

Being a Pilgrim in this world

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Date: 31 May 2020

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[0 : 0 0] Hello everyone and welcome to our next installment of the great saga of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and of their wanderings and sojournings on earth and of the blessings that God has promised them.

Well, the idea of blessing and pilgrimage and going on a journey somewhere is very much in the center of our story today. We read part of the story, it's part of a longer section in Genesis stretching from chapter 45 to 47 and so as we start I'm just going to highlight a few things from the Bible that was outside of our reading so just have your Bibles handy in just a moment.

But just to start off by saying in the Christian world we have a long tradition of the concept of being a pilgrim and of sojourning, of going somewhere on a journey, of not fitting in, of being an alien, kind of not belonging here in one sense. You know, that makes us think though, where exactly is our home? What are we to think of the world we live in? How are we to think of ourselves as pilgrims and wanderers as the Bible calls sojourners? What blessings are we to expect while we are pilgrims on earth? And what are we to do with those blessings? What are we to think about them? So our passage today should help us think through these things.

It actually starts off in chapter 45. Joseph has reconciled with his brothers and they get a lovely invitation from the Pharaoh actually saying, guys, well look, the famine is coming. Joseph, send for your family, bring them to Egypt, let them live here so that they can survive the famine.

And so they do that. The brothers go back to Jacob, who's still living in Canaan, and says, our son is alive. Your son is alive. Our brother is alive. And Jacob didn't quite believe them, but eventually he comes around. He says, okay, great. Let's go down there. And so there's a huge movement of God's people from Canaan down to Egypt. And as they leave, God speaks to Jacob one last time.

[2 : 1 6] And that's recorded in chapter 46. As they leave, God says to Jacob, I am God, the God of your father, he said. Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you into a great nation there.

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. So God repeats his promise of blessing to Jacob. It's the same one that he promised to Abraham, the same one he promised to Isaac. And that's significant because previously, God had told his people not to go to Egypt. That's not the place of blessing. The place of blessing is in Canaan. But here he's saying, no, you should go down there, and I will be with you while you're there. In fact, part of God's promises are actually going to be fulfilled while they're in Egypt.

I will make you into a great nation there. So they're going to become a great nation, interestingly enough, not in Canaan, but in Egypt, not the land of promise. An indication, perhaps, that a blessing can still be had, even in a place that's not the home of God's people. God says, I will go down with you. That's God's protective presence that actually ensures blessings. So when God is with his people, it ensures that they are protected and that they will receive blessings. One last thing to pick up there, he says, I will surely bring you back again.

And so there's an emphatic promise of God that although they are going to go to Egypt, Egypt is not their home. He still considers Canaan as their home. Now they go down with God's blessing, and it's a huge number of people. There's a long section in chapter 46, again, like one of those genealogies in the Bible. And it says in the end, and this is where our reading picked up, that 70 people in all went with Jacob down to Egypt. And so they go down to Egypt, and they ushered into the presence of Pharaoh, and they're suitably humble. They call themselves your servants. And then they use an interesting word in Genesis 47, verse 4. And it said, they also said to him, that's the brothers talking to Pharaoh, we have come to live here for a while, because the famine is severe in Canaan, and your servants' flocks have no pasture. So now, please let your servants settle in Goshen. That phrase in the NIV, we have come to live here for a while, in other translations is we have, we have come to sojourn here. And so it means to take a trip.

You're going somewhere, you are somewhere that's not your home. You're in between places. You're on a trip or a journey. And this introduces us to one of the themes, that of being on a journey, or being a pilgrim. It's really kind of the same thing. Pharaoh then blesses them with the best parts of the land, or the fat of the land in some translations. He gives them the best place to stay. It's a very magnanimous gift. Goshen is on the eastern part of the edge of the Nile Delta.

