

The Unusual Blessing Given to Joseph's Sons (Genesis 46-48)

Expository Lessons from the Book of Genesis

I. Background and Introduction

- a. Joseph has become second in command in Egypt. The seven-year famine he predicted has come upon Egypt and the surrounding nations. That forced his brothers to come down to Canaan seeking food.
- b. After revealing himself to his brothers, Joseph shows a compassionate heart toward them, and provides for them in Egypt.
- c. The brothers go back and tell their father Jacob, now an old man, that Joseph is still alive; the entire family moves down to Egypt.

II. Jacob and His Entire Family Move to Egypt (Genesis 46-47:10)

- a. Read **Genesis 45:25-46:7**
 - i. Before he dies, Jacob wants to see Joseph again.
 - ii. On the way travelling from Canaan down to Egypt, the Lord speaks to Jacob in a night vision. The Lord tells him:
 1. The Lord will bless their trip to Egypt, and will make Jacob's family into a great nation there.
 2. The Lord will go down with Jacob to Egypt, and the Lord will bring him back up again (second part fulfilled after Jacob dies in Egypt and his body is returned to Canaan).
 3. Joseph will put his hands on the eyes of Jacob (presumably to close them after Jacob dies).
 - iii. Jacob travels down to Egypt in a cart, along with all the wives, children, livestock and belongings of his extended family.
- b. Summary of **Genesis 46:8-27**
 - i. The descendants of Jacob who went down to Egypt, as well as the descendants of Joseph who was already there, are listed in **Genesis 46**.
 - ii. **Question:** How many descendants of Jacob, in total, went down to Egypt? What does your Bible say, in **Genesis 46:27**? Also, to double-check, please look at **Exodus 1:5** in your Bible. How many does it say there?

1. Some in the room will say “70 total” and others will say “75 total”.
2. The problem: in the Masoretic Text (MT, the Hebrew text that most modern Old Testaments are translated from), it says that Joseph had only two descendants, and the total number of Jacob’s descendants was **70**. However, in the Septuagint (LXX, a Greek translation often quoted by Jesus and the apostolic writers, and used in the early church) it indicates that while Joseph had Ephraim and Manasseh as his first two sons, he also had other descendants, and the total number of Jacob’s descendants was **75**. Which is correct?
3. Consider what Stephen said in the New Testament, in his speech in **Acts 7** when he recounts this story from **Genesis**:
 - a. “But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent out our fathers first. And the second time Joseph was made known to his brothers, and Joseph’s family became known to the Pharaoh. Then Joseph sent and called his father Jacob and all his relatives to him, seventy-five people. So Jacob went down to Egypt; and he died, he and our fathers.” (**Acts 7:12–15**, NKJV)
 - b. The LXX says 75 people, the MT says 70 (both in **Genesis 46:27** and **Exodus 1:5**). However, Stephen confirms what the LXX said here! Keep in mind that Stephen is in the midst of an intense exchange with Jewish zealots in Acts 7. It’s hard to imagine that he would be relying on Scriptures that were suspect.
 - c. It seems that Stephen, Peter and Paul were reading the LXX, and assumed that their readers/ hearers were as well. That is the main reason why I generally read from Old Testament translations based on the LXX (rather the Masoretic Text) as well.
- c. Joseph reunites with his father Jacob. (Read **Genesis 46:28-34**)
 - i. Jacob and Joseph have a tearful reunion after many years apart.
 - ii. Jacob says he can now die in peace, since he has seen Joseph again.
 - iii. Joseph tells his brothers to tell Pharaoh that they are shepherds, so that they can settle in the land of Goshen.
- d. Jacob brought before Pharaoh (Read **Genesis 47:7-12**)
 - i. Jacob is age 130; blesses Pharaoh.

- ii. Joseph provides bread and settles them in some of the best land in Egypt.

