

Grace In Genesis (ix)

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[0 : 00] Turn with me, if you would, to Genesis 47. On first inspection, Genesis 47 is a very strange place to go looking for the grace of God.

After all, God is not mentioned once in this whole chapter. In many ways, Genesis 47 is a little like the book of Esther, where God is conspicuous by his absence.

It is the absence of God which lays the framework for the grace of God at work in the lives of his people.

Because though they may be getting on with their day-to-day lives, God's at work to save and deliver them always. We may suppose, because God seems to be conspicuous by his absence in our society today, that he's no longer at work in his people.

Perhaps the great events of our time really are solely in the hands of the great men and women of the day. People like Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin.

[1 : 08] And God has nothing to do with the outcomes of their deliberations. And perhaps the people of Egypt thought the same way. After all, they both had Pharaoh and Joseph ruling over them and making decisions on their behalf.

But Jacob didn't think this way. And neither did Joseph. Because even though God is not explicitly mentioned in this chapter, he is front and center of their thoughts and circumstances.

And they know that God is at work through them. In a world like ours, where great men and women rule over us and make decisions on our behalf, and especially in the light of events in the last couple of days, perhaps we're tempted to think that the monumental events of our day are outwith the sovereignty of God.

That somehow God's grace has failed. But to think this would be wrong because in Genesis 47, as in our world today, God is weaving his story of grace, even though we can't see or feel his shuttle moving forward and back.

So Genesis 47, even though it does not explicitly mention God even once, is just one more weaving of God's sovereign grace at work in, through, and for his people.

[2 : 38] Human beings like Pharaoh and Joseph might be the fabric God uses in his tapestry at this time, but it remains the tapestry he is weaving. And so in this chapter, we see his grace at work in four ways.

The grace of human favor, the grace of human blessing, the grace of human wisdom, and the grace of human endurance. First of all, the grace of human favor.

The grace of human favor from verse 1 to 6. The grace of human favor. By Genesis 47, Jacob is an incredibly old man, and the hero of this story is now Joseph, Jacob's son.

As David explained through Joseph, God has delivered his people from the famine, which by this stage had enveloped the entire Middle East. We know the story. Joseph had been sold by his brothers, but through God's work in him, Joseph rose to prominence in the court of Pharaoh, king of Egypt.

Joseph interpreted Pharaoh's disturbing dreams and provided Pharaoh with a way ahead. There was to be a great famine, and Joseph suggested that Pharaoh appoint a man who would arrange a collection and the storage of grain so that the famine could be overcome and Egypt could survive.

[4 : 03] A grateful Pharaoh appoints Joseph to be the man in charge and makes him second in charge of all Egypt. That famine which holds Egypt in its grip also holds Canaan in its grip also.

So Joseph calls for his father and his brothers to come down and join him in Egypt where he can provide food for their needs. In our society, we tend to settle refugees in high-rise blocks and dodgy areas of our inner cities and not in huge detached houses and prosperous areas.

But these refugees, according to verse 2, Joseph and his brothers were settled in the very best Egypt had to offer, the land of Goshen.

The word Goshen means the cultivated land, the garden land. We're to understand that Jacob and his sons, as refugees, lived in the breadbasket of Egypt, not a place of drought or famine, but a place of plenty and beauty.

And what we're learning from verses 1 through 6 is that although Joseph planned it all out, the resettlement of Goshen was both approved and sanctioned by Pharaoh himself.

[5 : 24] By Pharaoh's order in verse 6, Jacob and his sons were to settle in the very best of the land, in Goshen, the garden, and they would take charge of Pharaoh's flocks.

They've gone from living in a desert and starving to death to living in a land of lush vegetation, being well fed, prospering, and being respected.

Remember, God's not mentioned in this chapter, not even once. Could it be that he's been conspicuous by his absence again, this time granting Jacob and his sons favor at the hands of the Pharaoh of Egypt?

Could it be that it's ultimately God who is behind Pharaoh's words and actions? Pharaoh thinks he is the most powerful man in the world.

I'm pretty sure the great men of our world think exactly the same way Pharaoh did. And yet, without working against Pharaoh's free will, the infinitely more powerful God settled his people in the land of Goshen.

[6 : 40] Can you hear the divine shuttle weaving between the warp and the roof as God weaves his divine tapestry? Through his gracious sovereignty, Joseph is raised to prominence in Egypt.

And through him, the Israelites receive favor at the hands of Pharaoh. Daniel received the same favor at the hand of the Babylonian kings. As did Ezra, as did Nehemiah, as did Esther.

Joseph of Arimathea found favor at the hands of Pilate when he requested the body of the crucified Jesus. In Proverbs 21, verse 1, these are very important words, especially in today's world.

