

Genesis 46:1-34, No. 71
“The Long Wait Begins”

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The Apostle Paul reminds us that everything written in the ancient Scriptures was written for us, written to instruct us in the faith and written to encourage us in the Christian life. But it is also true that we gain a deeper appreciation of many texts, such as this one, if we remember who its original readers were, the readers for whom it was first written. In any case take note of the historical frontier that is being crossed with this chapter. Here the patriarchal period – the history of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – comes to an end and the history of the nation of Israel begins. [Sarna, 312]

Text Comment

- v.3 The place and nature of Jacob’s worship indicate his state of mind. Beersheba had been Isaac’s primary center of activity and there we see his son offering sacrifices to the “God of his father, Isaac.” He had a sense of his family responsibilities and the assumption is that he would not leave the Promised Land without the Lord’s explicit permission. Beersheba, twenty-six miles south of Hebron marked the practical southern boundary of the land. Cultivation stopped there and it was desert until one reached Egypt. Apparently, Jacob was unsure he was doing the right thing by leaving the Promised Land for Egypt. But God appeared to him and assured him of his blessing and presence in Egypt. It is a happy thought that God knows our fears and anxieties without having to be told. The promise that God would make of Jacob a great nation repeated the promise previously made to Abraham and Isaac.
- v.4 “Joseph’s hand will close your eyes” is the promise of a peaceful death after reunion with his long-lost son.
- v.17 Hebrew genealogies tended to omit the daughters – and obviously Jacob’s twelve sons did not have 53 sons and only one daughter – so there must be some reason why Serah is mentioned, but we are not told what it is. She is also mentioned in two later genealogies in Numbers and 1 Chronicles. [Sarna, 315] It is also obvious that not all of these grandsons were born before the family moved to Egypt. Some were born in Egypt.
- v.27 The sixty-six did not include those who had died in Canaan or Ephraim and Manasseh who were born in Egypt. The problem with the number 70 is that it is difficult to know how that number was arrived at. There are several theories. However, as we know the number *seventy* represents totality (the symbolic number 7 times the symbolic number 10; Genesis 10, for example, records seventy nations descending from Noah, the point being that the entire population descended from him). Here, the point is that *all Israel* went to Egypt. Remember, the earliest readers of Genesis were the Israelites.

- v.28 Judah continued to take a leading part in the family's affairs. And it was fitting that he, of all men, should be the one to make the final arrangements for the reunion of Jacob and Joseph.
- v.30 Jacob's former despairing, "I shall go down to the grave mourning," has become a tranquil Nunc Dimittis. [Wenham]
- v.34 Two things may be at work here in Joseph's careful coaching of his brothers for their interview with Pharaoh. Joseph may have wanted to assure Pharaoh that he had no intention of moving his brothers into positions of power in the Egyptian court; but he seemed insistent that his family settle in Goshen and remain shepherds by trade. As one commentator suggests, Joseph wished "to ensure that Pharaoh's goodwill would be to the family's real benefit, not to their detriment by drawing them into an alien way of life at the capital." [Kidner]

Now, as I have often mentioned in our examination of Genesis, I have a new appreciation of the artful way in which the narrative has been constructed. Every section has its place in the whole by careful design and serves a specific and important purpose in relating the early history of the people of God.

Chapter 46 is no different in this respect. We noticed, at the beginning, that the narrator, however subtly, beautifully draws our attention to the connection between what transpires in this chapter and what has gone before. Jacob traveled only as far as Beersheba – where, as we read in 26:23-25, Isaac had built an altar and where the Lord had appeared to him and promised to him all that he had promised first to Abraham. And, now, when God appeared to Jacob at Beersheba, these many years later, he identified himself to Jacob as "the God of your father." And he made once more, the same promise to Jacob that he had made to Isaac and to Abraham before: "I will make of you a great nation" and "I will bring you back again", i.e. this land of Canaan I promised you shall certainly be yours.

