

Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus Christ, we read in the papers and see on the news some of the most dreadful things. Evil raises its head with vicious power making innocent people suffer and causing others to lose their faith or say, 'how can there be a God?' Give us the courage to sustain our faith and pray for those in deepest need who go through the darkest of times, and sustain our prayers until we see Your Kingdom victorious over all! Thanks be to God; AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Trees

Trees are an immensely useful resource that can give us building materials, a source of heat and energy, medicine, and much more. Pray that people will use God's gifts well.

On-going prayers

- Pray for those caught up in the earthquake in Java
- Pray for children who suffer because of bad schooling
- Give thanks for your home and everything God has given you

Meditation

Within the routines of everyday life,
Guide us with Your wisdom, Awesome God;
And give us a thirst for holy living.

Whilst doing our duties and daily work,
Provide us with Your strength, Powerful Spirit;
And a desire for true wisdom as well.

When seeking to honour You in our homes,
Inspire us by Your passion, Amazing Father;
And stir us up to be constantly loving.

Whether we find things hard or troublesome,
Lead us to seek Your help, 'Suffering Servant';
And encourage us to persist, in You.

Whenever we offer ourselves in worship,
Humble us through service, Gracious Lord;
Love us, and never let us go.

Bible Study - Genesis 46:28-34

²⁸ Jacob sent Judah ahead of him to Joseph, to direct the way ahead to Goshen. When they came to the land of Goshen, ²⁹ Joseph prepared his chariot and went up to meet his father Israel in Goshen. When he caught sight of him, he flung his arms around his father and wept there for some time. ³⁰ Israel said to Joseph, 'Having seen you for myself, I can now die knowing that you are still alive!'

³¹ Joseph said to his brothers and to his father's household, 'I will go and tell Pharaoh, and I will inform him, "My brothers and my father's household, who lived in the land of Canaan, have come to me. ³² The men are shepherds, for they have always kept livestock, and they have brought their flocks, and herds, and all they own." ³³ When Pharaoh summons you and enquires about your occupation, ³⁴ you must say, "We, your servants, have kept livestock from our youth until the present, just as our ancestors did." Then, you may be able to settle in the land of Goshen. This is because all shepherds are abhorrent to the Egyptians.'

Review

This is a most extraordinary part of the story of Joseph. Firstly, Judah leads Jacob's great nomadic wagon-train swiftly and directly through the desert to the land of Goshen. This was Joseph's suggested and ideal settlement area for his family (see 45:10), and the wonderful moment is reached where Jacob finally meets his long lost son Joseph, now the Grand Vizier of Egypt. It is a story of intensity and passion with which we can identify after reading the long and difficult journey that has led everyone to this point of restoration. Joseph wept for some time with his arms flung around his father (46:29), and Jacob expressed his heartfelt relief and delight at finding Joseph alive (46:30).

Then, although this part of the story is not easy to spot, Joseph needs to explain to Pharaoh that his family have settled in Goshen (as Joseph wanted – see 45:10f.). They are not in the 'best of the land' near to where Pharaoh lived further south (as Pharaoh commanded – see 46:16-20), and he has to explain this if his family is to be accepted by Pharaoh. Everything works out in the end, but it is fascinating to see the nervous tension in verses 31 to 34 as Joseph tells his family what to do and say when presented to Pharaoh!

It is possible to read this passage and not pick up the true nature of this problem, and some Bible translations enable us to spot Joseph's hesitancy and concern in verse 34; 'then, you may be able to settle in the land of Goshen.' Joseph was worried about whether what he had promised would indeed be allowed! Initially, Pharaoh had told Joseph to summon his family with the generous offer that they should leave everything behind them because they could have a better life in Egypt; better pots, pans, tools, trades, houses, jobs and everything. All they needed was to come (45:16-20). It was a generous offer, and one that it was not polite to refuse.

However, the brothers had already come to Egypt twice before, and it was clear from their previous visits that they were shepherds. This was not a problem when they were buying grain, but Joseph was concerned about the prejudice against shepherds amongst the Egyptian upper classes, who regarded them as somewhat less than human (46:34). Indeed, it may be that Pharaoh told the brothers to come without bringing anything because he knew they were shepherds and wanted them to be assimilated into the Egyptian workforce of the cities. Joseph however, knew that Jacob and the brothers needed to remain a separate people, and Goshen, in the far north was far enough away for them to remain largely independent of Egypt.

