

If God is For Us: The Life and Trials of Joseph

The Big Picture (Genesis 47:1-31)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on December 7, 2025

Introduction

- ❖ As most of you know, we've been in a series, in Genesis 37-50, on the life and trials of Joseph. **And by today's chapter, Genesis 47, the main plot points of Joseph's story have been resolved.** He's ascended from the depths of slavery to the heights of power as the governor of Egypt (only second to Pharaoh). He and his brothers have finally reconciled after their decades-long estrangement. And he's been reunited with his father Jacob, who thought he was dead. And now the entire family (God's *chosen* family) has moved to Egypt where they will be preserved and protected during this global famine.
 - **So with all that resolution now concluded, you could get the impression that these remaining chapters, Genesis 47-50, are anticlimactic.** It feels like a long, drawn out ending. Like in the third and last *Lord of the Rings* movie. Where after the ring has been destroyed and Sauron defeated, there's still like half-an-hour of movie left. The screen would go to black, you think the movie is over, and then another scene pops up. It felt drawn out and anticlimactic.
- ❖ **Is the same thing going on here in Genesis?** If you only have Joseph's story in mind, then, yes, there's a sense in which these remaining chapters seem less important and superfluous. But when you step back and read Genesis as it would've been read by ancient Israelites – as part of a five-book compilation written by Moses called the Pentateuch (“the Five Books”) – **then you start to realize that these final chapters in Genesis are actually important and necessary to prepare for the next book, for Exodus.** We need to know why God's people are in Egypt and not the Promised Land. And to see the contrast in how they initially prosper in the land, and then how everything flips at the start of Exodus.
 - Because the whole Pentateuch is telling the most important story in the OT – of how God rescued and redeemed his people from slavery and formed them into a holy nation, a kingdom of priests. **And, of course, that story prefigures and points to the broader biblical story of redemption found in the pages of the NT.** About how God rescued and redeemed his people from their slavery to sin and formed them into a holy people, a church, a body, a bride.
- ❖ **Without that perspective, without the big picture, we might fail to connect the dots and fail to understand how the events in this chapter are relevant to us.** That's why, from time to time in Scripture, we need to zoom out to better see our place in the story.
 - It reminds me of another movie. In the late 90's, there was an animated film called *Antz*. It was a story about a worker ant who falls in love with a princess ant, while saving the queen ant from a secret plot by a general ant trying to overthrow the colony. As you're watching, you're engrossed with the ins and outs of this massive ant colony. It makes you think, “Who knew the ant world was so complicated?”
 - But in the last scene, the camera starts to zoom out, and the audience comes to realize that the whole time our attention has been focused on just this tiny, little ant colony in the vast expanse of Central Park in Manhattan. **It's the filmmaker's way of reminding us there's always a bigger story to tell, and when we pull back the lens far enough, we can see how we're a part of it.**

- ❖ That's what I want to do for us this morning. I want us to see the details of our text, but I'll keep pulling the lens back as we walk through it, so that we don't lose sight of the big picture. I want us to consider three major plot movements in this chapter, and I'll do my best to connect them to the broader biblical story of redemption and how it relates to you.

Jacob Blesses And Pharaoh Prospers

- ❖ The first movement can be described like this: **Jacob blesses and Pharaoh prospers.** This is captured in the first twelve verses. **In the previous chapter, Joseph had been making arrangements for his reunited family to sojourn in Egypt during the famine.** Specifically in a region called Goshen, located on the northeastern side of the Nile River Delta. It was on the outskirts of Egyptian civilization and closer to Canaan, the Promised Land.
 - Now we're told in chapter 46:27 that there were seventy persons in Jacob's family. **Welcoming that large of a clan of foreigners would need Pharaoh's approval.** So Joseph arranges for five of his brothers to appear before Pharaoh. He coaches them on how to respond to Pharaoh's questions. When he asks about your occupation, tell him you are shepherds. Look at v4, *"They said to Pharaoh, 'We have come to sojourn in the land, for there is no pasture for your servants' flocks, for the famine is severe in the land of Canaan. And now, please let your servants dwell in the land of Goshen.'"*
- ❖ **Joseph makes sure that his brothers make it clear to Pharaoh that they are not a political threat to his power or to his people.** Make it clear that you have no intention to settle in the land permanently. So they clearly state that they have merely come *"to sojourn in the land."* They're only asking for a plot of land for a temporary stay during the next five years, the remaining duration of the famine.
 - By God's providence, Pharaoh responds favorably and offers them the best of the land. He permits them to stay in Goshen. He even offers them a royal patronage, meaning they can be in charge of his royal livestock. That's a generous offer that will result in greater wealth and prosperity for Jacob's family.
- ❖ In vv1-6, the picture before us is of five poor, hungry, haggard shepherds standing, with hat in hand, before a powerful, imposing, regal figure – a semi-divine ruler in the eyes of his own people. **But then, starting in v7, the picture is flipped.** Now we're presented with an elderly centenarian, a nomadic foreigner pronouncing a blessing over a much younger man, who just happens to be the ruler of the most powerful and prosperous nation in those days.
 - It's a surprising image. **Considering the circumstances, you would think Jacob was in the needier position.** That he would be the one in the room looking for a blessing. But no, instead he's the one offering a blessing.
- ❖ What is Jacob doing? He's taking a step of faith. **He's acting out of faith – faith in God and his promises. Jacob was fulfilling what his grandfather Abraham passed down to him.** Pull that lens back and remember that, back in Genesis 12:2-3, the Lord had promised to bless Abraham and his family. To bless this one family that they might be a blessing to *all* the families of the earth.

