

God's People-In, but not of Egypt

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning. Let me add my welcome to you as well. It's great to be able to be with you this morning. If you do have your Bibles, please keep them open in Genesis. We will try to have some of the verses on the screen, but it's a long passage, so not everything will be.

And it'll be good if you have that open and you'll be able to follow along. So Genesis chapter 46 and 47. Now, have you ever felt like this isn't where you want to be in life?

That if only things had turned out differently for you. Perhaps you had all these plans for retirement, but now that's not possible because of your poor health.

Or perhaps you thought you would have paid off your house by now. Or maybe you're not living so far away from your loved ones, from children, from grandchildren. Maybe there have been regrets with things in life which you know, sadly, that you can't change.

Now, often we think we're the only ones feeling like that, but especially when you look around and see all the happy posts on social media. But the reality is we're not actually alone, are we?

[1 : 1 1] And we need to look no further than Jacob today to see one other person like that. Now, this may surprise you because last week we saw Jacob's joy, didn't we, in discovering Joseph was still alive.

And so determined was he that he would go to Egypt to see him before he died. So how can I be saying that? Well, yes, that should have been the happy climax of the story.

But as we continue today in our passage, I think we get the sense that despite this welcome news, Jacob may have preferred life to have ended differently.

After all, this journey would have been an arduous one for an old man like him, even if Pharaoh did provide the horses and the carts. But more importantly, this was a move in the wrong direction.

Jacob was already in the land God had promised him. That was way back in chapter 35 when he met God at Bethel. God had given him the same promise to bless him in the land of Canaan, just like Isaac and Abraham.

[2 : 2 3] But then thirdly, think about where Jacob was going. Egypt. Egypt. Egypt. 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 the 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. And that's why God appears to Jacob again now, to assure him. And again, the place Beersheba is significant.

It's where God had appeared to his father Isaac as well. But now if you look in verse 3, God assures Jacob, Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you a great nation there.

So not only is God saying it's okay to go, he now discovers that he might stay there for a while, so that God could make a great nation of them there.

[3 : 26] Now remember God's original promise to Abraham in chapter 12 of Genesis, to make him a great nation? Well that's a direct echo of the promise here, isn't it? But God goes even further.

He says, 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.

What a comforting assurance, don't you think? Not only is it okay to go, but this is part of God's plan. And God will bless them there.

And so in verse 5, Jacob does as God tells him to do. 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 him.

So Jacob and all his offspring, or seed, went to Egypt, taking with them their livestock and the possessions they had acquired in Canaan. There's no doubt about this.

[4 : 29] This is a permanent relocation. And just for completeness, in verses 8 to 27, what we're provided is an entire listing of Jacob's seed or offspring.

We won't delve into each name today, but if you like counting, you can go through it a bit later and assure yourself that it all adds up. It does. But let me just point to you one key verse, one or two, the one in 26 and 27, which reads, All those who went to Egypt with Jacob, those who were his direct descendants, not counting his sons' wives, numbered 66 persons.

With the two sons who had been born to Joseph in Egypt, the members of Jacob's family which went to Egypt were 70 in all. 70, of course, is a symbolic number.

7 by 10 signified completeness. This was the full number of God's people. They may not be numerous enough yet to be a nation, but here was God indicating he was about to bring that to pass.

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

[5 : 53] And so the theme of this first section is the promise of God's blessing for them to go into Egypt. Now to the second, where the focus turns to God's provision for Israel in Egypt.

Now this is quite a long passage, but essentially there are two sections here. The first, from verse 28 of this chapter to chapter 47 of 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 came to be slaves to Pharaoh. Now it may be hard to work on what's going on at first, but together they show the contrast between the lives of the Israelites with those of the Egyptians.

So in the first story, we find a lengthy exchange of Joseph coaching his brothers as to what to say to Pharaoh. And essentially they are to convince Pharaoh that they are shepherds.

So in verse 31, after we have 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.