III. The Famine Continues – People Get Desperate (Genesis 47:13-26)

- a. Very severe famine. To eat, people from Egypt and Canaan give their money to Joseph (and Pharaoh), until it is gone.
- b. Then they give all their livestock to Joseph and Pharaoh, in exchange for grain/ bread.
- c. Next (except for the priests) they offer to sell all their land, and sell themselves as well to be servants to Pharaoh, in order to obtain food and seed; and they move into the cities.
 - i. The people say, “You have saved our lives; let us find grace in the sight of my lord, and we will be Pharaoh’s servants.” (Genesis 47:25, LXX, OSB)
 - 1. The people are happy to give up all they have, in order to receive bread to eat and to escape starving to death.
 - ii. In the prior lesson we looked at parallels between Jesus and Joseph. Here we see one more parallel: the people had to give up everything they had in order to be saved from death. Yet Pharaoh and Joseph (like the Father and Jesus) saw that the people were given seed and food.
 - iii. Jesus would later say, “So likewise, whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple.” (Luke 14:33, NKJV)

IV. Jacob Plans for His Death

- a. Read **Genesis 47:27-31**
 - i. After 17 years in Egypt, Israel (Jacob) is 147 years old, and sees that he is near death.
 - ii. Israel (Jacob) has Joseph swear that he will bury his father back in Canaan with his forefathers, not in Egypt.
 - iii. Israel “bowed himself (worshiped) on the top of his staff” in the LXX. Note that some translations like the NKJV, which are based on the Masoretic Text, say he bowed “on the head of his bed”.
 - iv. In the New Testament, the writer of Hebrews recounts this episode and tells us, “By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshiped, leaning on the top of his staff.” (Hebrews 11:21, NKJV)

1. If you do a comparison with Greek interlinear Bibles, the match between **Hebrews 11:21** in the New Testament and **Genesis 47:31** in the LXX regarding “bowed on the top of his staff” is especially clear.
2. The author of **Hebrews** was reading the LXX, and assumed that his readers were, as well!

V. **Jacob Blesses His Grandsons in an Unusual Way**

- a. There are some incredible gems to unearth from this chapter, *IF* we are willing to ask some tough questions of the text and then do the hard work of digging out the answers.
 - i. One of the books that has most helped sharpen my Bible study is a book called *How to Read a Book*, by Mortimer J. Adler. This book teaches how to be a good, active reader.
 1. If you were listening to a lecture, and your professor said something you didn’t understand, you could simply raise your hand and ask the teacher a question, directly.
 2. When reading a book you need to do the same thing; however there is one problem: there is no teacher to ask! Therefore, after you raise a question, *YOU are the one* who then must dig into the book to find the answer to your question! This is what a good reader does, and this is something we should all learn to do.
 - ii. Why is this so important? The goal of reading the Scriptures to discern what the writer was trying to communicate to us (as inspired by the Holy Spirit). To accomplish this, we must get into the writer’s head by asking challenging questions of the text and then digging out the answers from the text itself. It is much too easy, when we get stuck or confused, to turn to some modern commentator (with his or her modern filter or agenda) to explain what the Scriptures mean. Please resist the temptation to be lazy and take shortcuts!
 - iii. In this chapter, you are going to see an incredible amount of detail. We are then going to take a hard look and ask ourselves, “*Why* is all this detail being provided here?”
- b. Read **Genesis 48**
 - i. Recap of the story line.
 1. Jacob is very old, near death and blind. Joseph takes his two sons, Manasseh (the elder one) and Ephraim (the younger one) to see their grandfather.