- ❖ The fulfillment of that covenant promise is starting to take shape. **Here Jacob is serving as a channel of covenant blessing to a pagan ruler of a very different family on the earth.** And it's clear that this covenant blessing is not material or earthly in nature. He's not blessing Pharaoh with more money or power. He has none of that to offer. **No, the blessing he bestows is clearly spiritual in nature.** Perhaps he was praying to God to bless Pharaoh – not just with long life – but with life filled with his peace, his joy, his righteousness.
- ❖ **Now in v8, Pharaoh responds to that blessing of this kind of life with a question.** Clearly it appears that Jacob has experienced this blessing, since he's much older than Pharaoh. So he asks his age. *"How many are the days of the years of your life?"* (47:8) How old are you?
 - To which Jacob responds in v9, *"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.'"*
- ❖ So Jacob directly answers the question. How old are you? I'm 130 years old. But he doesn't stop there. **He goes on to offer commentary on those 130 years, and it comes across fairly negative.** Few and evil have been the days of my life. Which is true, in a sense. Jacob has had a hard life. Remember his conflicts with Esau. His prolonged exile in Mesopotamia. His miseries at the hand of his uncle Laban. The rape of his daughter Dinah. The death of his beloved wife Rachel. The betrayal of his eldest son Reuben. The supposed death of his favorite son Joseph. **His life has been hard. Jacob's days have seen much evil.** And he's right that compared to his father and grandfather, his years are shorter. His 130 are fewer in comparison to Abraham's 175 years and Isaac's 180 years.
- ❖ **But in another sense, from another perspective, his life has been pretty blessed.** Even while in utero, he was already the undeserving recipient of God's sovereign grace. And when he escaped his brother's wrath, fleeing to Mesopotamia, he left with no more than a staff in hand. And yet over those hard years of labor under Laban, the Lord blessed Jacob with a large family and abundant flocks. In spite of Laban's concerted efforts to cheat him.
 - And now Jacob has been reunited with his long lost son. And instead of starving to death in Canaan, he and his entire family are safe in Egypt, offered the best of the land, and supplied with adequate food to last those remaining years of famine.
 - **And even though 130 years is far short of 175 or 180, commentaries note that, in ancient Egypt, 110 years was considered the ideal life span.** To reach such an age would've been seen as a sign of blessing. So while Jacob thought it was few, I'm sure Pharaoh was still impressed by his 130 years.
- ❖ **My point is that Jacob *did* take a step of faith when he blessed Pharaoh. Not once but twice (47:7, 10).** When you zoom out and see the bigger story of God's plan to bless the whole world through this one family, then it's apparent that Jacob sees himself as the heir of those covenant blessings that were intended to be shared with all the world. So this was an act of faith on his part.