You remember how, really from the beginning of the book – at least from chapter 3 – but, especially from the beginning of the Abraham material in chapter 12, our attention has been concentrated on this double promise: of the seed and of the land. "To your *offspring* I will give this *land*," God had promised Abraham. And then follow chapter after chapter concerned either with the promise of the land or with the promise of descendants. And so it was with Isaac and then with Jacob, who spent years away from the land, but finally returned to it. The story of Jacob's offspring has occupied us for many chapters now.

And here in chapter 46 the same great subjects re-emerge: the seed or the descendants of the patriarchs and the Promised Land. Could Jacob safely leave the Promised Land to take refuge in Egypt? Yes, the Lord assured him, because "I will bring you up again" – not "you" as an individual (though Jacob would eventually be buried in the Promised Land) but "you" as a family, as a people. And, then, the emphasis falls once again on the seed, on Jacob's descendants. In v. 3 the Lord promised to make of Jacob the great nation that he had promised to make of Abraham and of Isaac. And then, notice how often the words "offspring", "sons", and "descendants" occur in the next few verses: 5, 6, twice in verse seven, again in verse 8, and then

again in the summary in vv. 26-27. And, of course, the sons are listed by name, with their sons, the long list taking up most of the chapter.

But, there is more. You remember that God, in renewing his covenant with Abraham in chapter 15, had told Abraham that his descendants would be strangers in a land not their own for four hundred years, that they would be enslaved in that land and mistreated, but that finally God would bring them out of there with great wealth back to the Promised Land (15:13-16).

The chapter we have just read is the beginning of that period of Israel's sojourn outside of the Promised Land, the beginning of the four hundred years that would end only in the days of Moses. The promise of the Lord was unfolding just as he said.

And that, in itself, is also the continuation of an earlier theme of the book, a recapitulation of one of Genesis' primary lessons in the life of faith. What is faith? How would you define faith? We make a great deal of faith as Christians. What is it? You remember how it went. The Lord promised Abraham, already an old man, both the land and a son. But it was a very long time before Abraham ever owned a single piece of property in the land of Canaan, and when he finally did it was only a gravesite. The Lord promised Abraham descendants. But once Abraham was in the land, everything happened *except* Sarah's conceiving a child. Abraham probably thought that he would have a son right away once God promised to make of him a great nation and had explicitly promised Abraham: "to you and your offspring I will give this land." But no son was forthcoming. No child at all. Indeed, as the years passed on any number of occasions the already dim hope for a child seemed to have been extinguished altogether. Twice, you remember, Sarah was taken into the harems of neighboring kings.

Abraham had a child by Sarah's maid, Hagar, but the Lord refused to acknowledge him as the promised heir. Lot, Abraham's nephew, would eventually have children – even if by incest –, but not Abraham and Sarah. They seemed to be the only people in the promised land who weren't having a child. *Twenty-five years* passed before the birth of Isaac. Abraham was seventy-five when he arrived in Canaan, Isaac wasn't born until he was one hundred.

And, to tell the truth, it had been slow progress from that point. Isaac was forty before he married Rebekah and *they remained childless for twenty years*. He was sixty when his twin sons, Jacob and Esau, were born. And then, after the boys had grown up, we must wait *another twenty years* while Jacob lived, loved, married twice, and had eleven sons in Paddan Aram. Once back in the Promised Land, no more of which he owned by the way than his grandfather Abraham had, Jacob lost his favorite son Joseph and wearily endured the next twenty years, the patriarch of a family so dysfunctional that no one could conceive of it being the foundation of a great nation.

And now, after all those fits and starts, and after what seems to be, in all honesty, not very much progress toward either the promised land or the promised seed, Jacob and his family were told by the Lord to go live in Egypt and there they would remain *for four hundred years!* Four centuries later Israel would still be in Egypt, still not have possession of the Promised Land, and the spiritual condition of that holy seed would be, once again, of very doubtful quality.

