

Message #15
Joseph

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JOSEPH'S FAMILY AND FAITH IN A SOVEREIGN GOD
GENESIS 49:29-50:26

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Years ago, when I was living in Ohio, I came across this brief article in *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*. **“His brother accidentally shot him in the face when he was 3. Since then, life has been one disaster after another. Roy Reep thinks he’s lucky to be alive. Reep, 67, a fire department dispatcher in Gastonia, N. C., recalled: He fell off a barrel and later got hit in the head with an ax. A nose operation disclosed two teeth left over from the original shooting. An auto accident left him with fractures and serious internal injuries. His wife shot him in the chest. He fell off a ladder and spent a year in bed as a result. A cataract operation left him blind in one eye. And so on. Three weeks ago he discovered a chunk of bone protruding from his mouth. Doctors took out a tooth and a piece of jaw from the original shooting 64 years ago. Now he has to get the hole in the roof of his mouth fixed. ‘I sit here and cry about the mistakes I’ve made and wonder why God’s been so good,’ Reep said, ‘He could have taken me away any one of those times.’”**

Life, at times, seems to be filled with mistakes and disasters and crises and tragedies. As we watch the evening news or check out stories online, we are regularly reminded of the suffering that is going on in the Middle East and Ukraine and the plight of thousands of unaccompanied minors who have streamed across our southern border. Even here in Boulder City we encounter people who are homeless.

The Christmas season is a happy time for many families. But there are many among us who are widows and widowers, and for them Christmas can be a painful reminder of departed loved ones. Loneliness has become a major problem in our country. Using something called the UCLA Loneliness Scale, a recent study found that “most Americans are considered lonely.” (Breakpoint, 5/24/2018) The loneliest group is the youngest --- Generation Z, those born in the mid-1990s to early 20000s.

In the midst of these challenges of life we are tempted toward discouragement, toward loss of hope. What we need is an anchor, something to grasp that will give us stability.

We have seen from our sermon series on the life of Joseph that this guy had significant challenges in life. He was rejected by his brothers. He was sold by them as a slave to a foreign country. He was unfairly sent to prison. Yet in the end Joseph became a success by any standard of measure. He became a hero of the faith.

An essential element of this success was Joseph’s grasp of the sovereignty of God. This is the idea that God is ultimately in control. Bad things happen in our world, but somehow they all fit together into a master plan of which the God of the Bible is the architect.

As we come to the end of the story of Joseph and his family, the Biblical text reminds us about the vital role that this understanding of the sovereignty of God played in the life of Joseph and in the life of his family. Also in this last passage we find events that summarize the main lessons that Joseph and his family learned. As we see those lessons reemphasized in our passage, we can benefit by applying them to our own lives, especially in the mist of the storms of life.

I.

First, from v. 29 of #49 through v. 14 of #50 we are going to consider the subject THE TESTIMONY OF JACOB TO THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD--- TRUSTING IN HIS PROMISES. (PROJECTOR ON--- THE TESTIMONY OF JACOB...) Jacob had inherited the promises of God given to his grandfather Abraham. But Jacob often did not demonstrate the faith and character that his grandfather did. He often operated on the basis of the principle that the end justifies the means. He used deceit. He was guilty of blatant favoritism toward two of his sons. All of these ways of being had negative consequences in his own life and in the lives of his family members.

But Jacob was a true believer. By the end of his life he had been reunited with his favorite son Joseph. He had witnessed the grace and the power of God in rescuing his family from famine and in fulfilling the prophetic dream that God had given to his son Joseph years earlier. He saw his family reunited. Thus his faith was strengthened.

The last time that we were here in Genesis, two weeks ago, we saw that Jacob, near the end of his life, called in Joseph and made him promise to return his body to Canaan after he died. Now he makes a similar charge to all of his sons. After pronouncing a blessing upon each of his sons, a part that we have skipped over, Jacob calls upon them to bury his body in the Cave of Machpelah in Hebron (HEBRON MAP 2) where Abraham and Sarah and Isaac and Rebekah and Leah were all buried. Shortly after this, v. 33 says that Jacob died.

