Genesis 48 – Not the End, Yet…

As we come to the ending of Jospeh's story, you might notice that there is a tension. As we have said before several times, the story of Joseph gives us a picture of how God is going to eventually make everything right in this world. A big part of this is how God heals the effects of sin in our families. We see this through the repentance of the brothers and the forgiveness of Joseph. After this resolution, it feels like the story is over. In fact, many of you have asked me after church, so, is this the last of the Joseph series? But, as we see, there is some more to the story. It is, as the title indicates, not yet the end.

The last chapters of Genesis show that there is a lot more work to be done if the effects of the fall in Eden are to be fully healed. While last week, Pastor Rich showed how God's people can bless the world they live in, Joseph is an excellent example of this, as we look closely at Joseph's handling of the famine, we see some problems. Yes, he provided a means to get through the famine, saving a portion of food from when times were good in preparation for when times were bad, and the people thanked him for this.

However, and this is a big however, by the end of chapter 47 we see Joseph using the food that he had collected in the good years to buy all the livestock in Egypt, and the land in Egypt for Pharaoh. Not only did Pharaoh own all the property, but the text says quite clearly, "Joseph reduced the people to servitude, from one end of Egypt to the other" (47:21). More than this, the story clearly points forward to the day when God's own people will be enslaved to Egypt, and their children murdered by Pharaoh, before their deliverance with Moses in the Exodus.

This tension in Joseph's story points to the coming of the true and better Joseph. The ending of Genesis is not the end of God's story. Even the wisest men like Joseph, are left with very hard situations in the world they find themselves in. Let's look at what happens as Joseph experiences some of the fallout of his decisions from the chapter before. Genesis 48:

Some time later Joseph was told, "Your father is ill." So he took his two sons Manasseh and Ephraim along with him. [2] When Jacob was told, "Your son Joseph has come to you," Israel rallied his strength and sat up on the bed.

[3] Jacob said to Joseph, "God Almighty appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan, and there he blessed me [4] and said to me, 'I am going to make you fruitful and 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.'

[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. [6] Any children born to you after them will be yours; in the territory they inherit they will be

reckoned under the names of their brothers. [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).

[8] When Israel saw the sons of Joseph, he asked, "Who are these?"

[9] "They are the sons God has given me here," Joseph said to his father.

Then Israel said, "Bring them to me so I may bless them."

[10] Now Israel's eyes were failing because of old age, and he could hardly see. So Joseph brought his sons close to him, and his father kissed them and embraced them.

[11] Israel said to Joseph, "I never expected to see your face again, and now God has allowed me to see your children too."

[12] Then Joseph removed them from Israel's knees and bowed down with his face to the ground. [13] And Joseph took both of them, Ephraim on his right toward Israel's left hand and Manasseh on his left toward Israel's right hand, and brought them close to him. [14] But Israel reached out his right hand and put it on Ephraim's head, though he was the younger, and crossing his arms, he put his left hand on Manasseh's head, even though Manasseh was the firstborn.

[15] Then he blessed Joseph and said, "May the God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked faithfully, 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 on the earth."

[17] When Joseph saw his father placing his right hand on Ephraim's head he was displeased; so he took hold of his father's hand to move it from Ephraim's head to Manasseh's head. [18] Joseph said to him, "No, my father, this one is the firstborn; put your right hand on his head."

[19] But his father refused and said, "I know, my son, I know. He too will become a people, and he too will become great. Nevertheless, his younger brother will be greater than he, and his descendants will become a group of nations." [20] He blessed them that day and said,

"In your name will Israel pronounce this blessing: 'May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh.' " So he put Ephraim ahead of Manasseh.

[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. [22] And to you I give one more ridge of land than to your brothers, the ridge I took from the Amorites with my sword and my bow."

This is the Word of the Lord

As I said in the introduction, the last chapters of the book of Genesis are something of an anticlimax from the heights of emotion of Joseph's revelation of who he is to his brothers to the story of him taxing all Egypt into slavery. The last three chapters of Genesis are described by one commentator as "over-detailed, if not morbidly melodramatic."[1] The question then is, what is God doing in giving us these passages?

To add further confusion to this, of all the stories that we know about Jacob, the author of Hebrews finds this chapter to be the most important. Hebrews 11:21 says, "By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph's sons, and worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff." Jacob had dreamed of the ladder to heaven, wrestled with the angel of the Lord, fathered the twelve tribes, but it is his blessing of Joseph's sons that stands above all this. This should cause us to be especially careful with what he is doing here.

The chapter begins by saying, "some time later…" It appears that in this undisclosed amount of time since the years of famine, Joseph had remained the prime minister of Egypt while his father and brothers lived in Goshen, the best grazing lands for shepherds on the outskirts of Egypt. During this time, it seems some space has grown between Joseph and his family, as Jacob does not recognize his sons, and later on, when Jacob dies, Joseph's brothers fear that there will be further retribution from Joseph. We wouldn't expect this if Joseph was around all the time.