Or, look at it this way. In 46:3-4 we have God's last recorded revelation to the patriarchs, the last time, so far as we know, that God spoke to Jacob. The next time the Lord speaks it will be to Moses, four centuries later. Malachi was the last of the prophets of the ancient epoch. After the Lord stopped speaking to Malachi, his voice fell silent in the world. The only Word from God that God's people had was the written Word, the record of his having spoken in the past. It would be four hundred years before the Lord would speak again, this time to Elizabeth and Zechariah regarding the birth of their son, John, who was to be the forerunner of the Messiah.

Four hundred years is a very long time. It is time sufficient for many generations to come and go. None of us, I imagine, can trace his or her family lineage back four hundred years. There have been too many generations; too many major changes in the face of men and nations in four hundred years. We would have to find our ancestors in other parts of the world because they were not in North America four hundred years ago. Not even those who came over on the Mayflower. They were still in Holland and wouldn't sail to the new world for another three years!

All of this waiting and waiting and waiting! *Indeed, in Genesis, faith is waiting. Here's your definition of faith. It's waiting in the confidence that what God has promised will someday come to pass. That is faith in the Bible. In Genesis, the measure of genuine faith is primarily a willingness to wait:* to believe that God will keep his word even as years pass with very little to show for the promises God had made. And, of course, so it would continue. In Micah 5 we read of the coming of the Messiah, "who will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God." But it was to be *seven hundred years* after Micah before the Messiah would appear. Do you appreciate how long seven hundred years is? Seven hundred years ago the Black Death had not yet visited Europe. It would be nearly two centuries before Columbus would discover the New World!

And, then, in the NT we read that "this gospel shall be preached throughout the world and then the end shall come" and "behold I am coming quickly; my reward is with me." But who, among those who first heard those words, imagined that Christians two thousand years later would still be looking for the coming of the Lord?

The Bible furnishes many reasons for all of this waiting, for the tortoise-like progress of the kingdom of God in the world. In Genesis 15 the reason given why Israel must wait four hundred years in Egypt before taking possession of the Promised Land was that the iniquity of the Amorites was not yet full. The Canaanites who then inhabited the land, were not yet so wicked, had not yet so completely defied the revelation of God in nature and in conscience, that God, just and holy as he is, was willing to destroy them and take their land from them and give it to his people. Israel would have to wait until God's judgment of the Amorites could be perfectly just. We must wait for Christ's second coming, the Scripture says, because God does not wish any to perish and because the entire company of his elect must be gathered in to the family before the end can come.

But in Genesis especially the waiting is a test, an exercise of faith, a means by which faith is strengthened and purified. We actually can see that waiting do its work in the hearts of the patriarchs. What weak faith we find in Abraham at the outset. He had been called to Canaan and

when famine struck he didn't think twice about leaving for Egypt. Jacob knew better than that now. When God told Abraham that he would give him a son Abraham, at first, did not believe it, not really; hence the fiasco with Hagar and Ishmael. But, later, after Isaac's birth after those long years of waiting, when God commanded Abraham to kill his son, Abraham neither debated with God nor hesitated, but immediately set out to obey. He knew by now that God would keep his Word, however long it took; his faith had grown sturdy through much testing, through much waiting. *And if the life we have been called to live is a life of faith, then, no wonder, we must wait as much as we do.*

Robert Murray McCheyne, the Scottish pastor, says somewhere, making comment on the Lord's parable of the vine and the branches in John 15, that "If we only saw the whole, we should see that the Father is doing little else in the world but training his vines." [Bonar, 159]

