

Preparing for the future

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Preacher: Steve Ellacott

[0:00] Well, it's Genesis 47. Let's rearrange things slightly.

! I suppose what I said was not quite true. There is a donkey in this story, actually, isn't there? It's always important, whatever you're studying, really, to ask the why questions.

In fact, it's really to be human is to ask the why questions. An animal will ask the what questions. What is this plant?

Is it safe for me to eat it? But humans ask the why question. They will ask why the hemlock and poisonous mushrooms exist.

Why are there rats and slugs and wasps? Why are there bacteria and viruses? By asking the why questions, we come to a deeper knowledge of the truth in its complexity.

[1:26] Another human trait is to oversimplify, like Job's comforters. Pretend the truth is always simple. People ask for the plain and simple truth, but it's been said that the truth is rarely plain and never simple.

asking the why questions help us to avoid that trap. And if we come to a passage of scripture, it's particularly important to ask the why questions if we're going to understand the what.

Unless we understand why these facts are related to us here, then we won't really get a clear grasp of what the Lord is actually saying through this story.

So what are some of the why questions we might ask here? Firstly, why doesn't the story end with Jacob and his family settled comfortably in Goshen?

Actually, Ben touched on this last week, but our current passage has a lot to say about that question. Don't all the best stories end with they all lived happily ever after?

[2:37] If you ever see the musical Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat, which actually does stick reasonably closely to the biblical narrative, but it ends with Jacob and his family in Goshen and indeed with the assertion that any dream will do.

But Genesis doesn't end the story of Joseph here. And that's because not any dream will do and they all lived happily ever after in Goshen is actually the wrong ending.

And here's another why question. Why do we care what happened to the Egyptians? We've already been told that Joseph supplied them with food.

So why do we interrupt the narrative with all this stuff about Egyptian politics? And even perhaps more puzzling, you'll remember that in Hebrew literature to say something twice means it is important.

So why on earth are we told twice that the priests did not sell their land? I'm not sure I can answer that why question, but it's an interesting one. And why is all this political stuff in Egypt put together with those instructions concerning Jacob's burial?

[4:04] The previous chapter finishes with Jacob and his family settled in Goshen and then we get this stuff about what happened in Egypt and then we go back to Jacob and the description of his death or at least his preparations for death.

Just before we consider these questions, there is one textual issue in this passage that we need to sort out. The standard Hebrew version of the Old Testament, the Masoretic text, and that's the one actually followed by the authorised version, says in verse 21 that Joseph moved the Egyptians into the cities.

But that doesn't really seem to make a lot of sense. It doesn't really fit with verse 13. How could they work the land if they'd moved to the city?

And the plan was to prevent the land becoming desolate and moving people to the cities was hardly going to achieve that. So other texts of the Old Testament say that Joseph made them servants or slaves and translate verse 21 that way, that Joseph made the Egyptians servants or slaves. This seems to make much more sense in the context and so most modern translations and the NIV and the ESV accept that reading but it's perhaps just worth pointing out if you had an authorised version, it's different.

[5:28] But most people now accept that the NIV reading that Joseph made them slaves or servants is the correct one. So let's go back to the why questions.

And there's an important clue here which we find in verse 26. Now you may wonder what's important about that but it tells us that that 20% tax is still in force today.

What is meant by today, not today in the 21st century of course, but today when the history was set down. Now it's likely that the history was set down and written down at the time of the Exodus.

And so if we think in terms of the Exodus then we can begin to answer some of these why questions. Genesis isn't a mere recitation of facts.

In fact, history can never be neutral in that sense. Even if you are just listing things that happened. You include some material and you leave other stuff out.

[6:43] You arrange your material in a certain order. And of course if you want to write stories that are remembered as Chris was reminding us a few weeks ago you use various literary devices.

And by these things the historian necessarily always puts a spin on the narrative. And certainly the narrator here has an agenda.

And as I say if we think of the agenda as something to do with the Exodus that will perhaps help us to get together with the text here. And I'd like to say that this agenda has at least three aspects.

The literary, the political and the spiritual. And I think one builds on the other. so we'll look at these three. First of all there's the literary agenda.

He wants a good story. He wants a story which will be remembered. But also he wants a story with the right ending.

[7:48] And the right ending to this story is not that they all lived happily ever after in Goshen. And I think he has a political agenda.