2. Jacob claims Joseph's two sons as his own; they will get an inheritance along with the tribes of Joseph's brothers (their uncles).
 3. Then there is a confusing hand-switching scene with the blessing of the grandsons.
- c. **Questions:** Why is this left-right hand discussion, and Joseph's attempt to switch his father's hand placement? What is going on here? Why is so much specific detail provided?
- i. The greater blessing, reserved for the older son, is to come from Jacob's *right* hand (not his left).
 1. Note that the right-hand side is the favored side in Scripture as well as in common use. (Sorry, left-handed people!) It says specifically that Jesus was to be seated at the *right hand* of God (**Psalm 110:1**).
 2. Also, everyone is familiar with the expression, "he/she is my right-hand person", referring the most trusted assistant.
 - ii. Joseph tries to put the elder son, Manasseh, under the Jacob's right hand (and Ephraim, the younger son, under Jacob's left hand). However, Jacob (his blind father) has other ideas, and insists that his younger grandson, Ephraim, will get the greater (right-hand) blessing.
 - iii. Jacob, the grandfather, accomplishes this by crossing his arms to override his son Joseph's plans. Jacob then resists Joseph's attempts to have him un-cross his arms (to put the right hand back on older grandson Manasseh). By this manner of blessing, the younger brother is destined to become a greater nation.
 - iv. Recall that earlier in Genesis, there are several examples of a two-sibling rivalry, where the younger one is to be favored:
 1. Isaac is favored over his older brother, Ishmael. This is discussed by Paul in **Galatians 4**. There, Paul makes the point that Ishmael, the son of the servant/slave Hagar, foreshadowed the Jews who were bound to the law; but Isaac, the son of the promise, foreshadowed the Christians.
 2. Jacob gets the greater blessing, over his older twin brother, Esau. (Discussed in **Malachi 1** and **Romans 9**.)
 3. Rachel is favored over her older sister, Leah. (See comments from Irenaeus and Justin Martyr in the **Genesis 29-31** lesson notes from this series.)

4. Early Christian writers saw this pattern of younger of two close siblings being favored, and getting the greater blessing, as foreshadowing:
 - a. Older sibling = the Jews (came first)
 - b. Younger sibling = the Church (Gentiles to receive the greater blessing)
5. Not surprising, some early Christian writers (Barnabas, Cyprian) saw the same pattern here, in younger brother Ephraim getting the greater blessing.
 - a. Cyprian, a church leader in North Africa, said that the Old Testament foreshadowed that the Gentiles would receive the greater blessing than the Jews. He pointed first to the example of Jacob vs. Esau. Then he recounts the story of Jacob blessing Joseph's sons, giving the greater blessing to the younger and insisting that he (Ephraim) would become a greater nation. (see *The Treatises of Cyprian*, Treatise XII, Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 1, pp. 512-513)
- d. Why is there so much specific text in this story to precisely explain where everyone is positioned, and how Jacob is placing his hands? (There is enough information to re-construct this entire blessing scene.) Think about why these details are here. Just random unnecessary information, or there for a reason? Is it representing something important?
 - i. Consider carefully the blessing that Jacob invokes. Re-read **Genesis 48:15-16**.
 - ii. He appeals to "the God who has fed all my life long to this day, the Angel who redeemed me from all evil", to "Bless these lads".
 1. **Question:** Is Jacob referring to two parties (God and 'the Angel') or do they both refer to the same personality?
 - iii. Consider what Jacob said to his wives when he was about to depart from Laban. Read **Genesis 31:11-13**.
 1. "The Angel of God" speaks to him in a dream, and says, "I am the God who appeared to you at Bethel."
 2. Therefore, the one referred to as "the Angel of God" is also referred to as "God".

- iv. Go back to Jacob's encounter with the Lord at Bethel, when he first left home in Canaan bound for Haran to find a wife. Read **Genesis 28:10-22**.
 - 1. Jacob saw "the Lord" standing above the ladder to heaven. He says that if God will protect him and bring him back, he will serve God.
 - 2. This is the same one who later appeared to Jacob to protect him from Laban's deceit.