We read, the king's heart is in the hand of the Lord. He directs it like a water course wherever he pleases. Proverbs 21, 1.

Because ultimately, it was the Lord who directed the heart of Pharaoh to show favor to the people of his love and promise. As I said, this won't be the last time in the Bible God's going to direct the hearts of kings like a water course.

[7 : 55] This won't be the last time God's going to use foreign, hostile kings to fulfill his covenant promises to Abraham and his descendants. So rather than be terrified by our human rulers, by the prevalent political and national politics of our day, perhaps as Christians we need to regain the confidence of Jacob and Joseph.

Because the heart of these great men and women of whom we hear in the news, they're in the hand of God. And he can grant favor to his church using them just as easily as he can deny it.

He did it in Reformation Scotland. He did it in mid-19th century Scotland. We pray he'll do it in 21st century Iran.

We know he can do it again. And that's what we pray for, surely. We pray for God in his sovereign grace to redirect the water course of our rulers' hearts so that the church may enjoy times of great peace.

The grace of human favor. But then secondly, we have the grace of human blessing. The grace of human blessing.

[9 : 26] Do you ever read things in the Bible that don't sit right? It's not that they're difficult to understand. It's that they're hard to swallow. Especially in the light of all that's going to follow.

In 400 years time from Genesis 47, the leader of the Israelite nation, Moses, will stand before the Pharaoh of Egypt and warn him about 10 plagues which God was about to send upon his nation.

At that time, the Israelites, the descendants of Joseph and Jacob had been enslaved. Their male offspring were being murdered. And it was time for them to leave the land of their captivity.

And so Moses stood before the Pharaoh and condemned him. But here in Genesis 47, we find the leader of the Israelite nation, Jacob, standing before Pharaoh and blessing him, not cursing him.

And this doesn't seem to sit right with us. That the patriarch Jacob, for whom Jesus held a very special place in his heart, prays for God's special blessing, to be poured out on this evil man.

[10 : 50] Because let's be clear about something. The Pharaohs of Egypt were not nice men. They were tyrants. Andrew Lloyd Webber had it right when he said, if you should ever be before

Ramesses, get down on your knees.

It was a dynasty of terror, both inside and outside of Egypt. And yet, Jacob, God's representative on earth at this time, lays his hands on the head of Pharaoh and calls down God's special blessing upon him.

It seems so wrong. But at this precise moment, God is using Pharaoh for his own purposes, just as much as he's using Joseph to welcome the people of Israel into Egypt and nurse them in the incubator of Goshen.

And so Jacob blesses him. And even though perhaps this doesn't sit right with us, that's the nature of God's grace. And this is incredibly important for all of us to listen to.

That it blesses even the Pharaohs of this world when they're used by him to bring about the prosperity of God's people. That Daniel's presence in the kingdom of Babylon brought about great blessing to the Babylonian empire.

[12:11] That Joseph's presence in the courtroom of Pharaoh led to Egypt's deliverance from famine. And listen, this is the point. The very presence of God's people in Egypt blessed the land.

They gave far more to Egypt than ever they took from it. Jacob blessed Pharaoh, but it was but a symbol of how the people of God were blessing the people of Egypt by living, working, and worshipping within its borders.

Before I came into the ministry, I worked as a research and development engineer for one of Europe's biggest materials manufacturers. About 70 of us worked at our particular research and development site just to the south of London.

And every Tuesday lunchtime, around 14 of us would gather together to pray for each other, the projects that we were working on, and for the company we worked for. The head manager of the research and development company, even though he himself was not a believer, used to remark that not one of the research projects on which Christians worked failed.

He recognized that Christians working in his division blessed the company as a whole. That God graciously blessed Lafarge Bras through its Christians.

[13:45] Now, I don't want to go all health and wealth, prosperity, gospel on us, but could it be that your presence as a Christian in your workplace blesses the company for which you work?

that just as Jacob blessed Pharaoh, you by your prayers, your work ethic, your character, call down God's blessing upon your workplace. Remember the words of Jeremiah 29, verse 7, when in the context of Israel's captivity in Babylon, the prophet says, seek the peace of the city to where I've caused you to be carried away.

Pray to the Lord for it, because in its peace, you'll have peace. Christian members of parliament call down God's grace on parliament as a whole.

Christian school teachers bless the school in which they teach, even if that school is not self-consciously Christian in its ethos. Christian students bless their universities and their colleges. Christian mechanics bless their garages. Christian librarians bless their libraries. I think we get the picture. That whatever God's people are, if we're living faithfully to him, we are beacons of God's grace in our homes, in our neighborhoods, in our workplaces, and in our cities.