But see why does he bother to say this? Even the commentaries I've looked at don't really say much about this bit about feeding the Egyptians. But it must be there for some reason.

And perhaps the writer wants to tell us about how Egypt was organized under Joseph and perhaps even by implication how Israel might or might not be organized under Exodus.

Exodus Exodus after all is about leaving Egypt and as we've discovered to our cost Egypt leaving anything and to our cost in this nation leaving anything is always complicated and always has political implications.

And so perhaps he has a political point to make here. But of course above all he has a spiritual point to make because this is redemption history.

[9:01] It's not just any history. It's a history of God's dealing with man with men and women with mankind. and redemption history has a direction.

It has a plan behind it. And as we as it's pointed out here it's the hand of the Lord that meant these things for good. And the narrator wants to trace the way in which the hand of the Lord is at work here and indeed see what he's working towards.

So let's see if we can answer some of the why questions by looking at these three aspects. Look at them in that order the literary then the political and then the spiritual because I think the historian cleverly builds from one to the next and if we look at it in those terms we can see how that's done.

So let's look first of all at the literary irony of this. A few years ago Disney released a film called Into the Woods which was actually a spoof of some of its own classic fairy tales.

If you haven't seen it it's worth seeking out. It's quite a good film actually. And about halfway through the heroine of the piece meets Prince Charming and of course you think they're going to marry and live happily ever after.

[10:31] But that's not the right ending to this story. And in fact I won't tell you what the actual ending is but it's darker and more complex

and much more dramatic and they all lived happily ever after.

It has a sort of feminist twist to it actually if you want to know but I won't say more than that. And the real end of the story of Joseph is not found in fact in Genesis at all.

The real ending of the story of Joseph is found in Exodus chapter 1 verse 8 which says this Then a new king who did not know about Joseph came to power in Egypt.

It's this line that both concludes the story of Joseph and starts the story of Moses and the Exodus. Exodus 1:6 tells us that Joseph had died and immediately the narrator tells us of the birth of Moses. In practice of course there were probably several hundred years between these two events but the link is that a king arose who did not know about Joseph.

[11:51] I don't know if you've ever thought of it this way but the story of Moses is kind of a mirror image of the story of Joseph because Moses was raised in a position of political power near the throne but he became an exile and eventually he leads the children of Israel out of Egypt.

It is kind of the mirror image of the story of Joseph who went to Egypt as a slave but came to a position of political power and brought the people of Jacob into Egypt.

And so the narrator wants to convince us that they all lived happily in Goshen ever after cannot be the right ending. And to do that this master storyteller interrupts the thread of the narrative to tell us something about Egypt which at first sight seems rather irrelevant.

But actually we need to understand the nature of Egypt here. What is the real situation of the Israelites in Egypt? What is life in Egypt like?

In modern terms we might ask what is the social contract of the nation of Egypt? That's what the narrator is touching on here. Notice how the historian is making use of dramatic irony here.

[13:15] How had Joseph arrived in Egypt? He'd arrived as a slave isn't it? Hadn't he? What's the last political act that we're told that Joseph did?

He makes slaves of the Egyptians. And then there's this business of the priests and the state funded religion.

Now of course Joseph had a personal interest in that because one of these priests was his father-in-law of course but I don't think that's the main reason that the narrator tells us this.

Surely the main point is that these are the very same priests who had so remarkably failed to make sense of Pharaoh's dream. If Egypt had been left to the auspices of these priests the priests and the people and Pharaoh himself eventually probably would have starved.

But it was there's an irony here that even these pagan priests benefit from the Lord's activity and Joseph's wisdom.

[14:27] There's no priest of the Lord in Egypt and yet it is the Lord's hand who is at work here. And there are other ironies here aren't there?

The Egyptians are losing control of their land having to sell their livestock and then their land. With the Israelites we are told by contrast in verse 27 actually acquired property.

Verse 27 that is of the previous they acquired property in the land. And it's at this point in the story that we suddenly get told of Jacob's insistence in being buried in Canaan.

In 46 verse 4 God had promised that Jacob would return to Canaan. It's becoming clear to Jacob that he's not going to return in the life.

He's now stuck in Goshen for the rest of his life and indeed is quite comfortable there. But he insists that he's not going to be buried in Canaan or perhaps that he's not going to have an Egyptian burial.