[5 : 42] It's a very rich soil, very good pasture land, perfect for growing crops and for raising cattle and flocks and things. And then Jacob is ushered into the presence of Pharaoh. And so you've got here the meeting of two political heads, as it were, heads of state. Obviously, one is way more powerful than the other. Let's pick it up in verse seven. Joseph brought his father Jacob in and presented him before Pharaoh. After Jacob blessed Pharaoh, Pharaoh asked him, how old are you? And Jacob said to Pharaoh, well, 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. And Jacob blessed Pharaoh and went out from his presence. Just some things to pick up there. So you're meeting two people, but one is obviously more powerful and has at his disposal, in a sense, way more blessings. He's got more stuff to give, more stuff to offer. The other doesn't have nearly as much power, seemingly. And obviously, at that time, doesn't have nearly as much blessings to give as you can't give anything, really. Although they do have a lot of possessions with them, but not as much. But interestingly, it's Jacob that blesses

Pharaoh, and he does so twice. I hope you picked that up in that reading. That's interesting, because the seemingly lesser powerful, the one with less blessings, is blessing the one that seems more powerful and has more blessings. And what's even more interesting is that Jacob sums up his life as being short and hard, a difficult life, full of bitterness, some of the translations say. And yet, he's still able to bless Pharaoh in spite of having such a hard life. We're going to return to this later on, because this is the key passage, because it teaches us some important things about blessings and being a pilgrim in this world. The story goes on. What happens next is that the famine hits, and the count goes on to tell us that Joseph becomes a blessing to Pharaoh. And the famine is so bad that the Egyptians spend all their money on the food, but in a sense, buying the food that they'd given to Pharaoh, they've got to buy it back. So they spend their money. Then they spend their cattle.

They've run out of money, and they still need food, so they give them their livestock. And finally, they sell themselves and their land to the Pharaoh.

In chapter 47, and from verse 20, it says, Joseph bought 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. The Jews, however, are left to live a life of blessing. Now, the Israelites settled in Egypt in the region of Goshen. They acquired property there and were fruitful and increased greatly in number.

Now, Joseph and his family, I guess, could be very happy in Egypt, could be tempted to think that this is their new home. But one little comment by Jacob reminds him that that is not the case.

[9 : 20] Jacob is still convinced that he's about to die and makes Joseph swear an oath that he will not leave his body in Egypt, but make sure that he is buried in Canaan. In fact, he wants to be buried along with Abraham and Isaac in the cave outside Hebron. From verse 29, when the time drew near for Israel, that's Jacob, 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.

I will do as you say, he said. Swear to me, he said. Then Joseph swore to him, and Israel worshipped as he leaned on the top of his staff. This is significant because it shows that Jacob knows that no matter how much blessing they get in Egypt and no matter how much it feels like home, it's in fact not home. The promises of God revolve around the land of Canaan, not Egypt.

And so the promises of having land in Canaan is still the operating paradigm, the drive behind everything that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob want and are hoping for. So that's the story, and to try to summarize that for us. Let's turn now and think about how this helps us think through blessings and being a pilgrim in the world. One thing to pick up is that blessings in Genesis, as in the Bible, are not only spiritual, but also physical. In fact, the main blessings are physical. Land, people, and life. A blessed life, a good life is all about enjoying life here on planet Earth. You see, we mustn't let ourselves slip into the idea that we can only expect spiritual blessings in this life, or that Christianity is only about spiritual blessings and not physical blessings.

One of the commentators that we read when we do our research on Genesis is a professor called Wenham, and this is what he says about blessing in Genesis. The blessing of God is one of the great unifying themes of Genesis. God's blessing is manifested most obviously in human prosperity and well-being. Long life, wealth, peace, good harvests, and children. What modern secular man calls luck or success, the Old Testament calls blessing, for it insists that God alone is the source of all good fortune.

Though God's blessing can be simply evident in a man's happy and successful life, it is always regarded as a result of a divine promise of blessing. Indeed, the presence of God walking among his people is the highest of his blessings. Nonetheless, material blessings are in and of themselves tangible expressions of divine benevolence.

[12 : 40] All right, so that just goes to show that when we talk about blessings in the Bible, we mustn't, and when we think about it as Christians, we mustn't have these two categories that are opposite each other, as if physical blessings are one thing and spiritual blessings are the other, and what we really need to grab hold of are the spiritual blessings and that the physical blessings don't mean anything. No, the physical blessings, the promises that God made to Abraham are very real and very important, but of course they link to God and his word and his promises. So in a sense, spiritual and physical blessings are part of the same package.