Well, that is one principal reason why there is so much waiting in the Christian life. God is after faith in us, an ever-stronger faith. He is "training his vines" to abide in him, which is to say, to have faith in him and to live trusting him and his word. *And the primary means of faith's nurture and growth is waiting.* If God were to fulfill his promises to us immediately, without delay, there would be little or no faith. Life would be by sight. But by waiting to fulfill his Word, God puts us to believing, even believing in the teeth of the winds of doubt and time, until we are sure that "the Word of our God stands forever" (Isaiah 40:8) and live in that certainty. *Faith is the principle virtue of the Christian life and faith requires time to grow. Faith is waiting, and it grows by waiting.*

Everyone who is a true Christian here this morning, a lover of Christ and his follower, is waiting, waiting long and hard for what the Lord has promised you but what he has not yet given you. We wait for our deliverance from sin, which he promised us; we wait for Christ-likeness; we wait for the saving blessings of God in the lives of our children; we wait for the desires of our hearts which the Lord told us he would give us as we delighted ourselves in him; we wait for answers to the prayers we have been praying, we wait for the joy of our salvation, for the peace that passes all understanding; we wait for the conquest of evil and for the second coming of our Savior and for a hundred things in between. And on and on we wait. And weeks pass, and months, and years, and decades, and even lifetimes, and still we wait. Like Simeon and Anna in Luke 2, in some ways, we will wait all our lives to see the consolation of Israel, and we may not see it. When you and I leave this world, it may be a far darker place than even now it is, with far poorer prospects for the church and kingdom of God. *If you are a Christian you are waiting all the time for a hundred things; your life is marked, defined by the fact that you are waiting for things; it is a fixed law in the kingdom of God.*

And that is the rub, is it not, for you and for me? The Christian life would be a snap if God fulfilled all his promises to us in a day or two, a week or two, a month or two, or even a year or two. But, if he did, we would not live by faith. We would not be trusting in the Lord our God, but trusting instead in the evidence of our eyes. To live by faith is a far greater thing and the thing God wants from his children.

After all, is this not part of the point of this chapter? The original readers, the people of Israel, may well have wondered whether the migration to Egypt was a mistake. It was a natural

question. Should Jacob and his family have stayed put in Canaan? Might they not have avoided all the agony of those years of slavery in Egypt? But, no, the Lord told them to go to Egypt. It was his will to take them there. And, it was his will to make them wait there for four hundred years! Just as it was his will to make Abraham wait for a son and Isaac to wait for his twin boys and Jacob to wait for Rachel and then for Joseph.

And wait they will, faithful men that they are. For, after all, the Lord has always kept his Word. It may have been twenty-five years in the doing, but Isaac was born just as God had promised; and so Jacob and Esau. It may have been seven hundred years but the Messiah *did* appear. His Word has never been forfeited yet. Every promise has either been fulfilled, is being fulfilled, or we are waiting for it to be fulfilled. *That assurance is what makes us Christians*. No wonder, then, that Richard Sibbes, the English Puritan, should find this waiting in confidence in the promises of God to be the “main difference” between a Christian and an unbeliever.

But notice, how this waiting is done. Jacob and his sons made a great move, were reunited with Joseph, settled in Goshen, negotiated with Pharaoh, took up their duties and renewed their livelihood. They were like the one hundred and twenty saints in Jerusalem after the ascension of the Lord. They were told explicitly by the Lord *to wait* in Jerusalem until the Spirit should be given. And they did. But *how* did they wait? They prayed – how they must have prayed! –, they read the Scriptures – that seems clear from Peter’s speech to them in the Upper Room –, no doubt they talked together of what they had seen and heard in the previous forty days, they even conducted important business – they filled the vacancy left in the twelve by Judas’ defection and suicide. This was not a Quaker-meeting kind of waiting, where all sit silently until the Spirit should descend. This was waiting full of faith and energy and obedient activity. This was not the waiting of silence and stillness. This is the waiting that husbands and fathers used to do before they were allowed to go into the delivery room, outside pacing back and forth, waiting, looking, watching to see who would eventually come through those double-doors to tell them whether they had a son or a daughter.

