

God's People-In, but not of Egypt

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[0 : 00] Well, if you have your Bibles there, it would be great to turn it back to Genesis chapter 46 and 47. We'll have some of the verses on the slides and screens today, but not all of them.

It's a long passage, so it would be handy to have the Bible in front of you. Now, have you ever felt that this isn't where you want to be in life?

That if only things had turned out differently for you, it would be much better? Perhaps you hope you'll be further along in your career instead of finding yourself starting over in yet another job.

Or maybe you wish relationships were much better in the family, but you don't feel you can do anything to change it. Or perhaps there's something that's happened in your life which you wish were different, but now looking back, you know that you can't change a thing, if only.

Often we think that we are the only ones with such feelings, but especially when you look on all the happy posts on social media, you might feel like that. But actually, the reality is we're not alone, are we?

[1 : 14] And today, as we look at Jacob, we find yet another person that feels a bit like that. Now, it may surprise you for me to say that because you think, well, didn't Jacob find out last week that Joseph was still alive and therefore he's full of joy?

He was determined to go and see him before he died? Well, yes, that should have been the happy climax of the story. But as we continue, I think we sense that notwithstanding this welcome news, Jacob may have preferred life to have ended differently for him.

After all this journey he's about to make, it's arduous for an old man like him, notwithstanding that Pharaoh is supplying the carts and the horses to bring him there.

But more importantly, this move was in the wrong direction. Jacob was already in the land that God had promised to bless him. That was way back in chapter 35 when God met him at Bethel.

God had given him the same promise as he did to Isaac and Abraham. But then thirdly, think about where Jacob was going. Egypt.

[2 : 28] If he had learned anything from dad and granddad, it was that nothing good comes from going there. Both of them had gone there in a famine, only to find trouble waiting.

But what to do? His beloved son Joseph, the one he thought was dead, he was in Egypt. And so he had to go and see him. So it explains why God appears to Jacob now, in chapter 46, to assure him.

Again, the place, Beersheba, is significant, because that was the same place that God had appeared to Isaac to bless him. So in verse 3, if you look with me, God assures Jacob by saying, Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you a great nation there.

So not only is it okay to go, but he'll have to stay for a while. God, you see, would make them a great nation there. Now remember God's original promise to Abraham in Genesis 12, to make him into a great nation.

Well, that's a direct echo of that promise here, isn't it? But God goes even further now. He promises, I will go down to Egypt with you, and I will surely bring you back again, and Joseph's own hand will close your eyes.

[3 : 54] What a comforting assurance. Not only is it okay to go, but it is part of God's plan. God will bless them there. And so in verse 5, Jacob does as God tells him.

Jacob left Beersheba, and Israel's sons took their father Jacob, and their children and their wives, in the carts that Pharaoh had sent to transport them. So Jacob and all his offspring, or the word there is seed, went to Egypt, taking with them their livestock, and the possessions they had acquired in Canaan.

So there's no doubt about it. This was to be a permanent relocation. And just for completeness, in verses 8 to 27, we have an entire listing of Jacob's seed.

We're not going to delve into each name today, but if you like counting, you can go through them later, and assure yourself that it all adds up. It does. But I want to just draw your attention to two key verses, which is in verse 26 and 27.

And that reads, All those who went to Egypt with Jacob, those who were his direct descendants, not counting his son's wives, numbered 66 persons. With the two sons he had been born to Joseph in Egypt, the members of Jacob's family, which went to Egypt, were 70 in all.

[5 : 12] 70, of course, is symbolic. 70 by 10, it signifies completeness, the full number of God's people. They may not yet be numerous enough to be a nation, but here God is indicating he's about to bring that to pass.

Here was the makings of a great nation. And now too, for the very first time since chapter 37, they're together again, reconciled, united, all in the one place.

And so the theme of this first section is the promise of God's blessing for them to go to Egypt. But as we turn to the second, the focus changes to God's provision for them in the land of Egypt.

