Genesis 47:1-28, No. 72
"Blessing the World"
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Text Comment

v.4 As Joseph had foreseen, Pharaoh asked the brothers about their occupation and they replied as Joseph had coached them to reply (46:31-34). That they came "to sojourn" in Egypt indicates that they did not intend to remain there permanently.

v.6 The audience went very well. The king even offered them jobs as royal stockmen. This position is attested in the archeological record. Rameses III is said to have employed 3,264 men, mostly foreigners, to take care of his cattle. In any case, the family will enjoy more rights than the typical immigrant and, as we will see in v. 11, they became property holders.

v.9 Remember, Abraham had lived to 175 (25:7) and Isaac to 180 (35:28).

v.11 The "land of Rameses" was another name for Goshen.

v.14 "Brought it to Pharaoh's palace" demonstrates Joseph's honesty. It was axiomatic in the ANE that people paid their own way, so long as they had anything to part with, including, eventually, their liberty. The Law of Moses recognized this principle, but humanized it with the right of redemption and ameliorated it with the law of jubilee – the return of the land to its original ownership every forty-nine years.

v.19 The possibility of the arable land reverting to desert was real and serious. The practice of the state providing seed in exchange for repayment at harvest time is attested in Egyptian sources of the period. Now, we needn't believe that every single landowner in Egypt suffered so severely and had to sell his land to the state, but a great many did.

v.24 A 20% tax rate was not unusual in the ancient near east and lower than it was elsewhere. Of course, modern states often have higher tax rates than that.

Now we have two important scenes in our reading this morning, the latter flowing from and confirming the lesson of the former. Both of them describe a preliminary fulfillment of the promise God made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, *that all the world would be blessed through them*. As so often in the unfolding narrative of Genesis, what transpires is, in some way or another, the unfolding of the divine promises to the patriarchs. So here.

First you have the audience that the Pharaoh gave to Jacob. But, how strangely and unexpectedly it develops. When Pharaoh met with the five brothers, we find what we would expect. The brothers were deferential to the king, they waited upon him, respectfully answered his questions, and received what favor he chose to bestow. That is what we would expect. They were guests in

Egypt, foreigners, with no particular claim on Pharaoh's time or attention, other than their relationship to Joseph.

But when Jacob was presented, everything changed! It was Jacob that blessed Pharaoh, *and not once but twice*. Almost certainly this blessing would have taken the form of a pronouncement of God's favor, such as when Jacob, in a prophetic role, blessed his sons and said something of their future, as we will read in chapter 49. Jacob's blessing also probably amounted to a prayer for God's kindness to the king.

Then Pharaoh asked Jacob about his age. Jacob was a very old man by this time. As we will read in v. 28, Jacob was one hundred and thirty years of age when he came down to Egypt with his family and died seventeen years later at one hundred forty-seven years of age. One hundred and thirty was as old then as it is now! It was a supernaturally long lifetime and would have, of course, commanded the respect and wonder of the king who lived in a culture where great age was particularly regarded as the blessing of God. *Pharaoh would have known he was dealing with no ordinary man.*

But, then, Jacob's answer was unexpectedly odd. "The years of my sojourning have been few and difficult. What is more, I haven't lived nearly as long as my father and grandfather." Pharaoh must have been taken aback and must have thought to himself, "If this old man thinks one hundred and thirty is a short life, he is operating with a very different understanding of life than I am." Remember, Joseph's extraordinary rise to power from slavery and prison must have impressed Pharaoh, and here was Joseph's father, a man of one hundred and thirty years of age complaining about how young he was! *What was it with this family?*

But, for the reader of Genesis, Jacob's answer is poignant and meaningful. We think back to the flight to Paddan Aram and the years spent there, the deceit perpetrated upon him by his father-in-law, the conflict in his home between Leah and Rachel, the rape of his daughter Dinah, the untimely death of his favorite wife, the tragedy of Joseph's apparent death, and the long years surveying the wreckage of his home amid the bitter rivalry of his sons. Verse 7 seems to suggest that now the old man is so infirm that Joseph must help him into the court. The long and difficult journey was near its end. Perhaps Jacob was thinking as we do. "It seems like only yesterday when I first laid eyes on Rachel at that well in Paddam Aram."

But Pharaoh, the greatest king in the world of that day, deferred to Jacob; he seemed to recognize that he was standing in the presence of someone greater than himself – not an easy thing for the king of Egypt to recognize – a man who knew the mind and will of God and who had God's blessing upon his life was standing in front of him.

The man who deceived his brother and stole his blessing, was now the source of blessing to the most powerful man in the world! That is the fact *the narrator expects us to notice*. That is the difference the grace of God makes. A disreputable fellow with a checkered past became a source of blessing to the world.