[15:43] Actually if you look on we find out he does have an Egyptian burial of a sort but not in Egypt. He's determined to be buried in Canaan.

And so by means of these literary devices and particularly his use of irony here the narrator draws our attention to the political realities of Egypt. And that reality is that Egypt is a nation ruled by and now actually largely owned by an absolute monarch.

Pharaoh claimed and more or less did own everything. And in fact with that in mind we can see a little of Joseph's economic and political nous.

I might almost say genius. The law had to be served, the grain had to be paid for and the people do become slaves or perhaps more accurately one would say serfs because they go back to working the land but they don't actually own it.

And the English word serf, Anglo-Saxon word describes that situation. They now work for the state, they don't get a free handout and indeed reducing people to living off free benefit handouts is not really a godly principle, it's not a good principle.

[17:06] It's not even in the best interest of the recipients in the end. But on the other hand compassion for those who are starving and in need, whether they're Israelites or Egyptians, certainly is required of God's people.

And we notice that the Lord demands this and Joseph has this compassion in spades. Look at verse 24. The Egyptians had asked just for food for themselves but Joseph spells it out.

He remembers that they will feed not just themselves but their families and their household as well. Joseph is well aware of the difficulties that these Egyptians are laboring under.

He's not a case of I'm all right Jack, we'll take the food for the Pharaoh and his court and me and you can just fend as best you can with what's left over.

Joseph is actually concerned for the welfare of the Egyptians. And so Joseph does the best he can in the circumstances and the political realities of Egypt for the Egyptians.

[18:14] I suppose there are compromises but he does the best he can. He avoids the benefit trap by a stroke of genius actually by inventing income tax.

As far as I know this is the first reference to income tax anyway. I don't know whether Sumerians used income tax or not but certainly Joseph seems to have invented it here. Government does need revenue of course but absolute monarchs tend to try and seize as much as they can get away with don't they?

They would take the 90% and just leave enough to keep the service alive. Sometimes not even that if they're really desperate. Perhaps if Joseph had not been there Pharaoh might have done this but it would have been an economic disaster.

Certainly a disaster for the Egyptians. And Joseph's settlement actually protects the right of the people to farm the land doesn't it?

It's quite remarkable wisdom really. And he means that they can profit from the fruit of their labors even if they don't own the land. Own the land they still profit from their own fruit of their own labor.

[19:31] So if it is slavery it's certainly slavery with the lightest possible touch. If the people prosper then Pharaoh prospers and Egypt prospers.

And if the people suffer then Pharaoh suffers as well. He doesn't take all the scarce resources for himself. And perhaps if Joseph had not been there and when the famine hit Pharaoh and his court would have seized what food was available and the common people would have starved.

But Joseph does the best he can for the Egyptians in that circumstances. And indeed what seems reasonable even today must have been a beacon of epinemic farsightedness in the Bronze Age I guess.

While the children of Israel are in Egypt what is good for Egypt is good for the Israelites. Joseph will do the best he can for all the inhabitants.

As I say what Joseph made of the state funded priesthood is less clear. But even then he may have agreed in principle that the religious leaders should be recompensed for their activity.

[20:42] And that would certainly be adopted by the Jews in Canaan. The Levites weren't required to grow all their own food. they took much of their sustenance in the 10% temple tax.

Even though these are pagan priests that we're talking about here. And I think it's worth just reflecting on this just for a little while. Because from time to time the people of God have risen to positions of power in a secular state.

There are several Old Testament examples. Think of Joseph. But in the Old Testament we have the prophet Daniel. We have Queen Esther and our uncle Mordecai.

Perhaps even in a slightly different way we have Nehemiah. Although he returned to Jerusalem of course. And if we reflect in our English history alone.

There have been examples haven't there. We can think of Edward the Confessor or Thomas Cranmer. William Wilberforce or Lord Shaftesbury. And we could list others if we thought about it a bit.

[22:01] And in each case the challenge has been to do the best for the people without compromising their testimony. And that sometimes has been a challenge for those people.

Cranmer particularly. It's a particular challenge. Joseph stands as an example for any believer in a position of influence.

Perhaps Joseph is an exponent of that principle that politics is the art of the possible. He can't make Egypt perfect but he will do the best he can for it.