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Jacob begins his blessing of Jospeh's sons by remembering what God has promised him. God appeared to Jacob at Luz, or Bethel, and repeated the promise he originally made to Abraham, to make him a great nation. The promise, as Jacob tells it, explicitly uses the language to fulfill what Adam and Eve had been commanded to do, "be fruitful and multiply" and to take the land. This is God's command to Adam and Eve before the fall, and the promise given to Jacob shows how God will fulfill this obligation for them.

The land given will be an "everlasting possession." Only God can make a promise like this, to give something forever. At the end of Jacob's life, it is this eternal promise that he clings to. Most importantly for this passage, it is this eternal promise that Jacob bases his blessing on. That is the faith that Hebrews is commending.

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[1] Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*. Zondervan Academic, 2000. P.491.

When Jacob begins his blessing, he surprisingly says to Joseph that he will adopt his eldest two sons and bless them as he would bless his own sons in the chapter to come. Jacob says, “Ephraim and Manasseh will be mine, as Reuben and Simeon are mine” (48:5).

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There are two ways we can take this adoption/blessing of Joseph’s sons. It is possible that Jacob is meaning to slight Joseph in bypassing him to bless his sons. It could be a commentary on how Joseph has become too Egyptian in his ways to receive the blessing of God, and so Jacob must now bless his sons in his place. Or it could also be seen as a double blessing for Joseph. Typically, in this culture, the firstborn would receive a double portion of inheritance to give them prominence over the family. This is why Jacob mentions Reuben and Simeon, who were his first two, and whose place Ephraim and Manasseh are taking. However, we recognize that Joseph is not receiving the blessing directly, but through his sons. Whenever someone recalls the tribes of Israel, they do not speak of Joseph, but his sons. This is a serious thing.

This evaluation of Joseph could be then somewhat like King David, who was unable to build God’s temple because he was a “man of war” (1 Chr.28:3). So is Joseph unable to be a patriarch because he was tainted with Egyptian power-lust. Joseph had no say in this matter. It was not because of his sin that put him in this place, nor is he at fault for doing so, and yet, the blessing passes over him. Just like David, who was faithful in following the commands of God in cleansing the Promised Land, so Joseph must have dealt accordingly with Pharaoh’s goods. But that does not mean it didn’t have an effect on him. The world, on account of sin, cannot bring perfect situations. Again, this points to the eternal promise of God that Jacob bases his blessing on.

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There is also a question as to why Jacob also intentionally blesses the younger of Joseph’s sons. The story is very reminiscent of Isaac’s blessing of Jacob over Esau. While the manner that Jacob and his mother went about securing that blessing has caused all kinds of problems in the family, Jacob can now see that God is using this for the good of all. Jacob is thus recognizing God’s hand in his life, just as Joseph had repeatedly said.

One thing that might go unnoticed, is that Jacob intentionally blesses Joseph’s sons above his elder sons. This is all the more interesting when we note that Joseph’s sons are half-Egyptian. Remember that Joseph took an Egyptian wife while he was there. Typically, taking foreign wives is not seen as a good thing in the Old Testament, as God’s people are to remain set apart, but in Joseph’s case it is understandable.

This blessing of the foreign-born sons, adopted into God's family directly, foreshadows what God will do in the New Covenant, where Jesus provides a way for the whole world to come to God. The natural birth that we are given is superseded by being born again in the new covenant. These foreign born will be grafted into God's people through his blessing.

One Church Father points out how Jacob even makes the sign of the cross with his arms as he blesses these foreign born sons, unintentionally pointing forward to the way that God will bring in the Gentiles into his covenant people, through the death of his Son.[2]

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The specific blessing that Jacob gives Joseph's sons also speaks to the greater work of God in this story. It is the God that led Abraham and Isaac and has shepherded him. Most importantly, it is a blessing from "the angel who has delivered me from all harm." This word for 'deliver' is more literally translated 'redeem', and it is the first instance of this word in the Bible. This deliverance or redemption will be seen in how God brings out his people from Egypt, but more importantly, in Christ, how we are redeemed from God's wrath for our sin.

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The story ends with Jacob now having a new relationship with death. Because of Joseph's resurrection, he is now able to trust God with his life. Jacob says in his blessing, "I am about to die, but God will be with you and take you back to the land of your fathers…" Jacob no longer speaks of death as the pit, as he did when he was worried about the lives of his children, but desires to be brought back to the promised land, the place of God's blessing, a sign of his eternal kingdom. The things of this world are passing away, shadows of things to come.

Before, in the story of Joseph, we saw glimpses of how God would fix the way sin had corroded inter-human relationships. Now we will see how God will begin to fix the rift between us and himself. This is a much larger story, that will take the rest of the Bible to unfold, even if it is foreshadowed in the life of Joseph. That is what Hebrews finds this to be the most important part of Jacob and Joseph's story because this is what most points to how there is a need for a future saviour. They are at the end of their lives, and what they have to pass on is first and foremost God's promise of salvation. That is why Jacob keeps insisting that his bones be brought back to the Promised Land.