Remember, we have seen this before. Because he was afraid of the king in Gerar, Abraham lied for a second time about Sarah being his wife. And Sarah was taken into the king's harem and the

promise of a son for Abraham was jeopardized once again. God then closed the wombs of all the king's wives and concubines. Remember, after God came to Abimelech in a dream and straightened the matter out, he required Abimelech to seek and receive blessing from Abraham. Only after Abraham had prayed for Abimelech did God again open the wombs of the women of his household.

That seems backward to us. Abimelech ought to have prayed for Abraham, not *vice versa*, or so we think. After all, it was Abraham who deceived the king; it was Abraham's cowardice that brought the trouble on the king's household. Abimelech should forgive Abraham. But, no, the blessing the king must have, only Abraham – frail, cowardly, sinful Abraham – can give him.

We are taught throughout Genesis that the covenant is kept and brings its blessings not because of the faithfulness and steadfastness and goodness of the men who are in covenant with God, but because of God's faithfulness, often in defiance of the unfaithfulness of his people. *And we learn that God's people are the channel through which comes God's blessing to the world, even though they are unworthy of such an honor.*

Most of the time, Jacob is not presented to us in Genesis as a paragon of virtue – though, to be sure he has his shining moments – but, nevertheless, Jacob is the source of God's blessing to Pharaoh and to Egypt. "We hold these treasures in earthen vessels…" Paul will later say. But, *we* hold them, *no one else*; those of us who believe and walk with God, however poorly we often do both.

This point is then illustrated and confirmed in the next section of the chapter that tells the story of Joseph's management of the famine in Egypt and the eventual servitude of most of the people of the land. With our modern sensibilities about the institution of slavery, we are apt to miss this important point. We are apt not to see that these verses are *precisely the demonstration of God's blessing coming to the world through those who are in covenant with him.* We are apt not to see these verses as an unfolding of the promise that all the world would be blessed through Abraham.

It seems to us, at first glance, that Joseph, on Pharaoh's behalf, took cruel advantage of the Egyptian citizenry and eventually enslaved them all. He had, as it were, cornered the market on food, and used his power to the disadvantage of others. I confess that was the view I always had of this history, and so what Joseph did bothered me. Shouldn't he have been more generous to the Egyptian people, come to their rescue without requiring repayment? But, I think I was mistaken and I now know the text itself teaches me that I was mistaken.

There is in many of the narratives of Genesis a statement that scholars have come to call *the evaluative viewpoint*. It is a statement, usually by someone other than the biblical hero, sometimes by the narrator himself, that explains the meaning of what had happened. That is, it is a statement that the narrator quotes that provides the narrator's own interpretation of what had happened without his actually giving that interpretation in so many words. Such a statement tells the reader how to judge the events that were reported or provides the ethical perspective we ought to have when reading the narrative. Such is *the evaluative viewpoint*.

For example, in Genesis 12:10-20 we read the account of Abraham's journey to Egypt, shortly after he arrived in the Promised Land, when he first lied about Sarah, this time to Egyptian officials, saying that she was his sister, not his wife. The result of his lie was that Sarah was taken into Pharaoh's harem and, in exchange, Abraham accumulated great wealth as a result of Pharaoh's favor. But then the Lord inflicted diseases on Pharaoh and his household because of Sarah's presence in his harem. What are we to think about what Abraham did? Was the lie an acceptable tactic**,** like Rahab's lie that protected the spies that had sent into the promised land? Was God pleased or displeased with Abraham? The narrator does not actually tell us. But in vv. 18-19 we read that Pharaoh, after he discovered that Sarah was married, condemned Abraham for lying to him and then sent him packing homeward. *Pharaoh's statement is the evaluative viewpoint in that narrative*. The narrator uses Pharaoh's outrage – which he quotes in his own account – to indicate to the reader the moral equation. Here was a pagan king lecturing God's man about honesty. That could have been left out, would have been, except the narrator wanted us to know that what Abraham did was wrong. And he supplied that interpretation of the events by repeating the words of Pharaoh. Such is the subtlety and sophistication of OT historical narrative.

Or, take another example from the very next chapter, chapter 13. What about the choice that Lot made to live in Sodom and Gomorrah? What are we to think of that? Abraham had offered him first choice of a place to live and to pasture his flocks and herds, and the area around Sodom was beautiful and well-watered. But, in v. 13, right in the middle of the story, we have an evaluative viewpoint from the narrator himself: "Now the men of Sodom were wicked and were sinning greatly against the Lord." That single statement put Lot's decision and his choice in its true moral context. The narrator doesn't tell us that Lot made a sinful choice; he leaves it to us to draw that conclusion by telling us that Lot chose the well-watered pasture without regard to the moral condition of the people who lived there. Lot chose luxury and prosperity for himself with no thought to the spiritual interests of his soul or the souls of his family; with no thought of the corrupting effects of evil company or the duty of living to the glory of God. The narrator tells us all that by inserting that single statement about the men of Sodom.