Jacob's strong desire to be buried in Hebron was a testimony to his family of his confidence in the promise of God. The Lord had told him and his ancestors that the land of Canaan would one day come into the possession of their descendants. Jacob believed that, despite the outward circumstances that made the fulfillment of the promise seem unlikely. In believing in the promise of God Jacob was making a statement about his conviction that his God was sovereign. Only an all-powerful God could bring this to pass. Jacob's God and Abraham's God and Isaac's God was sovereign. (PROJECTOR OFF)

This faith in the sovereignty of his promise-keeping God now became a testimony to the Egyptians. For they became involved in the process of bringing Jacob's body to Canaan. Nowhere else in the Bible is there such attention given to a burial, with the possible exception of the burial of Jesus. The primary reason has to do with the emphasis in Genesis that is placed on the promise of God to give the descendants of

Abraham the land of Canaan. Here there is a significant testimony made to the faith of Abraham's descendants in this promise by their sovereign God.

According to v. 2 Joseph has the physicians embalm his father's body. There was a separate Hebrew word that was used for "embalmers." Normally embalmers rather than doctors prepared the body of the deceased. But the embalmers used religious rituals that reflected their pagan beliefs in the survival of the body in the afterlife.
(PROJECTOR ON--- EMBALMING IN EGYPT)

This is a picture from ancient Egypt of the embalming process being conducted by Anubis, the god of the afterlife. Joseph and his brothers did not want the magic and rituals of the embalmers used with their father. But they wanted Egyptian mummification technology used so that Jacob's body could be transported to Canaan. That is why Joseph called in the physicians rather than the embalmers. The physicians were also capable of using the technology that was necessary to preserve the body.
(PROJECTOR OFF)

After Jacob's death there was a seventy day mourning period, which we know from ancient Egyptian texts was typical of Egyptian practice. Then Joseph sought and received permission from Pharaoh to bury his father in Canaan. But it was not just Joseph's family which brought the body to Hebron. There was a whole slew of Egyptians who came along. This says something about the high position and great esteem which Joseph had in Egypt.

As this great procession entered Canaan, there was more mourning. This was more than just a superficial, ceremonial mourning. For the Canaanites took note of the grief that was displayed and called it "a grievous mourning."

(PROJECTOR ON--- HEBRON TOMB) Finally the immediate family laid the body of Jacob to rest in the Cave of Machpelah. Some 1800 years later King Herod built this building around the site. Today it is a place of worship for Moslems and for Jews. Hebron is within the Palestinian territories. But there is a small orthodox Jewish community here, and it is protected by an Israeli Defense Force unit.

(PROJECTOR OFF) The procession of Jacob's family with the Egyptians to Canaan was to be a precursor of a procession that would come 400 years later. For in the great Exodus the descendants of Jacob would again leave the land of Egypt for Canaan, and they would bring a number of Egyptians with them. They would also bring the bones of another patriarch with them. This time they would be carrying the body of Joseph.

Jacob's instructions concerning the disposition of his body were a testimony to his faith in the sovereignty of God. For he trusted in God's promises. The realistic outlook for the fulfillment of the promise that the descendants of Abraham would possess the land of Canaan did not seem to be very good. Jacob's family was still a small tribe. They were not even living in Canaan now. The only possession that they had in Canaan was a grave site, though perhaps they also claimed title to land by Shechem. But Jacob's

family and the nation of Egypt witnessed Jacob's faith in the promise of God by his request to be buried in the Promised Land.

There have been many times in the history of Israel when the prospects for the fulfillment of the promise of the land seemed dim. When the Hebrews fled Egypt being pursued by a powerful Egyptian army, the prospects did not look good. When Joshua led the children of Israel into Canaan against more numerous and more powerful enemies, the prospects did not look good. When the Babylonians overran the country of Judah centuries later, the prospects did not look good. When the Roman armies in 70 AD invaded Judea and destroyed the city of Jerusalem, the prospects did not look good. When the Jewish people were dispersed and scattered through the world for 1900 years, the prospects for possession of the land of Canaan did not look good. When tiny Israel took on the larger and seemingly more powerful Arab armies in 1948 and 1967 and 1973, the prospects did not look good. On October 7, 2023, when Israel was attacked from the south and the north by terrorists, the prospects for occupation of the promised land looked in doubt. Still today Israel does not possess the land of Canaan to the extent that God promised to the patriarchs in the Book of Genesis. But God has promised that it will happen, and God always keeps His promises.