Okay, and then a second thing to start thinking about is that being a blessing now in this life doesn't just involve being a spiritual blessing, and what I'm thinking of there is things like prayer or sharing the word of God, obviously as important as those things are. But being a blessing now includes those, but also includes involvement with politics, economics, property, farming, business, and other normal daily life activities. You'll notice Joseph had a massive impact on the well-being of the people of Egypt. He literally saved their lives, and they themselves acknowledge it in the text.

So we mustn't fall into the trap of thinking that Christians mustn't be involved in the affairs of the world, or that we have nothing to offer in terms of real economic or physical terms.

Indeed, Christian history is littered with examples of great Christian men who have made huge contributions in the area of politics and science and medicine. So the world of politics and business, of law and medicine, are legitimate spheres of activity for Christians to impart blessings.

You remember James says this in James chapter 2, he says, Well, suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food.

[14 : 39] If one of you tells him, go in peace, stay warm and well-fed, but does not provide for his physical needs, what good is that?

And so what God wants us to do is to make judicious use of the blessings that he does give us, no matter how great or small, in blessing other people.

We mustn't hold them to ourselves, but neither must we think that there's no good in having blessing and in giving blessings to others. By blessing here, I mean physical stuff. Our New Testament reading also helps us think through how we interact with the world of politics and power.

You'll remember we read from 1 Peter 2. Just going to read a few verses there. He says this, Dear friends, I urge you as foreigners and exiles, so there's that idea of pilgrimage, of not belonging, to abstain from sinful desires which war against your soul.

Live such good lives among the pagans that though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. This is not withdrawal from the world.

[15 : 51] It's engagement but being good, by being a blessing. We don't conquer evil by running away, but by doing good deeds that point others towards God.

Then the third thing to think about. Having a short and a hard and bitter life does not mean we don't have blessings to give or that God isn't blessing us.

Because we're assured of the blessings in the future, which we don't have now, we can be magnanimous ourselves with what we do have now.

Jacob's response to Pharaoh, that he's had a short and a hard life, may be to us surprising, because he's inherited the promises of God.

And yet, as I'm sure you've been with us in this series, you'll remember that his life has been hard. His relationship with Esau was destroyed. He had to flee for his life.

[16 : 50] He was taken advantage of by his own family. You know, he married the wrong woman, etc. His favorite son was missing for years. His own kids lied to him, etc., etc. And now with the famine, they've got to move down to Egypt.

So he really lived a life that wasn't settled. He had to move from place to place. And there was constantly bad things happening to him. Just a thought. You know, when God says, I'm going to bless you, we immediately think, great.

And what we want is good stuff now. We never think of good stuff later and bad stuff now. And yet the story of God's people is that God promises to bless them.

And yet there is hardship on the way to receiving that blessing. Here's the other surprising thing about Jacob. Is that no matter how hard his life was or is, he actually is able to bless Pharaoh.

This, of course, is a fulfillment of what God said his covenant people would be. Back in Genesis 12, when God made his promises to Abraham, he said this, I will bless you and you will be a blessing.

[18 : 00] Through you, all the nations of the world will be blessed. And Joseph's interaction with Pharaoh is an indication of that truth.

Now, it's interesting that both the life of Christ and the life of his church, us, reflect the similar themes of having a long, hard life, full of evil, of bad things happening.

But yet, because they are called and blessed by God, both Christ and the church can go through really hard times, death even, and still pour out blessings, still be a source of blessing.

So here's one application for us in our lives. You know, our lives may be long or short. They may be full of blessing or have very little blessing.

They may be full of good stuff, or maybe they're full of bad stuff. But don't let the evilness bring you so low that you forget that you have been blessed and that you can still be a blessing to others.

[19 : 01] Small blessings are still blessings. In fact, the history of the church is littered with great examples of Christians who have suffered terrible things in this life. But because they know they've been blessed in their past by Christ and will receive more blessing in the future, they can both forgive the past and the people who've hurt them and still give back to others.