Well we have such an evaluative viewpoint here also in Genesis 47. We find it in v. 25 on the lips of the Egyptians themselves: "You have saved our lives…" Whatever *we as modern Americans* may think, the Egyptians themselves viewed what Joseph did as their salvation. And the narrator wanted us to hear them say it.

The history of the African slave trade and of the American slave experience have colored our view of slavery, so that it is difficult for us to enter into the ANE mind. In ancient society, slavery was an accepted way of bailing out the destitute and, under a benevolent master, could be quite a comfortable living situation, and certainly much to be preferred to starvation. Joseph was a slave in Potiphar's house and lived well and comfortably, had responsibility and, apparently, a substantial measure of personal liberty. Indeed, even the Law of Moses provided for some temporary slaves electing to become permanent slaves (Exodus 21:5). That is, they preferred to remain that master's slave rather than to take the freedom to which they were entitled after six years of service. Ancient slavery, at its best, was like tenured employment, whereas the free man was more like our self-employed. The latter had greater liberty, but he faced substantially greater risks in a day when there were none of the safety nets we count on today. Remember, the Law of

Moses provided, with some further protections for slaves, for much of what Joseph did here and in that law, it was regarded as a means of providing for those who were destitute, for those who could not survive unless someone else paid their bills. It was the ANE form of welfare, if you will, with a "must work for benefits" proviso, such as was reintroduced not so long ago by our own government during the Clinton administration. There really is nothing new under the sun!

As it happened, in a great famine, a perilous time for the population, what Joseph did in making these people slaves of the state was to their benefit. What it meant was that feeding all of these people immediately became Pharaoh's responsibility. Further, what they were left with was, effectively, the right to make a living from the land, a good living in good years, with the requirement to pay income tax at the rate of 20%. That is a rate somewhat higher than many pay today and considerably lower than the rate many others now pay! It appears to have been, in our modern lingo, a flat-tax, the kind now recommended by an entire school of economists; a tax without the complications and distortions of our present system of deductions, depreciation, and so on.

Now, I don't mean to say that everyone was happy with the arrangement or that Pharaoh did not himself take more advantage of it than he should have. The OT law carefully circumscribed the rights of slave holders precisely because slavery was an institution so open to abuse. The Law of Moses did not allow the taking of land in perpetuity as Pharaoh took it. There was always the Jubilee when the land would be returned to its original owner.

But, the fact is, the Egyptian people themselves, saw what *Joseph* did as saving their lives and as saving their lives in the manner and by means acceptable in that time and culture. That was their own interpretation of events and so, by including it in his narrative, the narrator has indicated that this is how we ought to understand what happened.

So, we have, in chapter 47, Jacob blessing Pharaoh, twice, and then that divine blessing coming to the king and to his people through the wise administration by Joseph of Pharaoh's affairs in the teeth of a terrible famine. It is a case of the nations of the earth being blessed through Abraham and of those that bless Abraham being blessed themselves – those who gave shelter to Jacob and his family were saved through a great famine. Those to whom the blessing belonged, like Jacob, were feeble men in and of themselves, but they had the favor of God upon them and even the vaunted men of the world depended upon them for the help they needed.

And this has been the story of human history ever since. Not a one of us has any true conception of how much or in how many ways the people of God have been a blessing to this world, even to the unbelieving world in which they have lived. In our recent sermons on Daniel we were reminded of the blessing that the Jews were to the Babylonians, to both king and people. And so it has been in so many different ways. It is to the Christians and their leavening presence that we owe the end of chattel slavery in much of the world. The other religions and the secularists were entirely content with the status quo. It is to Christianity that we owe the conviction of the sanctity of human life. We are discovering in our time that as the influence of Christianity weakens so do the protections that have long surrounded human life. It was the Christian faith that ended the exposure of infants in the Roman world, suttee in India, and foot-binding in China. It is to Christians that the world owes the doctrine of a just war and the requirement that even war be

conducted with a view to the sanctity of human life. It is even to the Christians that we owe much of our modern scientific advancement. It was the Christians view of the world as the theater of God's glory that led to their fascination with its inner workings and eagerness to discover the mind of God revealed in them. Supremely the very idea that God is a God of love – which is the view of no other great religion in the world, not a one; a view that is not central to any great philosophy of human life – so deeply rooted in the mind of so many in the world and an idea with massive implications, is a uniquely Christian gift to mankind. And I could go on and on.