The testimony of Jacob and the testimony of history is that we have a sovereign God. Because we have a sovereign God, we can trust His promises. This is one of the key lessons of our entire study of Joseph. This young man believed in the promises of a sovereign God even when every circumstance seemed to be working against him. But eventually this faith in a sovereign God bore fruit. And Joseph's convictions wore off on his brothers and on his father Jacob.

One day 200 years ago an old Indian, half naked and near death from starvation, supposedly wandered into a frontier settlement, begging for food. While eagerly devouring bread given to him by sympathetic frontiersmen, a brightly colored ribbon attached to a small pouch hanging around his neck was noticed. Upon being questioned the Indian said that it was a charm given to him in his younger days. The Indian let his inquirers open the pouch. Inside they discovered a faded, greasy paper which proved to be a regular discharge from the Continental Army, entitling this man to a pension for life. It was signed by General George Washington.

Too often God's people are like that starving Indian. We have been given great promises by a sovereign God. But unless we learn these promises from God's Word and claim them, they do us little good. Jacob testified to the sovereignty of God, and He did it by believing in the promises of God. We would do well to follow his example.

II.

In vv. 15-21 of #50 we come to THE TESTIMONY OF JOSEPH'S BROTHERS TO THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD--- EXERCISING FORGIVENESS. (PROJECTOR ON--- THE TESTIMONY OF JOSEPH'S BROTHERS...) We find out here what Joseph's brothers relearn from Joseph about the sovereignty of God.

Verse 15 says, **“When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, ‘It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him.’”** The brothers are still feeling guilt for their sin of having sold Joseph into slavery many years earlier. Guilt often leads to fear. Now the brothers are fearful of Joseph.

People who have mistreated others are often prone to interpret the actions of others in light of their own weaknesses. People who have been motivated by selfishness and a desire for revenge often expect others to be motivated by selfishness and a desire for revenge. Psychologists call this an example of projection. The brothers here have projected their own selfishness and desires for revenge upon Joseph. They are fearful that Joseph's kindness toward them has been motivated by love for his father. Joseph knew that his father would be upset if he did anything to his brothers. But now that Jacob is gone, Joseph may decide to retaliate. After the horrible things that the brothers did to Joseph, it is hard for them to imagine that Joseph could continue to be so loving toward them.

So the brothers sent a message to Joseph. They claimed that Jacob had said before he died that Joseph should forgive his brothers for their sin. Whether that is actually true is not made clear. But since the brothers feared that Joseph's love for his father was the reason that he had not retaliated against them, they would use that relationship as the basis for their plea to Joseph.

Joseph cried when he heard this message. He had forgiven his brothers long ago. He was upset about their anxiety and fear and inability to understand and trust him.

The brothers came in to Joseph and offered to be his slaves. Given what they had done to Joseph, that seemed like fair punishment to them. We human beings often have difficulty in accepting forgiveness. We often have trouble accepting it from others and from God. The result is sometimes that we punish ourselves. We tell ourselves that we are no good. We are beyond forgiveness. We live in the past and focus on our misdeeds. The problem is that we fail to understand the gracious character of our sovereign God.

Thus in v. 19 Joseph says to his brothers, **“Do not fear, for am I in the place of God?”** Joseph appears to be saying that it is God who has the responsibility to protect and vindicate his servants. (ROMANS 12:19) In the New Testament the Apostle Paul expresses it this way in the Twelfth Chapter of Romans, **“Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’”**

Joseph adds in v. 20 of our text, **“As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.”** Joseph acknowledged the evil that had been committed against him. His brothers had been motivated by hatred and jealousy. They not only caused harm to come to Joseph, but they also caused great pain to come to their father Jacob. (PROJECTOR OFF)

True forgiveness does not minimize serious sin. It does not say, "Oh, it was no big deal. I know that you really didn't mean it." True forgiveness acknowledges sin for what it is, but then it also does forgive.

What enabled Joseph to forgive was his appreciation for the sovereignty of God. He was able to see that God used the evil things that had been done against him to bring about a greater good for him and for his family and for the plan of God.

