

Prayer

Come to us today, O Lord, with resurrection power.
Overcome our misgivings, our stresses and strains;
Release us into service and fulfilment of spirit;
Show us how to be free, and liberated as Your child. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: The Human Spirit

Our own spirit yearns for God and is naturally conscious of the need for God's presence, salvation and blessing. If our spirit is broken because of sin and temptation in the world, we become uncertain about how to deal with these things. Ask the Lord to show you whether your spirit is 'broken', and ask Him to heal the spirit within which longs to be free in Christ.

Meditation

These are the true blessings of life, which God has given us:

- Those who have given us wise counsel, help and advice;
- Those who have walked alongside us in the darkest of times;
- Those whose company has been good and spiritually uplifting;
- Those who prevent us from walking into sin, through their presence;
- Those who sustain us in joy and happiness, whatever the circumstances;
- Those who turn us around when we have wandered from the path;
- Those who demonstrate to us the power of God in true faith;
- Those who give us hope by the gift of looking forward with faith.

There is no measure for these spiritual blessings, except, perhaps,
Our desire to give them to others, in Christ, as well as receive!

Bible Study - Genesis 48:8-22

⁸ When Israel saw Joseph's sons, he said, 'Who are these?' ⁹ Joseph said to his father, 'They are my sons, given to me here by God.' His father said, 'Please bring them to me, so that I may bless them.' ¹⁰ Now Israel's eyes were dim with age, and he could not see very well. So Joseph brought them close to him; and he kissed them and embraced them. ¹¹ Israel said to Joseph, 'I did not expect to see your face again; and now God has let me see your children as well!'

¹² Then Joseph removed them from his father's knees, and bowed down with his face to the ground. ¹³ Joseph took them both, Ephraim in his right hand (toward Israel's left), and Manasseh in his left hand (toward Israel's right), and led them near to him. ¹⁴ But Israel reached out his right hand and placed it on Ephraim's head (the younger), and his left hand on Manasseh's head (the firstborn), crossing his hands. ¹⁵ He blessed Joseph with these words; 'May the God before whom my ancestors Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day, ¹⁶ the Angel who has delivered me from all harm, bless these boys; and let my name be perpetuated in them, and also the name of my ancestors Abraham and Isaac; and may they become a great multitude on the earth.'

¹⁷ When Joseph saw that his father placed his right hand on Ephraim's head it displeased him; so he took his father's hand, in order to remove it to Manasseh's head. ¹⁸ Joseph said to his father, 'That's not right, father! Put your right hand on the head of the firstborn, this one.' ¹⁹ But his father refused, and said, 'I know, my son, I know; he will also become a people, and become great. Nevertheless his

younger brother will be greater than he, and his descendants will become a multitude of nations.'

²⁰ So he blessed them that day and said, 'Israel will pronounce blessings by you, and say, "God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh."' So he placed Ephraim before Manasseh. ²¹ Then Israel said to Joseph, 'I am about to die, but God will be with you and He will bring you again to the land of your ancestors. ²² I now give you as one who is above your brothers, one strip of land; the one I captured from the hand of the Amorites with my own sword and bow.'

Review

It seems strange that Jacob should have his two grandsons introduced to him again. He had already met them and claimed them as his own, creating an intriguing complexity within the total number of the tribes of Israel by replacing Joseph with what later Scripture calls the two 'half-tribes' of Ephraim and Manasseh (see previous study; Genesis 4:1-6). It is impossible to reconstruct the series of events towards the end of Jacob's death, but the second meeting with Joseph, described in this passage, clearly had a distinct purpose. The record of it certainly sounds like a very different occasion. Here, Jacob warmly held the two boys and enjoyed them despite his age; and after a dignified pause (48:12), Joseph presented the two boys for a blessing. Jacob's words were controversial, just as so many previous blessings had been within the line of Abraham; but it was something that could only be done after Jacob had designated the unique place of the two boys within the tribes of Israel, as in the previous text.

The whole story is full of irony. We know that Jacob was himself the younger brother who stole his older brother's birthright; so his prior choice of the younger Ephraim over the older Manasseh simply repeated his own deception of his father Isaac as a youth (Gen 27). Joseph was displeased with what his father had done, and attempted to take his hand and correct the blessing, but despite Jacob's failing eyesight, he knew very well what he was doing (48:19)! Unlike his own father whose failing eyesight prevented him from knowing what was happening (27:18f.), Jacob was in greater command of his faculties than his son expected!

