail. All day long he would answer mail from Christian workers in the field. One day, he thought the Lord showed him that he was dying, so he called his family around his bed to say good-bye and to encourage them in the faith. It reminded me of these chapters in Genesis. But like Jacob and Isaac, he didn't die until years later. (Ecclesiastes 8:8)

How can God leave these great people of faith bedridden and unable to care for themselves for years on end? Man does not see as God sees. To us, the thought of having others care for us is anathema. We want to be independent and owe no one anything. It is so humbling to be cared for, and yet, many godly people go through this experience. With my limited understanding, here is my supposition.

First of all, what is really important? How many prayers from the beds of those who could do nothing else have changed the course of history? When we are up and about all day, everyday, we take so little time to pray God's will into the lives of others. I know of letters

Commented [notes1]: 50 Before the years of famine came, two sons were born to Joseph by Asenath daughter of Potiphara, priest of On. Gen 41:50 (NIV)

Commented [notes2]: 4 Wealth is worthless in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death. Prov 11:4 (NIV)

Commented [notes3]: 24 Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. Matt 16:24 (NIV)

Commented [notes4]: 8 No man has power over the wind to contain it ; so no one has power over the day of his death. As no one is discharged in time of war, so wickedness will not release those who practice it. Eccl 8:8 (NIV)

from invalids that have changed the lives of young people. Would they have been written if the person were running around busy with daily life?

Then there is the humbling experience of no longer being a leader and independent. That has personal lessons that go deep to the core of who we are as a personality. I've seen elderly people grow bitter through their experience, and I've seen others grow sweeter and spiritually richer. If it happens to you, what will be your choice? (Deuteronomy 30:19) Will you be one of the constant complainers or a ray of sunshine to those who care for and visit you? I once thought it was personality, but I now know it has much more to do with our relationship with God. (Galatians 5:24)

Commented [notes5]: 19 This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live Deut 30:19 (NIV)

Commented [notes6]: 24 Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Gal 5:24 (NIV)

When Jacob wanted to relay what was really important in his life, he spoke of his encounter with God. He saw a manifestation of God. Many (myself included) believe this manifestation was the preincarnate Christ. He could say, *"God Almighty appeared to me... and blessed me..."*

That is the testimony of every believer, isn't it? We haven't all seen a manifestation with our eyes, but the eyes of our hearts have seen that Jesus is God's salvation. (Ephesians 1:18-19a) Jesus, Himself, said those who believe without seeing are blessed. (John 20:29) Most of us would sum up our life starting with the day we met our Savior. "God Almighty appeared to me in Riverside, California, and blessed me..." Where did He appear to you? Are you blessed with salvation today? If not, you can call out to Him today and you will one day say, "God Almighty appeared to me in Sedona, Arizona and blessed me..."

Commented [notes7]: 18 I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, 19 and his incomparably great power for us who believe. Eph 1:18-19 (NIV)

Commented [notes8]: 29 Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." John 20:29 (NIV)

Jacob continued, ⁴ *and said to me, 'I am going to make you fruitful and will increase your numbers. I will make you a community of peoples, and I will give this land as an everlasting possession to your descendants after you.'* When God speaks to your heart, you can remember it clearly. His promises become personal. Even though Jacob was dying in a foreign land, the encounter with God was so powerfully moving that he did not doubt it would come to pass. He saw his clan grow to 70 people and knew it would continue to be blessed and grow. He had no evidence that the land of Canaan would belong to his heirs, but he so thoroughly believed it that his blessing had to do with how to divide it up. He even wanted them to take his bones back and bury them there with his ancestors.

Do you so thoroughly believe that Jesus has gone to prepare a place for us and will come again to receive us so that we may forever be with Him? (John 14:2-3) Does it shape the way you see the future? Look how the promise affected Jacob.

Commented [notes9]: 2 In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. 3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. John 14:2-3 (NIV)

⁵ *"Now then, your two sons born to you in Egypt before I came to you here will be reckoned as mine; Ephraim and Manasseh will be mine, just as Reuben and Simeon are mine.* What did this have to do with the promise? When they came into the Promised Land, each of the sons of Israel would receive a portion. This is really speaking faith. The fulfillment is 400 years in the future, but Jacob is making sure that the sons of Joseph each have an equal share with Joseph's brothers. That's long, long, long, long range planning. That's faith in God's word!

The Hebrew wording of this passage seems to indicate that these sons were to take the number one and two spots in the family away from Reuben and Simeon. Because of the

flagrant sins of the first and second born, God was putting faithful Joseph's sons in these positions in the family. So important would the tribe of Ephraim become that for a time the name Ephraim would be synonymous with Israel. (Hosea 4:17) Sadly, both tribes would eventually give in to idolatry and be assimilated into Assyria, and Judah would be the tribe that would remain faithful to God.