In Christ, we have the ability to transform our pain into blessing. In fact, our New Testament reading in Peter helps us come to grips with that a bit more.

From verse 20 onwards, he says this, If you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. For to this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his steps.

He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth. When they hurled insults at him, he did not retaliate. When he suffered, he made no threats.

Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. And this, of course, brings us to the theme of being a pilgrim, of being a visitor or traveler on earth.

[20 : 20] Now, while this is true, there is a therefore that modern Christians tend to get a bit wrong. Because life is hard, and because we don't see many of the promised blessings sometimes in our life, although sometimes we do, we think that escape from earth and going to heaven is the answer.

We often hear, we are just passing through, heaven is our home. Well, in fact, heaven is not our home.

Earth is our home. There are two indicators in the story that tell us that this is still true. Shows us what the Jews were hoping for. Remember what God said to Jacob as he went down to Egypt.

Yes, I will be with you there. And indeed, part of my promises to you will become true there. But I will bring you out of Egypt. So God knows, and Jacob therefore knows, that their blessings are still to be had in Canaan.

Not in heaven, but in Canaan. The other indication is that Jacob makes Joseph swear an oath. He says he'll do it, but then he makes him swear an oath that he won't leave his body in Egypt, but bury him in Canaan.

[21 : 39] Now, if Jacob was hoping for heaven and the land of Canaan meant nothing, why did he, it's such an important thing that he made Joseph do. He wouldn't have done that if he hadn't thought that the land of Canaan was going to be his final home.

And it doesn't mean when he's dead. It means when he's alive, because they're all looking forward to the resurrection. The promise of land is such a vital thing for the people of God, that death itself, they know that death itself can't stop it.

And that's why they look forward to the resurrection, so that they can inherit the land that God promised them. The significance of this is it shows us how seriously and literally they understood God to mean when he said that he would bless them and give them land.

They know that the fulfillment of God's promises to them is living a life of blessing in the land of Canaan, not a life of spiritual existence in heaven. Being a pilgrim on earth, then, doesn't mean that earth is not our home, or it doesn't necessarily mean that heaven is our home.

It means that earth is our home, just not yet. Now, we've been teaching some time on this, and we've highlighted this in the story of Easter, that Jesus' resurrection is proof of our resurrection.

[22 : 58] That the goal of our salvation is to have resurrected bodies to live here on planet earth. And that this is the fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham, the promise of land and blessing and life, and that those promises are given to us in Jesus Christ.

So, when we think of how God blesses and how we are pilgrims in this world, we've got to steer clear of two extremes. The first is what we call the prosperity gospel.

People who believe in prosperity gospel love the tangible blessings of God, and they want them all, and they want them all now. God says, yes, my blessings do include tangible things, but you're not going to get them all, and you're not going to get them all now.

You will get them all, but you're going to get them all later for us at the resurrection. But there's another extreme, what I call the spiritual gospel, that there are no physical blessings and no benefits at all in this life of being a Christian, and that we must, the thing that we must do is escape this life and hope for heaven.

The biblical gospel is actually a mix of the physical and spiritual blessings that we can have in Christ, because obviously the New Testament speaks about spiritual blessings as well.

[24 : 17] This passage stands as a reminder that no matter how much or how little God is going to bless us in this life, the promise of what we will eventually inherit is of far more importance and helps us to be free with our blessings now, no matter how much or how little we've been given.

We're not just passing through to another dimension. We've got a role to play while we are alive on planet Earth. In essence, God has blessed us so that we can be a blessing to others.

Well, let's pray to God to help us think through these things and to act on them and to be a blessing to others. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, thank you for your word and the promise of real physical blessings in this life.

Lord, we know that we don't receive them all now, and some receive more and some don't receive as much. But Lord, because you've blessed us so immeasurably in Christ, you've freed us to give to others no matter how much or how little we have.

Help us to see, Lord, that we do have a role to play and that the areas of economics and politics and living in this world are important and that we can be a blessing to others.

[25 : 37] Lord, thank you that you've blessed us. Help us then to be a blessing to others. In Jesus' name, amen. Amen.