[7 : 11] The men are shepherds. They tend livestock and they are 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 will be allowed to settle in the region of Goshen, for all shepherds are detestable to the Egyptians.

And as we read further on in verses 3 to 6, Things turned out as planned. But what is puzzling is, why this focus on being shepherds?

Particularly when Joseph then says, All shepherds are detestable to the Egyptians. Presumably because they look down on that lowly profession.

Well, the answer is that, So that they will end up settling in Goshen. Now, you see here on the map, which I've got on the slide, Goshen is in the eastern part of Lower Egypt, as you see there.

[8 : 14] The Nile Delta and its rivers runs south to north, like an upturned umbrella. And Goshen, which is also referred to in verse 12 of chapter 47 as the district of Rameses, is on the right tributary nearest to Canaan.

We read too in verses 6 and 11 of this chapter, that Goshen is the best part of the land, and that is for pasture. Hence the referencing to shepherds.

But I guess it still doesn't mean that they had to live there, right? After all, we know of rich pastoralists in Australia. They've got land and country, Victoria or whatever, but their homes are in Posh and leafy Turek or Kew.

So why did Joseph insist that they live in Goshen itself? Well, so that by and large, Israel could keep to themselves.

You see, otherwise, given Joseph's position, there would have been pressure to assimilate. Pharaoh would have wanted to treat them well, appoint them maybe to government positions.

[9 : 25] 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 to Israel, doesn't it? Joseph chose for them to be treated like second-class citizens in Egypt, detestable shepherds.

They lived on second-rate land. Yes, it was great for pasture, but probably there are no mentions or palaces in Goshen, are there?

Just lots of paddocks with sheep poo. But as we now see, this turns out to be a blessing in disguise. Because from verse 13, we see what happens to the rest of Egypt.

[10 : 24] The whole region, we find, is still in famine. And so if you look at verse 14, Joseph collected all the money that was to be found in Egypt and Canaan in payment for the grain.

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. Then bring me your livestock, said Joseph.

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 our own dairy farmers do that, haven't we? During the recent drought. It's heartbreaking. Well, this gets them through one year, another year.

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

[11 : 25] 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 so that we may live and not die.

And that that land may not become desolate. So Joseph bought all the land in Egypt for Pharaoh. The Egyptians, one and all, sowed flocks. They sowed 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. Can you see just how widespread and comprehensive this servitude is?

It says there that only the priests were spared because Pharaoh allotted them their food. But the rest we see in verse 23 was 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 they ended up literally slaves, tenant farmers in their own land. And the irony is that these were Egypt's first class citizens, weren't they?

[12 : 38] They were supposed to be the privileged ones. Their king had the dream that would prepare them for this famine. They had seven fat years to store grain. And yet at the end, verse 25, they were thankful just to be alive.

And so long lasting was this, that this law, it says in verse 26, 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 number.

They lived off Joseph's allotment, true, but God provided for them, didn't He? And crucially, they were spared slavery. They acquired property.

They increased greatly in number. God, you see, was upholding His promise to Jacob even while he was out of the promised land.

[13 : 51] And yet, to his credit, Jacob never lost sight of God's promise. For although he knew God was with him in Egypt, he also knew where God's home for him was.

And so in verse 29, as we get to the end of the chapter, 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 Jacob representing all his sons, I think, worshipped as he leaned on the top of his staff.

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

Now it was easy for them to get comfortable in Egypt, you know, acquire more property, settle there, really take roots. For Joseph, the position of power was probably also very tempting.

[15 : 16] But they all kept their prize, their eyes, on the ultimate prize, didn't they? patiently waiting for God to fulfill his promises to them. Now they didn't know it then, but that would come in the form of the great exodus when under the leadership of Moses, God would carry them out and bring them back to Canaan.

And brothers and sisters, as Christians, our experience in this world is very similar. But unlike Israel, we already know who our rescuer is, don't we?

And that's Jesus. He's already rescued us from sin and death. And yet, as he prayed for his disciples in that other reading in John 17, he prayed that, 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 sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. For them, I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified.