Commented [notes10]: Ephraim is joined to idols; leave him alone!
Hosea 4:17 (NIV)

Then Jacob shared the one great loss of his life, the death of Joseph's mother. *7 As I was returning from Paddan, to my sorrow Rachel died in the land of Canaan while we were still on the way, a little distance from Ephrath. So I buried her there beside the road to Ephrath" (that is, Bethlehem).*

Loss has a way of shaping our life as well. The longer we live, the more loss we must face. Of course we know that it is only for a time, but there is still this painful time of separation. My wife and I keep discussing who is going first. Life goes on after the loss. Jacob had so many years to live, and so much to learn. His relationship with God went from the pits to the mountain peaks in those years that followed Rachel's death. We get angry with God, but then we realize that we need the comfort and relationship that only He can give. Loss can drive people into false doctrines and self-centeredness or it can bring us closer to God than we ever imagined. If we adopted our religion to serve us, then loss drives us from the idolatry of self. If our religion is a relationship with Jesus, loss drives us into His arms for comfort and hope.

Next, Joseph took his grandsons and set them on his knees. Jacob kissed and embraced them, rejoicing that he not only got to see Joseph again in this life, but his sons as well. Many scholars see the details of this passage as official adoption wording and actions of that day. If that is the case, and I believe it is, then Joseph expressed great faith in having his sons identified with the future of the Hebrews rather than that of Egypt. He had just made Egypt the wealthiest and most powerful nation in the world, but believing the promises of God, he let his sons be identified with the little despised tribe of Hebrews. I think that if some of us were there at the time, we'd probably tell him he was making a huge mistake. It was not the best choice, if financial gain and position are what you value, but it was if you value the eternal kingdom of God.

Jacob proceeded to bless Joseph's sons, but he did something unusual. He put his right hand, the hand of special favor, on the younger of the two. He had to cross his arms to do that. Joseph tried to get his Dad to straighten out his arms and do it as was the custom, according to what was expected, putting his right hand on the older of the two. Jacob wouldn't have it. He insisted that he knew what he was doing. He predicted a day would come when people would say, *"May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh."* So he put Ephraim ahead of Manasseh.

So it is in the Kingdom of God; God's sovereign grace is often mysterious to us. This comes in a long line of the first being last and the last first, Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, and Joseph and his brothers to name a few. (Luke 13:30)

Commented [notes11]: 30 Indeed there are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last."
Luke 13:30 (NIV)

This was an act of faith so important that it is mentioned in the book of Hebrews. (Hebrews 11:21) Jacob had learned to listen to God and operate according to God's leading and not the inclinations of man. May God help us to grow into that kind of spiritual maturity! Jacob has suddenly matured by leaps and bounds compared to his sulking and

Commented [notes12]: 21 By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph's sons, and worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff.
Heb 11:21 (NIV)

conniving past. In this chapter and the next, he will speak prophetically and with great faith. It had taken over 130 years, but the patient grace of God had turned him into the man God always intended him to become. How long will it take for us?

The blessing Jacob pronounced over them is something our young people are missing today. Listen to his words. ¹⁵ *Then he blessed Joseph and said, "May 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 delivered me from all harm --may he bless these boys. May they be called by my name and the names of my fathers Abraham and Isaac, and may they increase greatly upon the earth."* He reminded them that for 3 generations their ancestors had walked before God. That is a way of saying they lived their lives with the conscious knowledge that the eyes of God were upon them. The choices they made and the reasons by which they were motivated came from the fact that they lived with the awareness of God's presence. These boys were the heirs of that spiritual legacy. They knew their ancestors had revelations from God. They could see themselves as part of a larger story.

Have you told your grandchildren about the faith of their ancestors? If you are the first in your family, have you told your children? And if you haven't conveyed to them how important it is in your life, what are you waiting for? Jacob was a little early, but it is better to be a little early than too late. Root them in a spiritual legacy. Give them some spiritual expectations for their life. If you don't have anything eternal to pass on to your children, what do you really have to give them? If your answer is wealth, realize that many are ruined by wealth as they are helped, and that it is only for our limited time on this earth. (Proverbs 23:5)

Jacob asked that their numbers increase. This was God's promise to him, so he prayed that promise would be fulfilled in and through their lives. I rejoice to see those family reunions where the surviving patriarch or matriarch is close to a hundred years old, and there are 70 members to the family, especially when they are all faithful to the Lord. That is an awesome legacy. It is getting to be a rare thing in our day. God have mercy on our families and nation.