[15:13] And that might be very hard for some of us to swallow. Genesis 47 is telling us that we are the salt and light, the Christ grace, in those workplaces in which we struggle as Christians and in which God seems conspicuous by his absence.

Our workplaces are the better for having us there because we are the beacons of God's grace. Let me challenge you to think of your workplace that way tomorrow morning. That when you're tempted to have the Monday morning blues and wonder what the point of your work is, you look at the guy sitting next to you and you realize that you are the grace of God's blessing for that person.

That as you work with them, as you pray for them, that as you live as a Christian before them, you are bringing the grace of the gospel down to Egypt.

The grace of human blessing. Third, the grace of human wisdom. The grace of human wisdom. I am neither a good leader nor a particularly competent manager.

I know these skills can be learned and I'm trying to learn them. It's good to know what you're good at, not so good at, and I know that I'm not quite so good at either leadership or management.

[16:43] By contrast, Joseph seems to have been an exceptional leader and manager of men. Throughout this chapter, he shows remarkable wisdom in which he manages, the way in which he manages the famine in Egypt.

He begins with storehouses of grain, but he ends up possessing the vast majority of Egypt and its peoples on behalf of Pharaoh. When the people run out of food, they sell Joseph their land, their livestock, and yes, even their own freedom.

What you have here in Genesis 47 is human prudence and wisdom taken to its extreme. Just as Joseph showed himself brilliant in the household of Potiphar, just as he showed himself brilliant in the prison to which he was sent, so he shows divine wisdom in the management and organization of Egypt's government.

I don't use these words unadvisedly. The wisdom of Joseph is almost divine because it does really come from God. What we have here in Genesis 47 is the grace of human wisdom.

where God endows Joseph, son of Jacob, with exceptional skills in the field of leadership, management, and organization.

[18:07] These areas may seem rather mundane to us, even rather worldly, but they are areas God needed to give Joseph if he was to provide for the Israelites in Egypt.

At this stage in their history, they needed a leader and a manager just like Joseph. 400 years later, when Moses led the people of Israel out of Egypt, God gave him a talented speaker to be his right-hand man, his brother Aaron.

Daniel strikes me rather like Joseph as being another exceptional leader and manager and organizer. If you should read the history of Hudson Taylor's mission in China, you'll quickly realize that back home in the United Kingdom, there were brilliant managers, organizers, communicators, and fundraisers resourcing and guiding Taylor.

Without them, Taylor would never have made it inland from the Chinese seaports, and today's OMF would not exist. In some ways, the organizers and managers behind the scenes were entirely as important as the missionaries themselves.

furthermore, just as God had grace for Hudson Taylor in the preaching and proclamation of the gospel in China, so God had grace for Taylor's support, advisory, communication, and fundraising group back in England.

[19:36] You see, God's grace is entirely as operational in the missionaries as in the managers. God gave grace to Joseph to so brilliantly manage Egypt's affairs so it provide for Israel in Goshen.

In areas like leadership and management where God sometimes seemed conspicuous by his absence, be sure his grace is at work. James, the brother of our Lord, said in James 1.5, if any of you should lack wisdom, let him ask it of God who gives generously to all without finding fault and it will be given to him.

Joseph had God given wisdom to lead and organize Egypt in this time of crisis. And you know there are people thankfully like that in our connexion here who are given these abilities by God to organize to lead to manage.

They may not be able to preach like I do but I most certainly can't plan like they do. And God gives them as much grace to be faithful to him as he gives me.

This is the grace of human wisdom. could God be calling anyone here to use the wisdom he's given them in this way to propel the ministry of the gospel of Jesus Christ in this church forward by your leadership, by your organization, by your management.

[21:19] The grace of human wisdom. And then lastly towards the end of the chapter the grace of human endurance. I've made no secret of it.

I don't like Jacob. But if there's one thing Genesis 47 teaches me it is to respect the man. Here we have a man who by his own admission in verse 9 says to Pharaoh the years of my pilgrimage are 130 my years have been few and difficult and they do not equal the years of my fathers.

He's had a long hard life he's now a very old man and who knows he may not have much time left.

And yet towards the end of the chapter having been assured that his son Joseph will bury him back in Canaan we read in verse 31 and Israel worshipped as he leaned on the top of his staff and Israel worshipped as he leaned on the top of his staff.

Here's a man who at the end of a hard life is worshipping God. I find this deeply humbling.

Transforms Jacob into someone worthy of great respect by us all.

He's had a very hard life but rather than dying a bitter old man cursing God he's worshipping God. He can't stand up properly.

[22:50] He needs to lean on the top of his staff. Kind of primitive Zimmer frame I suppose. And yet he worships.