- v. Throughout Jacob's life, he was protected by someone he interacted with, referred to as "the Lord", "the Angel of God" and "God". All referred to the same personality. At one point "the Lord" is standing above the ladder in the vision at Bethel.
 - 1. In **Genesis 32:22-32**, when Jacob was returning from Haran and before he met Esau, it says, "a man wrestled with him" all night, until daybreak. Then this "man" says, "you have prevailed with God and with men". After the match, Jacob states, "I saw God face to face."
 - 2. Yet the New Testament teaches regarding God (the Father), "who alone has immortality, dwelling in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see, to whom be honor and everlasting power. Amen." (**1 Timothy 6:16**, NKJV) How do we reconcile Jacob's encounters with 'God' (who, it says, he saw) with what it states in **1 Timothy 6:16** and **John 1:18**?
 - 3. Several early Christian writers saw these encounters with "God" as people seeing or interacting with the Son of God (who later would become flesh, in the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem). The Son of God can be seen, and can take on human or angelic form. Therefore, the term "the Angel of God" (often emphasized with a capital "A" by the translators) can refer to the Son of God, as well.
 - 4. Novatian (early Christian writer; leader of the church in Rome who died 257 AD) discusses "the Angel of God" interacting with Jacob throughout Jacob's life, under various names and descriptions. This is also the "man" who wrestled all night with Jacob. He explains that this can only be referring to the Son of God.
 - a. "For when this very Jacob was about to bless Manasseh and Ephraim, the sons of Joseph, with his hands placed across on the heads of the lads, he said, 'The God which fed me from my youth even unto this day, the Angel

who delivered me from all evils, bless these lads.’ Even to such a point does he affirm the same Being to be an Angel, whom he had called God, as in the end of his discourse, to express the person of whom he was speaking as one, when he said ‘bless these lads.’ For if he had meant the one to be understood as God, and the other as an angel, he would have comprised the two persons in the plural number; but now he defined the singular number of one person in the blessing, whence he meant it to be understood that the same person is God and Angel. But yet He cannot be received as God the Father; but as God and Angel, as Christ He can be received.”

- i. *CP Note: Novatian’s point regarding grammar of the LXX here is correct: the verb ‘bless’ is in the third person singular (referring to ‘he’), not the plural (which would refer to ‘they’).*
 - ii. *For example, if you heard me tell my wife “I have invited the man who is my uncle and the center for the Boston Celtics to Thanksgiving dinner”, should she set one extra seat at the table, or two? However, if I added a verb and said, “the man who is my uncle and the center...is coming for dinner” (singular), she would know I am talking about one person by two different designations; but if I said “the man...and the center...are coming (plural) she would know I was talking about two different people.*
 - iii. *Novatian’s point is that since the verb “bless” is in the singular here, both ‘God’ and ‘the Angel’ must refer to the same Person. Novatian points to the divinity of Son of God as the obvious conclusion and solution here.*
- b. Novatian continues, “And Him, as the author of this blessing, Jacob also signified by placing his hands crossed upon the lads, as if their father was Christ, and showing, from thus placing his hands, the figure and future form of the passion.” (Source: Novatian. *A Treatise of Novatian Concerning the Trinity*. In Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 5, p. 630-631).
 - c. Novatian makes several points in the passages recounted above:

- i. Jacob is invoking the blessing of the One who has blessed and protected him over the course of his lifetime: God, also the Angel of God, also the “man” who wrestled all night with him. All refer to the Son of God.
 - ii. This is used by Novatian to demonstrate proof of the divinity of the Son of God, who appeared many times before the birth of Jesus. This demonstrates the divinity of Jesus Christ, who is the Son of God made flesh.
 - iii. Jacob is invoking this same Son of God, who was with him in his trials, to bless his two grandsons. *This blessing, however, is passed on to them through the blessing of the cross.*
 - iv. Novatian concludes, “He Himself (*the Son of God - CP*) was invoked in the blessing of these lads by the sacrament of the passion, intimated in the type (*pattern -CP*) of the crossed hands, as both God and Angel.
- e. Further thoughts on the “cross” foreshadowing, if Novatian is correct:
- i. Early Christians saw many more foreshadowings of the life of Christ, the cross, baptism, etc. in the Old Testament stories than most modern Christians do. I think these are worth considering, but you do not have to accept them if you think they are far-fetched.
 - ii. This is not the first place that the early Christians saw the cross foreshadowed in **Genesis**. Recall in our lesson on **Genesis 22**:
 1. Isaac, the beloved son of Abraham (and father of Jacob) carries the wood upon his own shoulders up the mountain to place of the sacrifice.
 2. His father is willing to sacrifice him there; a ram is provided as a substitute.
 - iii. Here in **Genesis 48**, if Novatian is correct, we may be seeing the sign of the cross, the form through which the great blessing of God would come, for the first time.
 - iv. Paul tells us, “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and bring to