- ❖ **But, at the same time, in the same moment, he passed up a perfect chance to bless Pharaoh in a special way.** Jacob was presented with the perfect opportunity to give a testimony of God's faithfulness. Of all the gracious ways in which he blessed him and provided for him even when he didn't deserve it. **He had a chance to share his testimony of God's goodness and grace in his life.** And he dropped it. He didn't do it. Instead, Jacob gave an impulsive, fleshly response that was fairly negative. It would've been an even greater blessing to Pharaoh had Jacob shared his story, his testimony of grace.
- ❖ Friends, the same applies to us. As those of us who are recipients of God's abundant goodness and undeserving grace, **it's our duty, our mission, to take the blessings we've received in Christ and to bless others.** To bless those that God brings in our life. Within our spheres of influence. Those in our communities, our campuses, our workplaces, *this church.*
 - **And one way to bless others is to share one of the most precious gifts you possess.** I'm not talking about any earthly treasure or power. I'm talking about your testimony. **One of the greatest treasures you own is your story of God's goodness and grace in your life.** How he rescued you from your sins through his Son dying in your place. How he pulled you out of your darkness and welcomed you into his kingdom of light. How he gave you a seat at his table and calls you his son or daughter.
- ❖ **Don't be like Jacob and fail to take advantage when presented with the opportunity.** When someone at work or at school asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have – be ready to share your greatest blessing, your testimony of God's goodness and grace and how they can experience the same in their lives.

Egypt Survives But Israel Thrives

- ❖ So that's what we can draw from the first plot movement – where Jacob blesses and Pharaoh prospers. And his prosperity is recounted in vv13-26. **By the end of this famine, Pharaoh is in a far wealthier position.** He has all the money, owns all the livestock, and every Egyptian essentially works for him as an indentured servant. This leads to the second plot movement for us to consider. It can be phrased this way: **Egypt survives but Israel thrives.**
 - What stands out is how Jacob's family continues to thrive in the land. Look at v27. Earlier in Genesis, the LORD gave Jacob the name Israel. But here in v27 is the first instance of Israel being used in a collective sense. Referring to the entire family. *"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."*
- ❖ But as the Israelites and their fortune improves, for the Egyptians, their fortune gets worse at every turn. First, we're told, in v14, that they spend all their **money** purchasing grain from Joseph. Next, after the money is gone, in v17, they sell all their **livestock** in exchange for more grain. And after all the money and livestock are gone, the Egyptians sell their **land and themselves** into slavery. Look at v19, *"Why should we die before your eyes, both we and our land? Buy us and our land for food, and we with our land will be servants to Pharaoh. And give us seed that we may live and not die, and that the land may not be desolate."*

- ❖ In vv23-26, we learn that all the Egyptians are now indebted to Pharaoh. They no longer own their land, so they work for him. **They serve as sharecroppers. One-fifth (20%) of their harvest every year is to go to Pharaoh.**
 - That might sound like a lot. **It might read like Joseph is fleecing them.** Like he's taking advantage of suffering people in their desperation. But *they* certainly don't see it that way. Listen to their response in v25, "*And they said, 'You have saved our lives; may it please my lord, we will be servants to Pharaoh.'*"
 - They're appreciative. **On one hand, it's because in other ancient near eastern cultures, the average amount claimed by the king would've been at least a third of your crops.** So Joseph's rate was lenient in comparison.
- ❖ But the bigger reason why the Egyptians were grateful – in spite of the fact that Pharaoh now claims all their money, livestock, land, and freedom – is because they acknowledged their desperate situation. **They knew they were doomed to die.** That there was nothing they could do to save themselves from the famine. **So Joseph's plan – where they renounce all they have and give it all to Pharaoh – that was their only recourse.** That was their only plan of salvation. Which is why they accepted it gladly and not begrudgingly.
- ❖ And notice how, in v26, Moses mentions how this Egyptian practice – this 20% tax code – is still in effect during the time Genesis was written. It was something his original audience was familiar with. Which is a hint that we should pull the lens back and zoom out. **And to ask why this was an important subject to bring up.**
 - Because the first recipients of Genesis – God's people under Moses's leadership wandering in the wilderness after being rescued from their desperate situation – **they needed to remember that they were once a favored class in the land of Egypt and were better off than the average Egyptian.** And yet even those poor Egyptians gladly gave their 20% out of gratitude for their salvation.
- ❖ Why is that so important for ancient Israelites to hear at the tail end of Genesis? **Because the following books of the Pentateuch are going to address the issue of tithing.** That biblical command for Israel to annually give a tenth of their crops to the Lord.
 - In case any Israelite is going to complain. Saying that's asking too much. They need to remember how the Egyptians reacted when they were rescued out of their dire situation. **If that's how an Egyptian gratefully gave to Pharaoh, then how much more should an Israelite be willing to give to the Lord?**
 - And to respond with a grateful heart saying, "*You have saved our lives, O God; may it please our Lord, we will be your servants.*" All the Lord asks of them is a tithe, half of what the Egyptians gave. **If *they* could be grateful in giving, how much more should God's people?** That's the logic in this text.