The evidence of this total forgiveness comes in v. 21. Joseph tells his brothers not to be afraid. He promises to use his position to provide for them. The text tells us, "**Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.**"

Joseph's brothers had witnessed the physical deliverance of their family from a serious famine. They had seen the generous provision that had been made for them in the country of Egypt. They had been exposed to the miraculous rise to power of their brother Joseph. These things enabled these brothers to testify to the sovereignty of their God in His care for them.

But perhaps the most amazing thing to them was the complete forgiveness given to them by their brother. The key to Joseph's forgiveness was his grasp of the sovereignty of God. He was able to forgive because he had confidence in the ability of God to use the evil that was done against him to accomplish God's plan and to bring about good. Joseph had some understanding of what God was doing in the big picture.

Earlier in this sermon series I described my Joseph experience of being forced out of a church as a young pastor because I had tried to address inappropriate behavior on the part of the leading elder and his wife. My wife and I were left high and dry with a small child, a house we had bought a year earlier, and a month's salary. We were also angry and hurt by how we had been treated.

The Sunday after I resigned another young pastor was invited to come in on short notice to preach in the Sunday service. He had no knowledge of what had happened in the church. I learned later that he just happened to preach on the subject of Joseph, and just happened to choose as his primary text Genesis #50 v. 20, "**As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good...**"

I don't know how the congregation interpreted the message that Sunday, but I saw it as a great encouragement from the Lord. I had been sold out by my brothers, but there was the promise that God would bring good out of it. I can look back on it now and see how the Lord used that experience to develop my character and increase my faith. At the same time this pastor's choice of sermon topic was a reminder of the sovereignty of God, and the timing at which it came helped me along in the process of forgiveness.

To forgive others who have wronged us, we also need to lift our eyes from our hurt and mistreatment to the sovereign God who has promised to work all things together for

good to those who love Him. Foundational to that is making sure that we have accepted the forgiveness that God's Son has provided for us, that we have accepted Jesus Christ as our personal Savior. Because He forgave us of our sins, we are to forgive others for their sins.

(PROJECTOR ON--- FANNY CROSBY TOMBSTONE) I have presided at a couple of burials in a cemetery in Bridgeport, Connecticut, where Fanny Crosby is buried. Fanny Crosby wrote about 800 hymns, including "Blessed Assurance," "All the Way My Savior Leads Me," "Tell Me the Story of Jesus," "Draw Me Nearer" and "Praise Him," which we will sing at the end of our service today. When she was six years old, she got sick with some kind of infection which affected her eyes. The regular family doctor was out of town. The guy who treated her was not really qualified to be doing it. What he gave her caused Fanny to go blind.

(FANNY CROSBY) Toward the end of her life a friend asked her, "**Do you ever feel any bitterness toward the doctor?**" She replied, "**I have not for a moment in more than 85 years felt a spark of resentment against him, because I have always believed... that the good Lord... by this means consecrated me to the work I am still permitted to do.**" A proper understanding of the sovereignty of God enables us to forgive. It assures us that our difficulties and mistreatments somehow fit into a bigger picture which will somehow ultimately work out for good.

III.

Consider finally vv. 22-26 of #50 and THE TESTIMONY OF JOSEPH TO THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD--- HAVING HOPE FOR THE FUTURE. (III. THE TESTIMONY OF JOSEPH TO...) The time came for Joseph to die when he was 110 years old. For some reason the Egyptians regarded the age of 110 as the ideal age at which to die. There are at least 27 references to this that archaeologists have discovered in the Egyptian literature of this period.

An archaeologist from the University of Liverpool by the name of Grigorios Kontopoulos says that most Egyptians died at a young age, but there seemed to be some among the Egyptian elite who lived to old age. He writes, "**Several cases of individuals who reached--- or who wished to reach--- a long lifespan were attested in ancient Egyptian literature. Although the majority of texts reflected the experiences of the literate male elite, several examples dated during the Dynastic period (such as the famous Papyrus Westcar [WESTCARE PAPYRUS] from the Middle kingdom, ca. 2000 BCE) indicate that 110 years seemed to be the ideal lifespan.**" This is that papyrus. It is fitting that the sovereign God should have this godly man, this hero both of the Hebrew people and of the Egyptians, die at this age. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Joseph also lived to see the third generation of Ephraim's sons. That would be referring to his great grandchildren. That it says that they were born on Joseph's knees may mean that Joseph lived until they were born and was able to hold them on his lap.

