

Prayer

Lift our hearts, Lord Jesus; may we be open to Your spiritual gifts, and by using them, live victoriously in Your love. Give us the courage to face the enemy wherever and whenever he may confront us; and give us the faith to trust You completely for deliverance and salvation. You, Lord Jesus, are our inspiration and hope. Alleluia!

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Waste

Pray today for the seas and oceans. Many of our oceans have severe problems coping with the large quantities of waste that are dumped into them (as well as over-fishing of some stocks). Pray that we may be spared the breakdown of the sea's ecosystems which are themselves important in issues such as global warming and patterns of climate change.

Meditation

Lord, how do You care for us each moment of the day?

In the midst of the darkest night Your watchful Spirit
Holds our bodies, minds and spirits until we wake:

As we eat, Your Creative power works deep within us,
Enabling our bodied to take sustenance from food:

When we talk, our hearts give rise to the words we say,
But the Spirit gives them meaning for those who hear:

In doing work, the Saviour watches us closely, seeking
To build the Kingdom of God through all we do:

If we take rest, we access the God-given gift,
Of healing and restoration of body, mind and soul:

As we spend time with our close family and friends,
He watches and guides our sharing and fellowship.

Lord, how do You care for us each moment of the day?

In these, and a myriad other ways.

Bible Study - Genesis 47:27-48:7

²⁷ So Israel settled in the land of Egypt, in the region of Goshen. They took property within it, and were fruitful and increased greatly in number. ²⁸ Jacob lived in the land of Egypt for seventeen years; so the total length of Jacob's life was one hundred and forty-seven years. ²⁹ When the time of Israel's death came near, he summoned his son Joseph and said to him, 'If I have found favour with you, put your hand under my thigh and pledge to deal with me in loyalty and truth. Do not bury me in Egypt, ³⁰ but when I rest with my ancestors, carry me out of Egypt and bury me where they are buried.' Joseph answered, 'I will do as you say.' ³¹ But Jacob demanded, 'Swear to me'; and he swore to him. Then Israel bowed down at the head of his bed.

^{48:1} Later, Joseph was told, 'Your father is ill.' So he took his two sons with him, Manasseh and Ephraim. ² When Jacob was told, 'Your son Joseph has come to you,' he summoned all his strength and sat up in bed. ³ And Jacob said to Joseph, 'God Almighty appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan, and he blessed me, ⁴ and said to me, "I am going to make you fertile and numerous; I will make out of you a group of peoples, and will give this land to your descendants after you as an everlasting possession." ⁵ So your two sons, born to you here before I came to Egypt, are now mine; Ephraim and Manasseh will be mine, just as Reuben and Simeon are. ⁶ As for the children you have after them, they shall be yours, and

they will be recorded under the names of their brothers in respect of their inheritance. ⁷ For when I journeyed from Paddan, Rachel, to my sorrow, died in Canaan on the way, some distance from Ephrath. I buried her there beside the road to Ephrath' (that is, Bethlehem).

Review

Having finished telling us what happened to Joseph, a story that has taken us almost ten chapters (chps. 37 to 47), Genesis now enters its final phase, describing a series of incidents focused around Jacob and his death. During the life of Abraham and Isaac, and especially when they came to die, it was always the one chosen son who would attend to the funeral and burial of the father. Now, however, Jacob's family had grown massively and his twelve sons and their children constituted a very large household, called the 'People of Israel'. God's promise that His people would be 'fruitful' was being fulfilled, as Jacob clearly perceived (48:4), and the Covenant would no longer be passed on through the line of one single son, but through the entire household; all 'Israel'.

Although we have already had plenty of hints within the story-line that Judah was the potential future leader of the tribes of Israel (see 43:8 and 44:18f.), as proved to be the case in later history, Jacob himself still dealt with Joseph as the senior son. He was still Jacob's favourite son (see chpt. 37), and it was he who had saved everyone from drought and starvation through his high position in Egypt and by the way God had worked through him over many years. So it was that in the first small story concerning Jacob and the end of his life (47:27-31), Joseph was summoned to Jacob's bedside and required to swear a formal oath. Placing his hand under his father's thigh (see also 24:2,9), Joseph accepted his father's request that he be buried in Canaan. For Jacob, the story of God's people lay in Canaan, not in Egypt, and despite everything that had happened he wanted to be buried 'with my ancestors' (47:30). By this he meant using the cave at Machpelah, the burial ground first purchased by Abraham for Sarah (23:17f.), but also used for Isaac and Rebekah as well (35:27f. and 49:31). When assured of Joseph's sincerity (47:30), Jacob 'bowed his head' which is a way of saying that he 'worshipped'. God had fulfilled his promises to the man who started out in life as a scurrilous young pretender, but had learned the lessons of life and also of faith in a long life.