Now here we have quite a long passage, but they're essentially two stories. The first, from verse 28 here, to chapter 47 and verse 12, is the account of how Israel came to settle in Goshen.

The second, chapter 47, verses 12 to 26, is the account of how Egypt became slaves to Pharaoh. It may be hard to work out what's going on at first, but they actually go together.

[6 : 30] They provide a contrast between the lives of the Israelites compared with those of the Egyptians. And so to the first story, what we have is a lengthy exchange of Joseph coaching his brothers on what to say to Pharaoh.

And essentially, they are to convince him that they are shepherds. So in verse 31, after we read that moving reunion between Jacob and Joseph, Joseph tells his brothers, I will go up and speak to Pharaoh and will say to him, my brothers and my father's household who are living in the land of Canaan have come to me.

The men are shepherds, they tend livestock, and they have brought along their flocks and herds and everything they own. When Pharaoh calls you in and asks, what is your occupation?

You should answer, your servants have tended livestock from our boyhood on, just as our fathers did. Then you'll be allowed to settle in the region of Goshen, for all shepherds are detestable to the Egyptians.

And as we read in verses 3 to 6, things do turn out as planned. But what's puzzling here is, why this focus on being shepherds? Particularly when he says, all shepherds are detestable to the Egyptians, in that they are being looked down upon as a lowly profession.

[7 : 57] Well, the answer is that it's to ensure that Israel settles in Goshen. Now you look here on the screen here, I have a map, and Goshen is on the eastern part of Lower Egypt.

The Nile Delta and its rivers run from south to north, like an Upton umbrella. And Goshen here, also referred in verse 12 as the district of Ramesses, is on the right tributary nearest to Canaan.

Now, we read in verses 6 and 11 of 47 that Goshen is the best part of the land. And that is for pasture. Hence the reference to shepherding.

But I guess it still doesn't mean that they had to live there. After all, we know today that there are many rich pastoralists who own a lot of land in the country in Australia. And yet they have their homes in the city, don't they?

In leafy part of Turek or Kew. So why did Joseph insist that they live in Goshen instead? Well, so that by and large, Israel could keep to themselves.

[9 : 07] You see, otherwise, given Joseph's position, there would be pressure to assimilate. Pharaoh would have wanted to treat them well, which was good, appoint them to maybe government positions.

There would be pressure to intermarry, to adopt the gods of Egypt, all of which would have made it hard for Israel to remain faithful to God and His promises. And Joseph was astute to this.

After all, he'd spent many years in Egypt already. And so he needed an excuse so as not to offend Pharaoh. But this comes at a cost for Israel, doesn't it?

Joseph chose for them to be second-class citizens in Egypt. They lived on second-rate land.

There's probably not a lot of mentions and palaces in Goshen.

Lots of paddocks, maybe, with sheep poo. But nothing luxurious. But now as we see, this actually turns out to be a blessing in disguise.

[10:12] Because from verse 13, we see what happens to Egypt. We know from what it says that the whole region was still in famine. And so first in verse 14, which is on the slide, Joseph collected all the money that was to be found in Egypt and Canaan in payment for the grain as the people came.

When the money of the people was gone, all Egypt came to Joseph and said, Give us food. Why should we die before your eyes? Our money is all gone. And Joseph said, Then bring me your livestock.

I will sell you food in exchange for your livestock. These were desperate times, weren't they? Because they were selling their livelihood to pay for food.

And sadly, we've seen some of that in our own country where our dairy farmers have had to do that in the recent drought. That's heartbreaking, isn't it? Well, this gets them through another year.

But then, when that's gone, they come back to Joseph again and say in verse 18, There is nothing left for our Lord except our bodies and our land. Why should we perish before your eyes?

[11:21] We and our land as well. Buy us and our land in exchange for food, and we with our land will be in bondage to Pharaoh. Give us seed that we may live and not die and that the land may not become desolate.