It must have been a time of great strain for Joseph, waiting to find out if his family would be formally accepted now they had made the decisive move to Egypt. He did not want things to go wrong after all his efforts to bring the family to a place where they could be at peace with each other and with God. Pharaoh had been generous up to this point in time, but if he felt that his offer was being turned away or that the family were taking advantage of him, would he resort to class prejudice to dismiss them? Joseph therefore took care to tell his brothers that he would speak to Pharaoh first (46:31) and when they came next, they had to emphasise that they were bound by ancestral loyalty to maintain their occupation of shepherding.

So Joseph showed spiritual maturity by taking control of the situation and ensuring that all went well. This may be a small point, and it is easily forgotten because we know that Pharaoh was eventually generous; but Joseph acted with wisdom in order to make sure that his family was able to settle in their preferred site of Goshen. God had changed Joseph from a young boy whose precociousness annoyed his family to a mature man who was able to protect it at the most critical of times.

Going Deeper

The Bible study continues with further information about the following subjects:

- The meeting of Joseph with Jacob
- Pharaoh and the move to Goshen
- Joseph's diplomacy

Going Deeper

The meeting of Joseph and Jacob is an important moment in Scripture, and it is highly emotional, enabling both father and son to understand what God had been doing in their lives. However, there is some intrigue about the settlement of the people of Israel in Goshen, and this is an important part of the text to study.

The meeting of Joseph and Jacob

It had been Joseph's plan ever since he revealed himself to his brothers that the whole family should settle in Goshen (45:10). Joseph knew Egypt intimately, and this was the best place for them to continue their traditions of keeping sheep and goats and living off their produce. For this reason, Judah led the family in that direction (46:28). It is interesting that as the saga of Joseph comes to an end, the seniority and leadership of the family of Israel is clear. Reuben, the eldest, had progressively lost his place as the natural first-born leader and forfeited this to Judah. This process has been obvious throughout the story, and is

conclusive in our passage where Jacob sent Judah ahead of him to lead the way and to make contact with Joseph.

We might expect that when Jacob and Joseph finally met, Jacob would bow down to Joseph in fulfilment of his boyhood dream (37:9), but it did not happen; they took hold of each other and wept (46:29). The dream remained unfulfilled; just like the prophecy of Jonah, in which Nineveh was not destroyed because its people repented, after they heard about God's wrath! Joseph's dream was nevertheless a vision which powerfully guided events in real life, but it was never completely fulfilled (it may seem strange, but this is an important part of the role of prophecy in the Bible, Old Testament and New). The truth is that when Jacob and Joseph met, Scripture says literally that Joseph 'appeared' to Jacob, using a word that is usually used in Scripture for an appearance of God Himself. For Jacob, the appearance of Joseph was a miracle, and it was enough for him to acknowledge that truth in their embrace and in his words of greeting. When the two meet, the words of the Hebrew text are almost untranslatable, repeating the words 'arms', 'fling' and 'necks', indicating a passionate and prolonged embrace (not a kiss) between father and son, accompanied by much weeping (46:29).

Jacob's reply in some translations of the Bible reads rather like a death wish than the height of joy (see 'now let me die, as I have seen your face ...' in the English Standard Version). For Jacob, the realisation of Joseph's existence after so many years 'revived his spirit' (45:27), and the translation of verse 30 given above is intended to show Jacob's sense of life rather than death; 'I can now die, knowing that you are still alive'. It was Jacob's greatest joy to know that he would end his days knowing that his family was reunited, and God's Covenant blessing which he had carried for so many years was now being carried not by one individual, but by the whole family of twelve sons, the future tribes of 'Israel'. It was a significant change in God's Covenant relationship with His people, and this very fact is probably best considered as the climax of the book of Genesis rather than any particular part of the story of Joseph and Jacob.

Pharaoh and the move to Goshen

If you were to read some other books about this part of the Bible, you will read any number of theories about what is really happening at this point in the story (46:31-34). Some treat it as an uninteresting extension of the story; just some more information about 'what happened next', others regard the whole matter as an example of Joseph's diplomacy, going ahead of the brothers to Pharaoh (46:31,32) in order drop hints about their circumstances and where they might settle (without mentioning Goshen specifically!). There is also a theory that Joseph did not want his family drawn into the cosmopolitan world of Egyptian city life, something that would have quickly eroded their identity and defeated the purpose of them being God's Covenant people. Neither did Joseph intend to show nepotism by filling court positions with his own family, something to which Pharaoh could have taken exception!

Whilst some of these theories may be partly true, I have emphasised a different idea in the introduction, which is that Joseph was uncertain about Pharaoh's reaction to his family's disobedience to him in bringing everything they had. The reason for my choice is because this is the obvious consequence of what Scripture chooses to record. Out of the many things that were doubtless said when Pharaoh first spoke to Joseph about his family, Pharaoh was at pains to express the hope that they would bring nothing with them (45:16-20). The reason was probably simple. Pharaoh was willing to be generous to Joseph's family, but the whole land was in the grip of drought and the last thing that it needed was a large group of nomads trying to feed their animals from sparse resources in a landscape devoid of foliage.