nothing the understanding of the prudent.” (1 Corinthians 1:18–19, NKJV)

- v. “For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” (1 Corinthians 1:22–24, NKJV)
- vi. For many Christians, the message of the cross is about Jesus dying so that our sins could be forgiven. This is a really important part of the cross. But there is much more to the cross of Christ than what God did for us/me.
- vii. Jesus said that the message of the cross has some painful, practical applications for our lives as well. “Then He said to them all, ‘If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me.” (Luke 9:23, NKJV)
- viii. Peter got very specific regarding what it means to follow Christ, including his suffering on the cross.
 1. “But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God. For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: ‘Who committed no sin, Nor was deceit found in His mouth’; who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously; who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness—by whose stripes you were healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.” (1 Peter 2:20–25, NKJV)
 2. “Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind...” (1 Peter 4:1, NKJV)
 3. “Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ’s sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part He is glorified. But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people’s matters. Yet if

anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter.” (1 Peter 4:12–16, NKJV)

4. “Therefore let those who suffer according to the will of God commit their souls to Him in doing good, as to a faithful Creator.” (1 Peter 4:19, NKJV)
5. “Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world. But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you. To Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.” (1 Peter 5:8–11, NKJV)
6. We are called to strive to live holy and righteous lives, and to be willing to suffer as strangers in this world, following the example of Christ on the cross. Jesus says we need to take up our cross every day, if we want to follow him.
7. Recently I’ve been taking a financial planning course with my family taught by a well-known evangelical. There were some great parts of the class, including the importance of being generous, being disciplined, and living within a budget. (There were also some significant kingdom teachings of Jesus regarding money that were missing.)
 - a. What was quite clear, however, was a popular, modern evangelical view of the gospel: namely, being a Christian will most likely lead to a great life, a wonderful family, and avoiding many of life’s problems.
 - b. Although this perspective is very popular in mainstream evangelical Christian circles, this is *not* what Jesus taught. He and His followers (like Peter) taught just the opposite! In fact, the way of the cross, willing to live a life of voluntarily suffering for righteousness sake, was central to Jesus’ life and teaching. Also, it appears that this theme was foreshadowed in the Old Testament, as well.
8. Let us reject the false modern gospel that tries to turn Christianity into a self-improvement program or a means to have a better, more wholesome life and family. Jesus said that following Him could result in ripping your family apart, leaving you poor or in prison for a long time.

9. Picking up and carrying your own cross may bring hardship and suffering into your life for prolonged periods of time. If that happens, Peter says you should not think it strange. It was established beforehand: the blessing was going to come from the cross, for those willing to follow Jesus on the narrow and difficult way.
- f. Lessons learned from Jacob blessing Joseph's two sons.
 - i. Ephraim would become greater than Manasseh, and he is mentioned first throughout the rest of Scripture.
 - ii. Ephraim and Manasseh, the two sons of Joseph, would be numbered among the 12 tribes of Israel forever after. They would each have a full tribe, and would inherit land in the Promised Land. In that sense (as the father of two tribes), Joseph would get double the blessing of his brothers.
 - iii. This is really encouraging given all that Joseph suffered. In the end, God gave him a double blessing, as Jacob blessed Joseph's sons in the name of the Son of God, through the blessing of... the cross.