So Joseph brought all the land in Egypt for Pharaoh. The Egyptians, one and all, sold their fields because the famine was too severe for them. The land became Pharaoh's and Joseph reduced the people to servitude from one end of Egypt to the other.

That's pretty comprehensive, isn't it? The widespread devastation that was happening to the people. It says that only the priests were spared because Pharaoh allotted them his food.

But the rest, we see in verse 23, were set to work in the fields and 20% of their produce was taken by Pharaoh as taxes. Sadly for the Egyptians, they started out as land and stock owners and end up as slaves, tenant farmers in their own land.

And the great irony of this is, these were meant to be Egypt's first class citizens. They were supposed to be privileged.

[12:36] Their king had the dream to prepare them for this time. They had seven fat years to store the grain. And yet at the end, verse 25, they were thankful simply just to be alive.

And then we read in verse 26 that so long-lasting was this, that this law remained in force long after the famine was over. But guess what happened to the detestable shepherds?

Verse 27. Now the Israelites settled in Egypt in the region of Goshen. They acquired property there and were fruitful and increased greatly in numbers.

Now they lived off Joseph's allotment, but crucially, they were spared slavery. They managed to acquire property. They increased greatly in number.

God, you see, was upholding his promise to Jacob even while he was out of the promised land.

God was blessing them notwithstanding that they were living in Goshen.

[13:46] And yet, to his credit, Jacob never lost sight of God's promise. Although he knew God was with him in Egypt, he also knew that God's home for him was somewhere else.

And so in verse 29, when the time drew near for Israel to die, he called for his son Joseph and said to him, If I have found favor in your eyes, put your hand under my thigh and promise that you will show me kindness and faithfulness.

Do not bury me in Egypt, but when I rest with my fathers, carry me out of Egypt and bury me where they are buried. And then verse 31, Israel, that is I think Jacob representing all his sons, worshipped as he leaned on the top of his staff.

Jacob knew who his God was, didn't he? And what his promises to him were. And so he knew that their fortunes would not lie in Egypt, but that they would return to where they belonged.

You know, I guess it would be easy for them to get comfortable in Egypt, keep acquiring more property, settle there, take root. For Joseph even, his position of power would have been tempting.

[15:07] But all of them kept their eyes on the ultimate prize, didn't they? Patiently waiting for God to fulfill his promises to them. Now, they didn't know how long and how, but we do, don't we, that it would come in the form of that great exodus when Moses would lead them out of Egypt.

And brothers and sisters, as Christians, our experience in this world is very similar as well. But unlike Israel, we already know who our rescuer is, and his name is Jesus.

As we celebrated in the Lord's Supper, he's already rescued us from sin and death. And yet, as we saw in our reading from John 17, he prayed this for his disciples.

It's on the slide. My prayer is not that you, Father, take them out of the world, but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth. Your word is truth. As you send me into the world, I have sent them into the world. For them, I sanctify myself that they too may be truly sanctified.

[16:24] This prayer applies to us too, for those of us who are in Christ. We too aren't of this world just as Israel wasn't of Egypt.

We're to remain in this world, yes, sent into it even to live for Jesus. Jesus. And while we do, God will protect us from the evil one. But we don't belong to this world just as Jesus himself did.

Rather, we belong to the new creation, our promised inheritance, which one day Christ will gather us to when he returns. And so, what does that mean for our lives now?

Well, that even though on the surface we go about our lives just as everyone else does, so we still have to send our kids to school each morning now. We still pay our taxes.

We still shop at the same supermarkets, observing the same social distancing, eating the same food. Yet, our place in this world is fundamentally different.

[17:26] We're driven by a different set of priorities in life. Our eyes are fixed on a different prize and reward. Our worth, our identity comes from a different source, the ultimate source, if you like, which means it fundamentally affects the way we live.

As Christians, we learn how to suffer well, to face death bravely, because none of these things can rob us from the joy and hope that we have in the new creation.