The second small story surrounding the death of Jacob comes next in our reading, telling the story of what happened when Joseph visited his sick father with his two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh (48:1-7). Initially, Jacob began to do what many elderly people have always done, and reminisced about what God had done for him, appearing to him at Luz (Bethel), blessing him, and confirming the great Covenant promise passed down from his father (48:3,4). Everything he said, however, copied the manner in which his own father Isaac had given him the Covenant blessing (28:3,4) and he undoubtedly intended to pass this on to Joseph and his sons by speaking it out to them. Having done this, he then continued by addressing Joseph about his two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. He took the liberty of claiming them as equivalent to other sons of his own, alongside Reuben and Simeon, that is, as heirs! He then said that any other children born to Joseph would not receive the same privilege (48:5,6)!

This was an extraordinary development, and one which takes some explaining (we shall look at this later). Jacob's musings about the Covenant and the death of his beloved Rachel (48:7) appear to be connected to this decision in Jacob's mind, but it is very hard for us to understand what he was thinking. Certainly, his mind was on the Covenant of God. Many of the words he used were typical of the Covenant (see 47:29, 48:4) granted by God to the forefathers, and it was imprinted on Jacob's mind that he lost his beloved Rachel shortly after God fulfilled His personal promise to return him safely to Bethel (28:15 and 35).

Throughout these first two stories of the end of Jacob's life, we are reminded most forcefully that although God's people had arrived safely in Egypt, the ultimate arena of God's activity for His people would be the Promised Land of Canaan. They came from there and they would have to return there. There is much more within this passage, but in a simple way, this reminds us that even today, God's people have a spiritual home in the 'Body of Christ', the Church, and wherever the work of mission takes pace and wherever we are called to within the world, this is our only home, and we should never forget it!

Going Deeper

There are a number of mysteries within this passage; what exactly was Jacob doing when he 'bowed his head' (47:31); and why did he ask Joseph to repeat the promise to be buried in Canaan? Also, why did Jacob include Ephraim and Manasseh into the twelve tribes of Israel when there were already twelve? We shall now find out.

The promise to bury Jacob in Canaan.

Our passage begins with the confirmation that the family of Jacob were sustained throughout the great drought as promised by Joseph. Many commentators wonder how or why the people of Israel survived independently of the rest of the Egyptians and were not made slaves of Pharaoh, but Scripture itself tells us that Joseph promised to look after his own family, and he had every power so to do (47:12). The telling irony is that in the book of Exodus, we are told that when another Pharaoh came on the throne, one of the first things he did was to ensure that the Israelites were immediately incorporated into the bonded slavery system, and forced to work as Pharaoh required (Ex 1:8f.).

It is important to record the total number of years of Jacob's life, being 147 years. This compares to Isaac's age (180 years, 35:27) and Abraham (175 years, 25:7). It is still difficult for us to fathom how these ages relate to life expectancy today, but the three great 'forefathers' of Israel, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, all lived to an age which commanded respect (even from Pharaoh – 47:7-12).

Now, we have seen above how Joseph was required by Jacob to place his hand between Jacob's thighs, a most sacred ancient sign of promise, and declare that he would bury Jacob in Canaan. Conscious that Jacob himself had something of the deceiver about him (see Gen 31,32), is it possible that he detected the sound of a civil servant in Joseph's rather formal first reply 'I will do as you say'? The comment is neutral and indicates no personal commitment; but Jacob had not summoned Joseph in order to obtain agreement for a functionary task, for him it was a sacred task. Jacob therefore refused to let Joseph go and demanded an oath, which he obtained.

At this point, Jacob 'bowed down at the head of his bed' (47:31). The translation of this is difficult, for it could equally be 'worshipped with his head on his staff', or some combination of these two sentences! I reckon that Scripture included this observation about Jacob because it does several things. Firstly, it makes it clear that by worshipping (frequently expressed in Hebrew by 'bowing down'), Jacob regarded the promise to return to Canaan as sacred; not just for him, but in due course for his whole family. What would happen to Jacob would one day happen to all God's people: they would return. Secondly, the dream of Joseph was that his father would one day 'bow down' to him (37:9), and although his brothers had clearly offered this obeisance already, his father had not. One translation of this text is that Jacob 'bowed his head on his staff'. Is this perhaps a small acknowledgement to Joseph that having made his promise, he was now worthy of submission from his father, thus fulfilling the last part of the original second dream?