Joseph made a significant statement to his family in v. 24: **“I am about to die, but God will visit you and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.”** Up to this point the family of Jacob has largely depended upon Joseph and his high position in government for protection and care. Joseph now points them to the sovereign God. It is He whom the people must trust. It is He who made the promise about possession of the land of Canaan. It is He who will bring them there.

This Joseph, like his father, gives instructions concerning the disposition of his body. He, too, wants to be buried in the land of Canaan. But he wants his body to be buried only when his people make their final exit from the land of Egypt. Thus his body is going to hang around and serve as a constant reminder to his people of his confidence in his sovereign God. That body is going to be an ongoing expression of Joseph’s faith in God. He perhaps sensed that difficult times would come for his people. What they would need is hope for the future. Joseph’s unburied body would be one source of that hope. For it would be a reminder to them about the confidence of their ancestor in God’s promise to bring them back to the land of Canaan.

An archaeologist by the name of Douglas Petrovich says that he believes that he has found evidence of the place in Egypt where Joseph lived. (JOSEPH’S TOMB) This is a reconstruction of the remains of a compound in Avaris in Egypt. In the back yard of this house there is a tomb of some significance. There are eleven other grave sites nearby. The bigger tomb is empty. Its contents could have been removed by grave robbers. But there are no bones left behind. Usually grave robbers leave the bones.

The focus of Joseph’s hope was a visitation from God. (PROJECTOR OFF) In a world that is filled with sin and evil and trials and difficulties, that has always been the focus of hope for the people of God. There was a hint of that hope in the Garden of Eden after sin had entered the world. God promised that the seed of the woman would eventually bruise the devil on the head. In the Abrahamic Covenant God promised that through the descendants of Abraham all of the nations would eventually be blessed. Here at the end of Genesis there is the hope expressed that some day there will be a visitation from God whereby the people will be able to leave Egypt and claim the land of Canaan. During the Exodus itself there were many occasions when the children of Israel hoped for a visitation from God whereby their enemies would be defeated. In the period of the Judges the Israelites often cried out for a deliverer. They looked for a visitation from God. Sometimes that visitation took the form of a Judge. In the Babylonian Captivity in the sixth century BC the Jews looked for a visitation from God whereby they might return to the Promised Land.

The prophets of the Old Testament began to focus their hope for a visitation from God by a person, by a Messiah, who would deliver them from their enemies. Finally Jesus was born. Such is the Christmas story. The father of John the Baptist (PROJECTOR ON--- LUKE 2:68-69A) spoke of Him saying, **“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people/ and has raised up a horn of salvation for us...”**

This visitation involved a suffering Messiah who returned to heaven. He, however, promised to come again. This time He will come as a conquering king, and He will establish His kingdom upon the earth. Thus the focus of God's people today is upon this visitation of God in the form of the return of Christ. Our hope is expressed in the brief prayer that concludes the Book of Revelation, "**Come, Lord Jesus.**"

God's people have always been faced with trials and tribulations. But because we have a sovereign God, we can trust His promises, we can forgive, and we can have hope for the future.

Eric Liddell (ERIC LIDDELL) won a gold medal in the summer Olympics 100 years ago in Paris. He later went as a missionary to China. When WW II broke out, he sent his family out of the country. He was imprisoned in a Japanese war camp. There he suffered from a brain tumor which took his life. Prior to this he wrote, "**Circumstances may appear to wreck our lives and God's plans, but God is not helpless among the ruins. Our broken lives are not lost or useless. God's love is still working. He comes in and takes the calamity and uses it victoriously, working out his wonderful plan of love.**"

(PROJECTOR OFF) Such is the life of Joseph, truly a man for all seasons, a man who portrayed the Christ-like qualities of the Messiah who would one day visit His people. May God give us the grace to emulate Joseph's trust in the promises of a sovereign God, his ability to forgive others, and his hope for the future.