Instead, because of this great hope, we have the boldness to lay down our lives for others. Unlike the world, we do not live for ourselves, but we live for others.

We serve them. We tell them to join us in the new creation. Friends, it is tempting, isn't it, if we lose sight of the gospel to allow the world to mold us into its way of thinking.

that is to cause us to look around and then to compare ourselves with others. But dear brothers and sisters in Christ, if looking at your bank balance or your qualification or your children's achievement or lack of or our job titles and even there I say our race, agenda or marital status makes us feel like second-rate citizens in this world, then please remember, we may be looked upon as detestable shepherds, but actually when we're in Christ, nothing can be further from the truth.

[19:14] We're actually first-class citizens in God's kingdom and that is way, way better than being a first-class citizen in this world. We've already been rescued from sin and death in Egypt we belong to the glory of the new creation, none of which we deserve, by the way, we don't be proud because of that.

All of this is ours only by faith in Jesus and repentance for our sins. And so if you call yourself a Christian and you still look to these yardsticks to validate your own success or your sense of worth, then please repent of it, seriously, because you're jeopardizing your glorious inheritance in heaven. Now, as I say this, I hope you don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying that we just dismiss life's suffering and disappointments. You only have to look at Jacob's own experience to take encouragement.

We skipped over some verses earlier, back in verse 8 of 47, when Jacob was taken to meet Pharaoh, Pharaoh asked him this, how old are you? And this is what Jacob replied, the years of my pilgrimage are 130.

My years have been few and difficult, and they do not equal the years of the pilgrimage of my fathers. You see, Jacob doesn't pretend his life was a bed of roses, does he?

[20:52] Putting our hope in God's promises doesn't mean we can't grieve and lament. It's not just about putting on a brave face and pretending all is well. No, Jacob openly acknowledges his hard life.

His father and grandfather had a better one than he did. They are buried in Canaan, while he will die in exile. And yet, we mustn't go from that lamenting to then doubting God's promises, and looking to the standards of the world and trying to seek satisfaction in this life, because then that would make God out to be a liar.

If anything, Jacob's difficult life probably made him cling all the more to God's promises. At the same time, the relative comfort of his final years here in Egypt didn't make Jacob see Egypt as his home either.

And so that should be our attitude as Christians. Whether life on this earth has been easy or hard, we mustn't be tempted or discouraged from our hope in Christ. We're no longer of this world.

We've been set apart from it, or as Jesus prays, sanctified for God's kingdom. Yes, Jesus still prays that we remain in it to do God's work, to work for the good of the people in it.

[22 : 10] And so as a church, as Christians, we must guard against becoming too otherworldly, so we're no use for God in this world. But there's also the other fallacy, isn't there? That salvation for Israel could be found in Egypt by trying to integrate with it, by trying to climb up its corporate or social ladders, by being radical agents of change.

After all, they could think, you know, Egypt was where we got our food. We survived the famine. It's easy, isn't it, to think that then Egypt is where the answer is.

But that's a fallacy, because belonging to Egypt wasn't God's plan for Jacob. And likewise, God's plan for salvation for us is clear.

It's through his son dying for our sins, redeeming this world in himself. He is the new creation. And so for us, even as we do good in this world, because God is good, we're not called to save this world.

Jesus has already done that, his way. The best thing we can do for this world, really, is actually to point others to him as their only savior, and to encourage them to join us, not being of this world, but putting our trust and our hope in Jesus, even though we may still be called to live in it.

[23 : 40] Let's pray. Father, thank you that you have called us out of this world in Christ Jesus, that by faith we belong to the new creation, that we have the hope of a glorious inheritance promised to us in your word.

Help us to remember your goodness to us, that we are part of your glorious promises and part of your plans for this world. Teach us to live as those who belong to the new creation.

teach us how to point others to Jesus, our Savior from the old and the Lord of the new. In his name we pray. Amen.