Presenting Ephraim and Manasseh

It is clear that the remainder of Genesis comprises a series of stories surrounding the death of Jacob, and just as in real life, some things get repeated or forgotten. There are so many attempts to explain why Ephraim and Manasseh were introduced to Jacob twice (48:5 and 48:9 – two separate occasions), the technical explanations become complex and unreal, involving the attempt to put together a variety of different possible 'sources' for the one story. I think it wise to accept that sometimes true stories reflect real life, and elderly people both forget things, and also feel they need to repeat them. Little else is required to explain the text in my opinion! Each story element has its distinct purpose and derives from a genuine recollection of something that was said or done by Jacob, passed on in the traditions of the people of Israel, and eventually recorded as we now have it.

In our passage (48:1-7) it is evident that Jacob was ill, and those around him feared for his life and called Joseph. The ailing Jacob roused himself for the visit (48:2) and proceeded to recount the Covenant granted him by God and via his own father at Luz (Bethel – 48:3). This recounting of the Covenant emphasises two things, the fertility and numerous nature of God's people, and the permanence of Israel's holding, in God's eyes, of the 'Promised Land'. Despite age, Jacob was consistent in reminding Joseph that this was where his final resting place should be!

The consequences of what happened next were very considerable, for by claiming Joseph's sons as his own, Jacob made two future tribes where there had been one! You may have

noticed that in the traditional lists of the twelve tribes of Israel, Joseph is not mentioned, but Ephraim and Manasseh are each mentioned sometimes as 'half-tribes'. It is also worth noting that in due time, God separated out the tribe of Levi as dedicated to Him as a tribe of priests. This action reduced the active number of tribes by one; for example, in the organisation of the march through the desert (Numbers 2:1f.), and in this case, the two 'half tribes' of Ephraim and Manasseh took their share of work as one tribe. Tomorrow, we will learn more about this when we read the story about Jacob's blessing of the two boys; a story with not a little trickery in it which reminds us of the young Jacob!

Whatever reason there was for Jacob to do this, his actions served to make sure that the people of Israel were able to muster twelve tribes in each of the different circumstances in which they were required, from engaging in war to looking after the tabernacle of God (see Numbers 2).

Application

Here we have the story of an old man coming close to death, and a series of incidents occurs in which the old man Jacob made his last demands and requests, and passed on the inheritance he had received to those he considered to be his 'heirs'. Major family disputes have arisen because of inheritance and the consequence of the content of wills in our own day, and it was no different in ancient times. The main feature of what happened in the past was that there was greater reliance upon what was heard to be said by the dying person because writing was as yet not a common means of recording a person's dying intent.

One thing is clear, however, which is that any confusion about godly inheritance is cleared up completely by Jesus Christ. Of course it was important for God's people to ensure the correct passing of the Covenant from one generation to the other. In our day, Jesus has promised us that we are all His heirs, that is, all who believe in His name. Therefore, the manner in which the Covenant promises of God are passed on is by evangelism; each new generation is introduced to Jesus Christ, hopefully within the family, at least; and also beyond. As each new generation responds in faith to the living God in Jesus Christ, then the inheritance of faith is passed on, and we do not have to wait with baited breath over the dying words of a man, to see how things will work out for the future! Jesus has died once and for all, and His dying words 'father, forgive ...' have granted us all the inheritance of a right to stand before the throne of God by faith in Jesus, and receive peace with God, and eternal life.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Discuss in your group whether you think that Jacob thought his extended family would stay very long in Egypt?
2. Why is death such a difficult subject for people in today's secular world, when in the past, it was celebrated with much more vigour?
3. Is it really important that we have twelve tribes of Israel and know who the leader is? Discuss this in your group.

Discipleship

Have you ever had the privilege of being with someone when they have died? This can indeed be a difficult and terrible thing, but it is also moving and can be profoundly life changing, especially if we hear the final words that are said by the person. Sometimes we have to sit and wait with relatives until the time comes for death, and we do not know when this will be; just like Joseph in this story. It is important that we honour such times and allow the Lord to speak to us through the profound fact of life which is death.

Final Prayer

At the end of a day, when good things have happened and the worst has been overcome, may we rest in the knowledge that You, Lord Jesus Christ, have been our guide. Then, in full confidence of Your love and power, lead us into tomorrow with faith and without fear. AMEN