As we saw in the previous chapter, Joseph can share his wisdom in government administration, and in doing so be a great blessing to Egypt. But at the same time there is still something more that needs to come, in Joseph's careful administration, he ends up

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[2] Ephrem the Syrian, *Homilies on Genesis*, 66.9.

enslaving all of Egypt, and leading to the enslavement of his own people. As Jesus said to Pilate, his kingdom is not of this world, there is no situation in which even men like Joseph can build God's kingdom, God must build it himself. This does not mean that we cannot do anything, God's people are a huge blessing to the world, but this world is at best a shadow of things to come. It is idolatry to treat the shadow like the reality.

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The story of Joseph's life reminds me of someone who has a much closer tie to our own denomination, the great Abraham Kuyper. If Joseph is a patriarch of all God's people, Kuyper is at least a patriarch of the Christian Reformed Church. Abraham Kuyper lived from 1837 to 1920. Kuyper was born as a pastor's kid, homeschooled by his father. Later he graduated with a doctorate in theology from Leiden, where he persuaded toward the liberalism of his day. However, when he became a pastor himself, he recognized that this liberal theology did not minister to his church, he turned from this liberalism and found true faith in Christ.

Eventually, Kuyper led a large number of people out of the unfaithful national Dutch Reformed church, which no longer held ministers to adhere to our confessions. The group called themselves the 'doleantie', meaning 'those who grieve', because they grieved the poor state of the national church, and so the necessity to leave. Eventually Kuyper would join the Doleantie with an earlier group that had left the national church, forming the Dutch counterpart of our denomination in America.

Kuyper wouldn't stop there though. Kuyper founded newspapers, trade unions, universities, lead political parties, and would even become the Prime Minister of the Netherlands. In this we see a strong correlation with Joseph. Kuyper was born a small-time pastor to become the Prime Minister of the Netherlands, Joseph was born to a shepherd in the middle of nowhere to become the Prime Minister of Egypt. Both men faced great adversity along the way, Joseph with his brothers and Potiphar's wife, and Kuyper against an ever-growing liberal church and society.

Kuyper helped the Netherlands as a whole maintain their religious roots, and avoid some of the mistakes of France with their revolutionary political tendencies. He cared deeply about his country and the church. He always wanted to look out for 'de kleine luyden', the little people, the orthodox rural society scoffed at by the urban elites. Kuyper helped faithful Christians find a place in modern life, showing that they can serve God in every sphere they found themselves, not simply what would be considered *religious*. Kuyper also helped preserve Reformed doctrine, writing some of the best theology of his era, all while

maintaining ties to Christians who came before him. Like Joseph, he was an exemplary wise man.

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But like Joseph, Kuyper's deep involvement in politics changed him. Kuyper could be more fixated on changing this world than preparing people for the world to come. His **biographer** notes that by the end of his life he would be too busy writing columns for his newspaper on Sunday morning to even attend church. His biographer writes, "his desk had become his pulpit, a national readership his congregation, his study a populist version of the "sanctuary"..."[3]

In this, his life is both a model and a warning, just like Joseph. Both men, though incredibly admirable, were affected by their surroundings and their drive to improve the world they were in. This is a good thing, but it can easily lead us to think that what we build here and now are ultimate ends in themselves. Joseph, though attempting to be faithful as best he can, led all Egypt and his own people into slavery. Kuyper, though fighting against a growing modernism that sought to get rid of anything Christian, eventually was distracted by this fight to neglect that which gave him the reason to fight to begin with.

In our own lives, we too are forced by our situations to try and live faithfully to what God calls us to. It can be tempting to mistake what we are working at in our lives today with the eternal kingdom. Even if we are working in institutions that are directed to those ends, Christian schools, Kings University, or even the denomination, these things must serve the ultimate end in God's kingdom. When we think that our ultimate purpose as Christians is to build God's kingdom ourselves then it becomes very easy to make excuses for these organizations and forget the whole purpose of the organization to begin with!

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This is why, like Jacob, we must show our faith in God's eternal promise to save us above everything else. It is this which Jacob is remembered for in Hebrews, and it is this which will live on forever for us as well.

God's Word does not treat the problems of our lives with simplistic answers. Yes, the gospel is clear, and easy enough for a child to understand, but the way it interacts with our lives is as complex as our lives are themselves. Creation is still disordered from our sin. The order that God wants to bring to our lives has to deal with that disorder in a way that can

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[3] James D. Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper: Modern Calvinist, Christian Democrat*. Eerdmans, 2013. P.129.

account for the incredible complexity that our lives exhibit. We will not see a perfect political order on earth until the true Lord of all comes again, the true and better Joseph.