And so it was as the long wait in Egypt began. Life went on, duties were undertaken, spiritual wisdom was exercised in the choice of a place to settle. They would wait, but meantime, they would walk with God and serve Him! And see how they did. There was the beautiful reunion between Jacob and his son, Joseph. There was a new attitude toward death on Jacob’s part, the same spirit we will hear eighteen centuries later in Simeon’s, “Lord, now let your servant depart in peace...” And there was care taken to ensure that the family would not be compromised in its loyalty to God and his covenant by association with a pagan people. What was that but a beautiful summation of what our lives should be as we wait for the fulfillment of God’s promises to us: love and harmony in the family of God, the faithful embrace and confession of the promise of eternal life – a heavenly mindedness – and a conscientious effort to keep ourselves pure and undefiled by the world.

And, what did God do while the four hundred years began slowly to pass. He continued his daily interest in the life of his people. What a lovely touch there in v. 4. “And Joseph’s own hand will close your eyes.” Jacob might well have thought, the promise of God to him being what it was, that he would die in the Promised Land with his family around him there. But it was not to be. More years, centuries indeed, had to pass before the family could take possession of the land

promised to them. But, meantime, God dealt kindly with his servant Jacob. He promised him a quiet death with his loved ones at his bedside, and, especially, the son whose absence he had mourned those twenty-two long years.

We may have to wait, but we will not wait without any number of manifestations and demonstrations of God's love and care and provision for us, his people. Abraham waited for a long time for a son, but along the way God did many things for him to give him every reason to hope, every reason for confidence in the promise that God had made to him. And so it is with you and me.

How like the situation of Jacob and his family is our own today. How like that of countless generations of the saints. They were given promises from God – mighty and marvelous promises – that were not yet fulfilled. Some have not been fulfilled for two thousand years. But they prayed in hope, they served the Lord in the meantime, and they appreciated the many demonstrations of his love that the Lord granted them from time to time. The author of Hebrews makes just this point about these men and women in his great chapter on faith. The patriarchs did not receive all that was promised to them, but they saw the promises fulfilled from afar and waited all their lives in patient endurance for what they knew would someday be theirs. And so must we, and *so can we*, surrounded as we are with such a cloud of witnesses. They *knew* that God would keep his Word. He always had; he always will.

And, knowing how important it is for us that our faith be strengthened, we will expect to be made to wait for many things, and meanwhile we must put our faith to work on those same promises of God and seize them from afar as the patriarchs did.

If you visit Edinburgh, the tourist guidebooks will direct you to Greyfriars cemetery, where many saints of God and martyrs are buried. The Martyrs Monument in the cemetery will tell you that some one hundred men buried in that cemetery were executed for their faith in Jesus Christ during the wars for the reformation of the church in Scotland. The NE corner of the cemetery is a hallowed spot because so many of the covenanters who were executed in Edinburgh were buried there – men who had long waited for the reformation of the church – and in the SW part there was at one time a covenanter prison where twelve hundred covenanters were kept for five months in terrible conditions after the battle of Bothwell Bridge in 1679. Alexander Henderson, the architect of the Scottish Covenant, one of the principle manifestoes of religious freedom, is buried near the site of that prison.

But the guidebooks won't tell you much of this. They will be more interested in another figure in the cemetery's history, a dog named Greyfriar's Bobbie, a Skye terrier who was supposed to have guarded his master's grave for some fourteen years before dying himself, a story very likely embellished over time. But if it were entirely true, what a contrast and what a spur! If a dog can wait fourteen years for a master who will not come, how long can we wait for promises that are sure to be kept and when kept, will take our breath away? The saints have waited in hope all these ages; surely, we cannot do any less. *No one has ever waited in vain for God to keep his Word!*

“In you [O Lord] our fathers put their trust; they trusted and you delivered them. To you they cried and were rescued; in you they trusted *and were not disappointed.*” [Psalm 22:4-5] It is essential that our children and grandchildren can say the same thing about us!