We can also smile at Joseph's objection to his father's actions, as Joseph was himself younger than all his other brothers, except Benjamin and he had received favour from his father all his life. Indeed, his youthful precocity was the reason for the trouble which led the whole family on its strange adventure (Gen 37). Joseph did hold back when the blessing was given, saying nothing until his father had stopped speaking (verse 17), and only then objected. His complaint was immediately put in its place by Jacob!

The blessing Jacob gave to Ephraim and Manasseh was given to them under their father's name ('he blessed Joseph with these words ...' 48:15), and it is a fascinating, threefold blessing. It may be too much to say that it reflects a Trinitarian theology of Father Son and Holy Spirit, but the blessing speaks firstly of the God of Joseph's ancestors, the Covenant God of Abraham and Isaac (48:15). Secondly, it speaks of 'the God who has been my Shepherd all my life ...' (also 48:15), and thirdly 'the Angel who has delivered me ...' (48:16). Each of these three is fascinating, but we notice immediately that the second throws us forward in time to the great King David who wrote 'The Lord is my Shepherd' (Psalm 23). Also, it may appear strange to us that Jacob talked of God as an Angel in the last part of the blessing. However, this was his way of talking about how God had accompanied him on his journeys. His first had started with a vision of angels ascending and descending (28:10f.), and it looks as if Jacob felt that God had protected him throughout his life by angelic presence.

The whole passage comes from a time when the formal blessing of young people in this way meant a great deal. Today, we struggle to know much more about what 'blessing' means than what it means to say words of 'grace' to each other at the close of a service! However, our words are always powerful and what we say is important, as we all know within normal family life. It is a great gift to be able to bless other people with our words, and both the New and the Old Testaments speak a great deal about the power and importance of 'blessing'.

Going Deeper

Ephraim and Manasseh became important figures in the tribal structure of the later Israel, something anticipated in what Jacob said to Joseph and the boys. The words of Jacob's blessing yield more as we look at them further, and the final words of the passage are also a significant mystery; something which is hidden by the efforts of translators to make sense of an awkward passage of Hebrew!

Jacob and the boys

Had Jacob forgotten the boys he had claimed as 'his own' only three verses earlier (48:5)? Unfortunately, we do not know the real sequence of events, and neither can we fully hear the tone of voice in which Jacob said 'who are these?' as he saw Joseph's sons Ephraim and Manasseh (48:8). I like to imagine that Jacob well remembered the time he came to his own father for a blessing (see above and ch.27) and said these words with a wry sense of humour; he knew what he was going to do!

Jacob began by asking Joseph to bring the boys for a blessing (48:9), but when Joseph brought them, he kissed them and embraced them. The report of this in Scripture gives us the impression that at this point he was playing with the boys and enjoying their presence (48:10)! We are then given a touching little glimpse of conversation. Jacob (here in verse 11, called Israel) said to Joseph that he had despaired of ever seeing his favourite son again, and rejoiced to see his children! It was a touching moment.

Then Joseph took his sons, stood back and bowed. We have now travelled beyond the fulfilment of the second dream of Joseph (in which Jacob bows to Joseph), and although Joseph was now the most senior figure in the land of Egypt apart from Pharaoh, he showed due deference in bowing low to his father (48:12). It was a solemn moment because it indicated Joseph's clear intent to obtain a blessing for his sons from Jacob, now that he had claimed them as his own.

The blessing

Jacob proceeded to make his intentions clear and despite Joseph's intent to present Manasseh before Ephraim, Jacob placed his right hand on Ephraim's head, and he received the prior blessing. In later years, the tribe of Ephraim would become one of the largest of tribes, eventually forming the majority tribe of the northern group of the tribes of Israel. So established was this dominance that the prophet Hosea in the eighth century spoke of 'Ephraim' as if speaking about the whole northern Kingdom of Israel! (Hosea 5:5, 9:13 etc.). After the destruction of the Northern Kingdom by the Assyrians in 720 BC, Ephraim was split up, and parts of the tribe became the group we now know to be the 'Samaritans', though other Israelite groups of the tribe of Ephraim were linked back into Judaism in the centuries before Christ. Manasseh too has a chequered history in the Old Testament, but both of them fulfilling the words of Jacob in his blessing (48:19).