Did you notice how Jacob described his relationship with God? *...the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day...* I love that expression! Don't you? Look at all the craziness that Jacob got himself into, and yet, he knew the Lord was his shepherd through it all. Everywhere he went, fled, escaped from, God showed up to tell Jacob that He would go with him. (Genesis 28:15;31:3) What comfort! No matter what stupid things I do, or how deep a mess I create, God goes with me and shepherds me. I might end up with a limp, like Jacob, but that is part of his faithful shepherding. (Genesis 32:25) Even though he turned his back and didn't want to hear from God for years, because of his misunderstanding of what God had allowed, God was still his faithful shepherd.

I hope you know the same is true in your life! Even when you thought He abandoned you, that one set of footprints in the sand was His, and He was carrying you through the difficult time. I can tell you of all the times He has shepherded me through things I wondered if I could endure. Some came about as the result of living in a fallen world. Some came because of my selfish decisions. Some came because of the sin in others' lives, but He has seen me through them all and He will continue to see me through them

Commented [notes13]: 5 Cast but a glance at riches, and they are gone, for they will surely sprout wings and fly off to the sky like an eagle.
Prov 23:5 (NIV)

Commented [notes14]: 15 I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."
Gen 28:15 (NIV)

Commented [notes15]: 3 Then the LORD said to Jacob, "Go back to the land of your fathers and to your relatives, and I will be with you."
Gen 31:3 (NIV)

Commented [notes16]: 25 When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man.
Gen 32:25 (NIV)

until I stand in His presence face to face. (1Corinthians 13:12) Amen? I hope you know "...the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day..." is the same faithful God in your life.

Commented [notes17]: 12 Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.
1 Cor 13:12 (NIV)

Then he called that God the Angel who had delivered him from all harm. How can he say that? He ran away from home to save his life. He had his wages robbed seven times by Laban changing them. He had to flee Laban and then promise never to return. He had a limp inflicted by that same Angel. His parents died, and so did his nursemaid, his favorite wife and two grandsons. For years his sons lied to him about the death of his favorite son. So how are we to interpret "the Angel who delivered me from all harm"?

Jesus taught us to pray, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one." (Matthew 6:13) Jacob certainly wasn't delivered from pain and difficulty, but he was never destroyed by it. He came through every time with God's help. That is the kind of deliverance we can expect as well. (Psalm 91:7) I hope you understand that, because if you think life in Christ is easy, you need to read Hebrews 11. He brings us through the stuff of life and uses the difficulty to transform us; that is deliverance from all harm! (2Thessalonians 3:3)

Commented [notes18]: 13 And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. ' Matt 6:13 (NIV)

Commented [notes19]: 7 A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you.
Psalms 91:7 (NIV)

Commented [notes20]: But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen and protect you from the evil one.
2 Thess 3:3 (NIV)

²¹ Then Israel said to Joseph, "I am about to die, but God will be with you and take you back to the land of your fathers. Well, as I said, he probably had quite a few more years, but this is still a part of his epitaph. He is conveying to Joseph what God had committed to him. He learned that God is with you wherever you go. He learned it was true for everyone. The first "you" is singular. "God will be with you, Joseph." The second "you" is plural, his descendents and extended family. They will be going back. God's word cannot fail. What a legacy he passed on! It is God that would do it, and He did! (Exodus 12:37-38) John Wesley's last words echoed a thought similar to Jacob's epitaph. "The best of all, God is with us!" That was our lesson from this week's chapter in The Truth Project as well. God desires intimacy with each of us!

Commented [notes21]: 37 The Israelites journeyed from Rameses to Succoth. There were about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides women and children.
38 Many other people went up with them, as well as large droves of livestock, both flocks and herds.
Ex 12:37-38 (NIV)

What important promises we have to pass on to our descendents! (2 Peter 1:4) God will be with them as He has been with us. He will see them through every difficulty of life. We can say that after a long life of experience. We will all be together again in our Promised Land. Do your children and grandchildren know those basic truths? I don't know how people get through life without having that as solid foundation to build from. What peace and stability there can be for those who build their lives around it. (Matthew 7:24)

Commented [notes22]: 4 Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.
2 Peter 1:4 (NIV)

Fathers, consider giving an official blessing to your children and grandchildren. You can use Jacob's blessing as a starting point. Make it a special solemn occasion. Women, if your husband is absent or gone on before you, it's up to you. You can do it in writing, though it is much more affective face to face. Make sure they know these essential truths. That is our God given duty.

Commented [notes23]: 24 "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock."
Matt 7:24 (NIV)

Let me close with a benediction right out of this chapter. Now may God who has been your shepherd all your life to this day, deliver you from all harm, and bless you and your children forever. Amen!