And yet the solution is never perfect. Joseph redeems his brothers but he cannot redeem the future. And so given the opportunity perhaps and an unexpected political influence, a friend in higher places, it wasn't a wrong thing for the Israelites to make themselves comfortable in Egypt.

But the narrator still wants to make it clear that this is the wrong ending. It can't be the final answer. In the course of time a king would arise who did not know respect Joseph.

[23:12] And when that happened it was bad news. So both Egyptian and Israelite alike. And so there is a dilemma. God's spiritual agenda and hence that of the people of God as represented by our narrator must have not a political target ultimately but a spiritual target, a spiritual aim in mind.

So let's think about what he has to tell us about the spiritual priorities. This is a song slide.

I think I just made a few of those points there but I forgot to do the slide. Sorry. But it's the wrong ending. So let's look at the spiritual priorities.

And there's this death business. Egyptian religion was essentially a death cult based around the sun god Ra.

no other society before or after has built tombs like the Egyptians have they? Many of them are still visible to this day.

[24:43] I was reading just in the news this week that a new tomb of a high Egyptian official has been just been discovered. Think of ancient Egypt and what do you think of?

You think of pyramids and mummies don't you? This was a death cult. The idea was that the more stuff you took with you into the tomb the better life you would have in the afterlife.

In other words as we might say the Egyptians really did believe that you could take it with you when you go. And as Ben was reminding us last week the danger of course is that the Israelites would assimilate into Egyptian culture.

would they buy into this death cult? Would Joseph have a tomb second in grandeur only to that of Pharaoh which he probably could have demanded? Jacob understood that this could not be allowed to happen and he's very clear about that in verse 29 and 30.

This land belonged to Pharaoh. It's not the land of promise. Not the land that had been promised to Abraham. Not the land that had been promised to Jacob.

[26:03] The current government might be sympathetic but that could and would change. Jacob will not submit to an Egyptian burial.

In fact he will not be buried in Egypt at all. Goshen was a comfortable land but it was not the land of promise. It was not and never could be the Lord's land where righteousness dwells.

It was okay for God's people to make themselves comfortable and acquire property in Egypt but they were not to get too comfortable. They had to remember that they were not to stay there forever.

Joseph had to understand that even with his position in Egypt he should not lose sight of God's priorities. promise. Jacob's heart was set in Canaan the land of promise and so Joseph is made to swear that he will not give Jacob an Egyptian burial.

Joseph might seem to be on top of the world but in the last analysis in Egypt he was still a slave of Pharaoh. The land of promise, the land of true freedom was not Goshen, not Egypt but lies elsewhere.

[27:20] So let's think about this as a few lessons for ourselves and really perhaps two lessons for ourselves but they're connected.

So firstly some Christians have asked why polish the brass on a sinking ship and in other words they're asking is it right at all to be concerned with the affairs of this world?

Is it right at all to pray for the peace of the city in which you're living? Why bother with the politics and affairs of this world? But actually Joseph is an example that shows that this is the wrong attitude.

After all we do have to live here for a while. Joseph demonstrates compassion even for the Egyptians who had enslaved him.

We have to live here and we have to live with our fellow citizens of this land or whatever our homeland is and it is right to be concerned with the affairs of this world in that sense.

[28:32] It's certainly a right thing to be concerned for the welfare of those around us. We shouldn't make religion into an opiate of the masses. We shouldn't say that oh well of course this world is so terrible that the only thing to do is hope for the world to come.

We should indeed be saying even in this world there's a right way and a wrong way to do things and it should be a way that's based on compassion and on truth and the rule of law and indeed care for the people in the community.

We shouldn't just say it doesn't matter because it does. If we can do something to help as Joseph was in a position to do then it is the right thing to do and it's our duty to do it.

Joseph did the best he could for the Egyptians. But of course this does bring us a dilemma and that was the dilemma that Joseph and Jacob faced.

Remember that verse in James and again I think Ben reminded us of it last week. James puts it, religion that God our father accepts as pure and faultless is this, to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

[30:09] And this passage in Genesis shows us the dilemma that exists for the people of God at every time and in every place. How can you do both of those things?

We can't build heaven on earth. Joseph had to accept that Egypt was not the land of promise that eventually there would be a king who did not remember him and that the ultimate hope of God's people lies elsewhere.

But still Joseph under God's hand can provide temporary succor for Jacob's family and yet ultimately this turns out to be just another form of slavery. Moses was the one who would lead the people back to Canaan and freedom.