The words of blessing which speak about God in three distinctly different ways (48:15-16) tell us a number of different things about Jacob and the way that he understood God to have worked during his life. By honouring God as the 'God of his forefathers', Jacob acknowledged that the God in whom he believed was the same Covenant God who had led his father and grandfather. God's leading was expressed in a number of different promises, but in this passage Jacob emphasised the promise of abundance, and the promise of land. Towards the end of the text, Jacob reiterated his strong request to Joseph to take him back to Canaan when he died (48:21). He previously had to emphasise this to Joseph (47:29-31), but he repeated the request yet again. For the old man Jacob, this was a non-negotiable requirement and he could not die in peace without being sure that his instructions were understood and carried out. Canaan was the Covenant Promised Land of God to which God's people would return, and it was essential to Jacob that he would be buried there, whatever the future.

It is interesting that this text is the first in the Bible which talks about God as a 'shepherd'. Joseph's brothers were earlier described as shepherds (46:32,34), and Joseph himself had spent his life working with sheep and goats, although the word 'shepherd' is only used in Genesis very rarely (e.g. 29:3). By calling God 'my Shepherd' (48:15), Jacob started something which has caught the attention of faithful people ever since, and it is worth noting that the originator of this famous 'pastoral' picture of God came not from David, but from Jacob!

The third part of Jacob's blessing referred to 'the Angel'. Because the definite article is used ('the'), and because Jacob knew about angels from his very first dream (Genesis 28:10f.), it is clear that he was talking more specifically about God's earthly presence during his life. Angels appeared to his grandfather Abraham (Gen 16:7f. 19:1, and 21:17) and in each story, they were honoured by Abraham as representing and sometimes being the very presence of God with him. Jacob talked about 'the Angel' in the same way. He had 'delivered' Jacob in the midst of his many adventures, and along with the image of the Shepherd, the Angel gives us a very real sense of God working actively in the life Jacob.

Jacob's gift to Joseph – a plot of land?

The very last verse of this passage (48:22) is an enigma, and most translators are not sure what to do with it. My translation assumes that Jacob was talking about a strip of land which he promised to Joseph, something like a foretaste of the occupation of the Promised Land, yet to come. If you look in other Bibles, you will find a wide variety of translations, often referring to 'portions' of something, but not saying what. The translation I have given simply tries to give the text some meaning which relates to the storyline of Scripture at this point, which is about the future entry into the Promised Land. Perhaps Jacob thought it appropriate to tempt Joseph by means of this 'gift' into thinking about Canaan rather than Egypt!

Application

One thing we can learn from this passage is the wonderfully free way that Jacob talks about God working in his life. Having talked about God formally with reference to his forefathers, he seems to be liberated to describe God's presence in profoundly new and expressive ways; as a 'Shepherd' and as the 'Angel'. It is a great gift to be able to look back on life and confidently celebrate the work of God through everything that has happened, seeing the Lord's hand in all manner of interesting and significant ways. We are children of God no less than Jacob, and we have the liberty in Christ to celebrate His presence with us; but the secret is to walk with the Lord all our lives, whatever our faults and failings, as Jacob did.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Discuss whether there is anything we can learn today from the ancient practice of blessing children before death?
2. How similar is Jacob's picture of God to ours? What difference does it make for us to know Jesus?
3. Some think that Ephraim's future dominance of northern Israel was 'written back' into the story of Joseph. Is this reasonable? If not, why not?

Discipleship

The blessing of Jacob in this passage reminds us of the benefits of reflecting on our life's experience, and trying to understand how God has led us through what may sometime appear to be strange circumstances. How often do you do this? It is possible to do this too much or too little, and difficult to get the balance right. Consider whether you do have this balance right, and whether you need to reflect on your experience more, or less.

Final Prayer

Calm my troubled heart; give me peace. O Lord, calm the waves of this heart, calm its tempests! Calm yourself, O my soul, so that the divine can act in you; calm yourself, O my soul, so that God can live in you, and His peace cover you. AMEN (*Soren Kirkegaard*)