Joseph's diplomacy

The situation was resolved (as we shall find out tomorrow) and Joseph's diplomacy, for whatever reason, did indeed work. But Joseph was concerned that the whole matter was dealt with very properly in order to ensure that Pharaoh would not respond badly because of what he had said earlier (45:16f.); and Joseph's advance comments to Pharaoh would emphasise the historic nature of the family's occupation. Joseph was aware of some prejudice against shepherds (46:34); something that has never been verified either historically or archaeologically, but may have simply been the attitude of upper-class Egyptians amongst whom Joseph lived towards the menial nomadic groups and slaves who shepherded flocks and herds in Egypt.

Joseph told his brothers that when they were asked to speak by Pharaoh, they should tell the same story as himself. This would explain why they felt it necessary to bring all their flocks and herds with them, along with their possessions, and he believed it would lead to the family being allowed to live in Goshen. This was a border area some distance from the main centres of Egyptian population; and being to the north-east of the Nile Delta, had the potential of greater amounts of vegetation from which flocks and herds could feed. Perhaps Joseph had already acted in other ways to ensure the successful conclusion of his plan, but He still felt it necessary to instruct his brothers carefully! There was a definite tone of concern and uncertainty.

Application

However much we want to, we cannot plan our lives; only the Lord can do this. Reading the story of Joseph, we have a mixture of feelings, firstly that this is exactly what should happen, but secondly, that the way it all worked out was unexpected by those for whom it was real. In addition, the way it all worked to serve God's purposes could only be fully seen after it had happened. We live with tension all the time. On the one hand, we believe that God is in control of our lives and has His hand on what happens, and yet from our present perspective, things are unclear and uncertain, and sometimes even bleak. It is only in looking back that we can see the details of how God has been at work through all manner of events in order to help us and save us; and this gives us cause for faith and hope.

Of course, this perspective on the past is not something that could be experienced by someone who did not know God's love, or acknowledge His providence. For this reason, we cannot expect everyone to look back on their lives and find a divine hand has led them for better and not for worse. It seems true of this story, perhaps more so than many in the Old Testament, that God's people had to live with all manner of uncertainty, including some deep questions about whether or not God was indeed in control and fulfilling His purposes. Jacob mourned the loss of Joseph for decades, and Joseph had to find his own life without knowing what happened to his family, for example; and what would happen to God's promises to the forefathers?

When Joseph and Jacob met, the prolonged emotions described in our text were not just the result of personal feelings. They contained the mutual realisation that God was indeed in control of everything, and His plans for good and not for evil had prevailed. Looking back, each of us should be able to recall moments like this. We do not live with this manner of experience all the time, but we can treasure, and should never forget, those great moments when we know that God has blessed us and His hand has guided us. As our lives unfold, we will then learn to recognise such moments when they come, and grow in faith that the purposes of God will be fulfilled in our lives.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Emotions are an important part of our makeup. Why do some people avoid showing their feelings and emotions?
2. Discuss the theory that Joseph is trying to secure Goshen for his family against the wishes of Pharaoh. Why does Joseph get his way?
3. Discuss in your group whether it is important for us to leave everything behind if we are to follow the Lord.

Discipleship

Personal comment:

This story of Genesis describes a major movement and change for the family of God's people. From time to time, all of God's people have needed to change so that the Lord's will be done. God Himself has decided that things must move on and we have no option but to move with Him or be left behind! It is of course difficult to know when this is happening, but we must be prepared for it. To refuse to believe that the Lord will change His church or make it move on, for example, is contrary to the evidence of God's Word.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Consider the circumstances that dictate your own work, your home circumstances, your hobbies and interests and everything else in your life. What place does your faith have in determining these things? Are any of these things negotiable, and are they all God's clear will? Asking the question should not be a threat, but the answers might be!*
- *Pray for the Lord to place His hand on those who need to change their lives in order to do God's will; you may know one or two members of your own family who need such prayer. Pray that God will deal gently with those who are at present stubbornly resisting His will.*

Final Prayer

Almighty and ever living God; You made the world in love, and it must break Your heart to see the mess we have made of everything You have created for our benefit, enjoyment and blessing. So fill us with Your Holy Spirit that we re-connect with all the blessings of life You have made for us, and enjoy the life You have given us. Thank You Lord God; AMEN