But then even when they got to Canaan the dilemma persisted didn't it? Moses told them they were supposed to be a beacon with their wise laws for the nation around.

So the nation could not be hermetically sealed against the world around it. But opening the borders could let in the spiritual pollution and indeed that's exactly what happened wasn't it?

[31:23] If you think forward into the history of the nation rather than becoming a beacon a light to the nations around the pollution of the nations around found its way in.

And so our historian here may have seen the exodus as the end of the story of Joseph but actually it's not. The Israelites would soon find their way back into slavery.

The true end of the story is not the exodus at all. We'll come back to that in a minute. But let's say first of all that Christians today face exactly the same problem as we might put it.

How do you keep the church in the world but keep the world out of the church? Christians have always faced that problem. And it's always tempting isn't it to pull up the draw bridge and to seal the church against the world.

Christians have tried to do that somewhere. Go and live in a monastery or go and set up a colony somewhere away from other people. But there are two objections to this plan.

[32:42] The first objection is it doesn't actually work anyway. Why? Because you take your sin in with you. And a fortress is useless if there's a traitor inside.

We're told Paul tells us not to give the devil a foothold. And the devil's a great climber. A monastery wall or even an ocean is not much of an obstacle to him.

Pulling up the draw bridge, retreating into the fortress cannot be the right solution. But mainly of course if we do that how can we forfeit our Lord's command to go into all the world?

We cannot do that. We cannot divorce ourselves from the world. That's what the Lord told us to do and that's what Paul would tell us to do. He says you have to be taken out of the world and that's

not what God wants.

like Joseph in Egypt we have to delineate the work of God in the world.

[33:54] Show people the hand of the Lord at work and that's always going to come with the danger the danger that we get too comfortable here.

how can we be light and salt? Sorry that's a slide for that.

I'm getting a bit behind with the slides here. So that's the danger. Do we pull up the jawbridge? No.

That's not what God requires. How can we be light and salt?

Josie found a way for a while. But Goshen wasn't the end of the story. But in fact the people of God would later find that not even Canaan is the end of the story.

They got to Canaan and yet they found they were still not in the city whose builder and architect is God.

[35:03] The real end of the story of Joseph is not found in Genesis at all or even in Exodus. It's found in the book of Revelation. Revelation 21 verses 23 to 27 says the following.

The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it. Egypt worshipped the sun god but this city does not worship the sun.

The city doesn't need the sun or the moon to shine on it for the glory of God gives it light and the lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light so it will not be divorced from the nations.

It will not be a fortress. On the contrary the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it and it won't be sealed shut. On the contrary we're told on no day will its gates ever be shut for there will be no night there.

There won't be a night when the gates have to be shut for safety. And we're told indeed that it's repeated the glory and honour of the nations will be brought into it.

[36:20] But surely that means that evil will find its way in. But no. John tells us in Revelation that nothing impure will ever enter it.

Nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life. The gates are open always open yet only those can enter whose names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life.

Then the glory of the nations will be brought into it but nothing impure will ever enter it. Jacob's family were in temporary exile in Egypt.

We are in temporary exile here. For a while we must make the best of it. Jacob knew where the story would really end.

We must remain in the world and yet we strive to keep out the pollution to live as citizens of the holy city here in this world.

[37:39] And let me finish with one final thought. It always helps to have friends in high places. Jacob's family avoided starvation children because they had a brother in the court of Pharaoh who had the ear of Pharaoh who was able to take these dirty shepherds as the Egyptians would have thought of them and bring them into the court of Pharaoh.

It always helps to have a friend at the court of the king. But we have a brother don't we in an even higher court. Jesus pleads for us not in any earthly court but at the court of the father himself.

Joseph died. Pharaohs come and go. Governments change policies. Some are better than others. None of them are perfect. But in the court of heaven there was never be a change of government.

There will never be the uncertainty of new policies.

There will be no referenda because there is none to vote on. We will all acknowledge the rule of the lamb. There will never be a time when Jesus isn't at the court of the father to present our case to say there may be dirty wilderness dwelling shepherds but they're my brothers and he introduces us to the king to the throne of grace to the place where grace is to be found.

[39:33] There's never any change of policy here. Indeed Hebrews tells us doesn't he that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

So as we close let's sing again. Sing 966