And 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 are to remain in this world, yes, sent into it even, to live for Him.

[16 : 37] And while we do, God protects us from the evil one. But we don't belong to this world, even as Jesus Himself doesn't. Rather, we belong to the new creation, our promised inheritance, which Christ will gather us to on His day of return.

And so what does that mean for our lives now? Well, this, that even though on the surface, we go about our lives just as everyone else does, you know, we still have to send our kids to school, still have to pay taxes, we shop at the same supermarkets, eating the same food, yet our place in this world is fundamentally different.

We're driven by different sets of priorities in life, aren't we? Our eyes are fixed on a different reward. Our worth and 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 know how to suffer well. We know how to face death bravely. Because none of these things can rob us from the hope of glory that is in Christ.

Instead, we're given boldness and courage to lay down our lives for others. Because we're not living for this world. We're able to serve them because we know we've got a guaranteed inheritance in the new creation.

[18 : 01] Friends, it's very tempting, isn't it, if we don't stand firm in the gospel to allow the world to mold us into its way of thinking, to look around and try and compare ourselves with others.

But dear brothers and sisters in Christ, if looking at your bank balance or your qualifications or your children's achievements or lack of them or our job titles or even our race, gender or marital status makes us feel like second-class citizens, like detestable shepherds, then please remember that that can't be further from the truth because we are first-class citizens in God's kingdom.

We've already been rescued from sin and death, from Egypt. We belong to the glory of God's kingdom, none of which we deserve, but which is ours by faith and repentance.

And let me also say that if you yourself call yourself a Christian and yet you still look to these yardsticks in this world to validate your own success and worth, then please repent of it, seriously, because that jeopardizes your true inheritance in Christ.

Now please don't misunderstand me, I'm not trying to say that we just ignore all the sufferings that we have or disappointment. We only need to look at Jacob's own experience. So we missed some of those verses earlier on, but back in verse 8 of chapter 47, when Jacob was approached by Pharaoh, Pharaoh asked him, how old are you?

[19 : 40] And Jacob said, 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, does he, that life is a bed of roses. Just put your hope in God's promises and don't worry about everything else. No, there's still a place to grieve and lament.

It's not just about putting on a brave face. Jacob openly acknowledges his father and grandfather had a better life than he did. They're going to be buried in Canaan while he's going to die in exile.

And yet, we mustn't go from that sort of grieving and lamenting to doubting God's promises, looking to the standards of the world instead. Because that would make God out to be alive, that he will not fulfill his promises for us.

I think, if anything, Jacob's difficult life probably made him cling on to God's promises even more. At the same time, the relative comfort of his final years didn't make Jacob see Egypt as home either.

[20 : 47] And that should be our attitude as Christians. Whether life on earth has been good or bad, hard or easy, we mustn't be tempted or discouraged from the hope that is in Christ.

We're no longer of this world. We've been set apart from it, or as Jesus prayed, sanctified for God's kingdom. And yes, we still remain in it to do God's work and to work for the good of the people still in it.

And I have to say that as Christians and as a church, we do need to guard against being so otherworldly that we're no use to God in this world. But there's also the other fallacy, isn't it?

That we think salvation for Israel could be found in Egypt by trying to integrate with it, climb up the corporate or power ladder or be radical change or radical agents of change.

After all, isn't Egypt where they found food for the famine? Well, that's a fallacy because belonging to Egypt wasn't part of God's plan for Jacob.

[21 : 53] And likewise, God's plan for salvation for us is also clear. It's through his son dying for us, redeeming this world in himself as the new creation.

And so for us, even as we do good because God is good, we're not called to save this world. Jesus has already done that. The best thing we can do for this world is to point others to him, our only savior, and encourage them to join us, not being of this world even though we're still in it.

Let's pray. Father, thank you that you have been, 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 plan for creation. Teach us to live as those who belong to the new creation and to point others to Jesus, our savior.

In his precious name we pray. Amen.