- ❖ Now let's keep zooming out to see how it ultimately applies to us. It's pretty convicting when you read the response of those Egyptians in v25. They're just so thankful for their salvation. **That's why they didn't complain when they were called to give up their wealth and freedom.** Because they realized how bad off they were. How they were doomed to die.
- ❖ **Christian, when we struggle to give to the Lord – when we feel like he's asking too much – could it be that we've lost sight of how bad off we were?** How we too were doomed to die. Not by the effects of a famine but by the curse of sin. **Could it be that we've forgotten how amazing grace is and how great a salvation he accomplished for us?**
 - Yes, to be saved means you've renounced all you have and given it all to Christ. But when you realize that Christ and his cross is the only plan of salvation. That there's no other way to be saved. Then you're going to cry out with a grateful heart, "You have saved my life, O God; may it please you for me to be your servant."
- ❖ **And, Church, that logic is extended to us.** If the Egyptians can be grateful in their giving. If God's Old Covenant people had even more reason to be grateful. Then we – as inheritors of a better covenant enacted on better promises rooted in Christ – **how much more should we, as New Covenant people, give to the Lord with grateful hearts?** Whether it's 10% or 20% or whatever percent God is convicting you to give – the point is to give in faith and in grateful response to how he saved your life.

God Promises And Israel Believes

- ❖ That's a lesson to be learned from the second movement in this story. Now let's consider the third and final plot movement. It can be summarized like this: **God promises and Israel believes.** This relates to Jacob and his instructions to Joseph on what to do with his body after he dies. He wants to be buried back in the Promised Land.
 - Let's look back at v28, "*And Jacob lived in the land of Egypt seventeen years. So the days of Jacob, the years of his life, were 147 years.*" I don't think it's any coincidence that Jacob gets to enjoy seventeen more years with Joseph. Which matches the same length of time he got to enjoy at the beginning of Joseph's life. This was a gift.
- ❖ Jacob's final request of Joseph is so important he tells him to swear an oath. **He wants Joseph to promise that after he dies, to take his body to the land of Canaan to be buried with my fathers in their family's burial plot.** You have to understand that where a person was buried mattered a great deal in the ancient world.
 - Where you're buried signifies where you recognize as your homeland. **So Jacob's request to bring his body back to Canaan is really a declaration of allegiance to the LORD and a declaration of faith in the promise that Canaan is their home.**
- ❖ Recall God's promise to him in chapter 46:4. Assuring him not to be afraid to abandon the Promised Land and go down to Egypt. That he would bring Jacob back again in due time. Jacob was banking on that promise by faith.

- That explains his answer to Pharaoh back in v8. Look there with me. He asks Jacob, *“How many are the days of the years of your life?”* And notice how he replies, *“The days of the years of my sojourning are 130 years.”*
- ❖ He was asked about the years of his life, but he answered referring to the years of his sojourning. **In other words, Jacob sees his life as one big sojourn.** It’s one big pilgrimage. This world is not his home. He’s only been passing through. **And that’s been true – not just of his stay in Egypt – but for his 130 years of existence, to that point.**
 - And remember the context when he says this. **Egypt is the best place to be in all the world right now.** It’s the only place where there’s any food. Where there’s even a fighting chance of survival. Everywhere else is dry and desolate. Everywhere else is essentially a graveyard. And yet Jacob refuses to call this place home.
- ❖ And, in the end, not even Canaan is Jacob’s forever home. **He and his family were promised a city that has unshakable foundations, whose designer and builder is God** (Heb 11:10). He was looking forward to an eternal city where you gain entrance – not by the works of your hands, nor the measure of your achievements, nor the degree of your devotion. **No, entry into this city is by faith alone.** By trusting in the King who paved the way and secured you entrance by means of his shed blood.
 - That’s what we’re celebrating this Advent season. **How Jesus left his heavenly abode and became a sojourner on this earth. For the singular purpose of securing for us an eternal home in heaven.**
- ❖ If we’re followers of Jesus – if our true home is heaven – then we need to ask ourselves some tough questions. **Have we been too comfortable and too easily pleased to call this place home?** Have we been living and behaving as if this world (in its present fallen state) is our forever home? **Do our life choices and financial decisions reflect the mindset of a settler or a sojourner?** That is, have we been laying up treasures on earth like a settler or treasures in heaven like a sojourner?
 - A sojourner like Jacob will refuse to call this land his home – even if he’s given the best of the land. Will we do the same? **Are we going to settle for this land? Or are we going to press on in our sojourning?** Will we stay faithful until our King returns and brings his kingdom in all its fullness?