I was reminded recently of an episode in the history of men and nations that illustrates the goodness that Christians have spread throughout the world. Years ago, I became enamored of the life and ministry of John Paton, the Scottish missionary to the South Sea Islands. Paton and other missionaries like him took the gospel to peoples who were still living in the stone age – cruel, violent, given to cannibalism, universally given to lying and theft – and deeply superstitious. But, through the heroic effort of these faithful Christian preachers and teachers, the gospel took root and a new civilization was born among the people, even among those who did not in fact become Christians themselves. The church was established, the number of Christians increased rapidly, and the way of life on the islands was transformed in every good way. As the generations passed the church continued to exercise a life-giving and purifying influence among the people who inhabited the islands of the South Pacific.

Those who brought the gospel of Christ to the South Seas were men and women motivated by the purest love but they were also men and women of steel. Many of their peers or predecessors were murdered by those they came to save, so, when the Japanese invasion of New Guinea began in 1942, and the British government ordered English citizens to leave for Australia, it was predictable that the missionaries refused to comply. The Anglican bishop of New Guinea wrote to all his workers:

> "We must endeavor to carry on our work in all circumstances, no matter what the cost may ultimately be to any of us individually. God expects this of us. The Church at home, which sent us out, will surely expect it. The universal Church expects it. The tradition and history of missions requires it of us…. The people whom we serve expect it of us. We could never hold up our faces again if, for our own safety, we all forsook [Christ] and fled when the shadows of the passion begin to gather around Him in His spiritual and mystical body, the Church in Papua."

Six weeks after writing that letter, the mission steamboat was bombed and the bishop machine-gunned while visiting territory already in Japanese hands. Such was the mettle of these who brought the blessing of God to the nations of the South Pacific. [Van Dusen, *They Found the Church There,* 32] And that courageous witness through two generations bore a magnificent fruit.

When the aircraft carrier *Lexington* was sunk in the battle of the Coral Sea, two of its flyers crash landed near Rossel Island, off the coast of New Guinea. Christian Papuans rescued them, fed and protected them until they could send them on to safety. Years before those same islanders were already noted for their skill in helping the victims of shipwreck, but for a different purpose.

When a vessel had foundered near the same island, eighty years before WWII, three-hundred Chinese had been similarly rescued by the grandparents of these same islanders who rescued the American pilots. The Chinese had also been well cared for, but they were eaten, 299 out of the 300. [12-13] This AP dispatch was carried in US newspapers on October 22, 1943.

> "Stanley W. Tefft, 25 years old, an aerial gunner from Toledo, Ohio, disclosed today that Christian natives on a South Pacific island had won seven converts among navy airmen who had been shot down in combat with the Japanese. …
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> The gunner, who is at the naval air station [in Alameda, California] recuperating from his wounds is one of the converts. With two companions, Lt. Edward Peck of Shreveport, La., and Radioman Jeff Scott of Garden City, Ks, he reached the island on a raft after two and a half days at sea. Four others were also there. For the next 87 days they hid on the Japanese occupied island, watched over by the natives, whose first act was to give them a Bible.
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> "That and our experiences made us Christian," Tefft said. "Every night they would gather around us and we took turns reading the Bible…. You can tell the world that I am now a devout Christian." [p. 67]

And many more stories like that. What is that, but just one more instance of what we read this morning from Genesis 47: the blessing of God extending to the world through his covenant people, and those who bless them and receive them being blessed themselves. Whole new civilizations just and kind had been created in those islands out of the rubble of the awful world which they had inhabited before. Why? Because Christians came among them. Don't you suppose there were some Egyptians who found eternal life through their contact with Jacob and his family? This is the Bible and the history of the world in a nutshell. God started with an individual, made him into a nation – a people for his very own – and by that people he reaches out to bless and save the world.

And, along the way, even when nations do not embrace the gospel itself and when people do not themselves believe in Jesus Christ and follow him, they still, like the people of Egypt, receive many good gifts by the hand of the church of God, sinful, weak, frail, and faulty as that church is and always shall be while in this world. We have no idea how dark and cruel this world would be without the civilizing and humanizing influence of the Christian church.

Jacob and Joseph are our ancestors, brothers and sisters in Christ. They are like us in our sin and weakness, but also like us in their calling to bring God's blessing to the world. And whether it is a king or simply our next door neighbor, it is our privilege and our calling to be the hand of God extending favor, his kindness, and his help to the world. There should be in every one of our hearts the aspiration to do that! To do it by word as Jacob did and by deed as Joseph did. And there should be in the mind of every reader of Genesis, everyone who sees the frailty of these servants of God and God's covenant, the conviction that *he can*, *she can* do that! If a man like Jacob, after the life he lived, must bless the king of Egypt, then I can bless my neighbor.

Presbyterians that we are, we can all agree with John Wesley who told his congregations: “Do all the good you can. By all the means you can. In all the ways you can. In all the places that you can. At all the times you can. To all the people you can. As long as you ever can.”