His heart's not filled with his own achievements how well I've done in life. His heart's filled with the way in which God has guided and provided for him and his family. Because he's viewed life as a pilgrimage.

And it's been long and it's been a struggle. But he's not bitter about it. He's worshipping. I both liked my father-in-law and respected him greatly.

Never did I think higher of my father-in-law than when he was on his deathbed. He'd been a Christian for over half a century. He was a man's man.

But he was dying of a cancer which had left him desperately weak and emaciated. He could no longer lift his beloved hammer or hammer a nail into a piece of wood which he used to do with frightening regularity.

[23 : 57] He could no longer go out onto the hill and feed his sheep which he loved to do. He couldn't even get out of bed. He was flicking in and out of consciousness. The day before he died he whispered to those who were gathered around his bed, my wife included, the words Yea though I Yea though I They instantly knew that he was repeating that line from Psalm 23 Yea though I walk through death's dark veil yet will I fear none ill for thou art with me and thy rod and staff me comfort still.

Now there's a man who at the end of his life leaned on top of his staff and worshipped God. Sadly I meet all too many people who end their days in embittered anger cursing the world and cursing God but not Jacob.

Perhaps that means we're looking into the heart of a man in a way that we haven't done before and what we're finding is deep dependence upon God. He shows his worshipful attitude in that it's not so much the staff he's placing his weight on he's placing his weight upon God.

Don't you wish to be like him in his dying? That we too with our dying breath would worship Jesus Christ for the glory of his gospel. But with this I close the real reason that I respect him so greatly is simply because he made it to the end.

He didn't give up. Like King Solomon. He didn't become proud and self satisfied. Like King Uzziah. He persevered to the end of his life.

[25 : 50] There have been way too many high and low profile defections from the Christian faith in the last few years. And what? Do they think they are worthy of our respect because they have given up the faith and have not endured to the end?

Our sympathy perhaps but not our respect. Maybe the greatest in the kingdom of God aren't the flashes and bangs variety who rise to prominence and then fall spectacularly but those who plod along from day to day living mundane lives trusting the grace of the gospel of Jesus Christ and dying with their heads on the top of their staffs worshipping God.

Let me think to ourselves well this won't happen to any of us right? In my youth fellowship back in Bonacord in Aberdeen Free Church in the early 90s there were so many zealous Christians and if you could go back there and say to them within 20 years over half of you here will have fallen away from the faith that have laughed you out of town and said not me surely brothers and sisters in Christ you must endure the Etruscan poet Roman satirist Perseus once said Vincent keep a teacher he conquers who endures the spirit of Jesus puts it even better in his word when perhaps with Jacob in mind the writer of the Hebrews writes therefore since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses let us throw off everything which hinders and the sin which so easily entangles and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us so once again I say brothers and sisters in

Christ you must endure but of what grace is this command that God deserves and demands our endurance in the faith in Romans 15 5 he is called the God who gives endurance what do we think that we must win through against the unrelenting power of malice and temptation evil and doubt without the daily grace of God giving us the endurance we need yes we must endure but the first step of this endurance is that we must pray for it and earnestly seek it from the God who gives endurance himself no God is not mentioned by name anywhere in this chapter but in the amazing stories of his grace at work here his presence is shining forth brightly he may be conspicuous by his absence but the shuttle of his grace is moving forward and backward to the warp and the weave of this chapter after all what else can account for a dying man who's lived a very hard life worshipping God what else can account for the grace of Jacob's otherworldly wisdom what else can account for the ability of a mere man to confer blessing on the whole nation what else can account for a hostile king like Pharaoh favouring a hated people like the Jews grace it's grace you know it's sheer grace

but then that's what the tapestry is all about that's what the storyline of the whole Bible is from creation to cross to crown and that's the experience of all who put their faith and trust in Jesus Christ let us pray heavenly father we can't help but think in our world today that you're conspicuous by your absence how else can we explain oh lord our own perseverance in the faith other than that you have been strengthening us and helping us to endure by your grace how else can we explain the perseverance of the church in western europe when it's been under such attack for so many decades how else can we explain the rise of the church in places of the world which we just simply wouldn't have expected like china and iran and sub saharan africa and south america truly lord give us the faith to believe that in the events of the past few days and whatever shall come about in this week to come we shall not be terrified but rather we shall hear the shuttle of your grace working even through the actions of the great leaders of our day we remember especially your people christians who in the nation of iran who perhaps are caught in the terror of not knowing what the future holds for them treated by their own countrymen as traitors perhaps spat on imprisoned threatened beaten murdered even lord we ask and pray that as they endure their own darkness that the light of their witness would bless that land and that in years to come we would think of iran not as a land where terror emanates from but a land where the gospel wins through we ask all these things now in jesus name amen