

MOVING THE FAMILY OF GOD

SERIES: THE STORY OF JOSEPH



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Genesis 45:15–46:27
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Paul Taylor
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“I have some difficult news to share. We’re moving to Texas.”

Those were the words my parents spoke to me thirty years ago. I was a freshman in high school, and my father’s job was being relocated from Connecticut to Houston, Texas. I was crushed. I loved our town in Connecticut. I always thought I’d graduate from Staples High School just like my older brother and sister. In the summers, I would bike to the ocean and launch my sailboat in Long Island Sound. In the winter, we’d drive up to Vermont and go skiing. Texas had none of that.

My life changed when I heard those fateful words, “We’re moving to Texas.” Fast forward to 2021, and if I hear anyone else say those words around here, I’m going to scream. Now it seems like everyone is moving to Texas.

This morning as we continue in the biblical story of Joseph, we’re going to see the family of Jacob embark on a massive relocation. This isn’t just one nuclear family loading up a moving van and getting on a plane. It’s a multi-generational migration. This morning we’ll see the story of Moving the Family of God.

Jacob is going to move his entire extended family from Hebron in the Promised Land of Israel to Goshen in the foreign land of Egypt. That’s a distance of just over 200 miles. It would be similar to moving from Palo Alto to Redding, California. On foot. Moving around a few hundred people. With folks well advanced in years and babies. And goats. Lots of goats.

Jacob decided to make this move for many reasons. He could have more land in Goshen. He could be closer to his son Joseph. He could live a more prosperous and comfortable life. Bigger house, more money, closer to family. Do any of those reasons sound familiar? Not much has changed in 4000 years.

For many people living in the Bay Area, the question of whether to move can be a constant one. There is always

the lure to move closer to family, find a place with a lower cost of living, and escape the frenzy of life here.

As we look at this story, there are some very practical concerns we’ll explore. When should you move? What role does quality of life play? How important is it to live near family? I know these are questions that many of you ask regularly.

In a larger sense, the story we’ll look at today isn’t just about one family moving to make their life better. It’s about how that family’s decision fits into the grand story that God is writing. When Jacob moves his family to Egypt, it sets up the whole drama of the Old Testament. The formation of the nation, the exodus, the conquest of the Promised Land. Even the exile, return and eventually, the birth of the Messiah.

Jacob’s decision may have led to a bigger house in the short term, but in the long run, it resulted in God’s people being oppressed for 400 years.

We’ve zeroed in on different characters throughout this story. Mostly Joseph, but last week we focused on Judah. This week, the spotlight is on Jacob. As we reflect on his experience, we’ll see familiar themes: the generosity of an outsider; the complexity of family dynamics, haunting memories of the past’ anxious fears for the future, and the hopes of a storybook picture of a perfect family. But in the middle of that, we’re going to see how God meets him. And that will help us whether we’re moving, staying, or somewhere in between.

The generosity of Pharaoh

Last week we saw Joseph reunited with his brothers. In an emotional outpouring, he revealed his true identity. That reunion became known and led to this:

Genesis 45:16-18:

When the report was heard in Pharaoh's house, “Joseph's brothers have come,” it pleased Pharaoh and his servants. 17 And Pharaoh said to Joseph, “Say to your brothers,

‘Do this: load your beasts and go back to the land of Canaan, 18 and take your father and your households, and come to me, and I will give you the best of the land of Egypt, and you shall eat the fat of the land.’

Pharaoh hears the good news and wants to bring Joseph’s whole family together. He makes an incredibly generous offer to do so. We are meant to notice the extravagant generosity of the king of Egypt. This Pharaoh has only been shown in a positive light. He recognizes Joseph’s wisdom, he gives him a huge promotion, and now he offers the good life to all of Joseph’s family if they move to Egypt.

Pharaoh’s generosity is unexpected. It’s the kindness of an outsider. He is not part of the family of God. This is the last time we will see anything close to kindness coming out of Egypt in the Old Testament. Do we have anything to compare this to? Have you received generosity from an outsider?

California has always been a place where people came to make their fortune—from conquering the frontier to the gold rush to immigration and now chasing the startup dream. People come here to make it big.

Just like Pharaoh, the companies in our area can be very generous. Large salaries. Free food. The promise of a stock option payday. People still come here to make it big, and some of you have done just that.

Remember how devastated I was when my parents told me we were moving to Texas? Do you know what made me change my mind and actually become excited? My parents promised two things: we could get cable TV, and our house would have a pool.

It was the stuff I’d get that made me come to peace with a big move. It was the better life. Early on in this passage, the focus is clearly on the material possessions that will now become available to Jacob’s family. Three times the benefits package is detailed out.

Before we judge Joseph or Jacob, remember that they were living in a famine. Their lives were not working. They were working hard but literally starving to death. So the promise of a prosperous life in Egypt was a huge relief. But as Joseph sends them off, complicated family dynamics emerge.

Genesis 45:22-24:

To each and all of them he gave a change of clothes, but to Benjamin he gave three hundred shekels of silver and five changes of clothes. 23 To his father he sent as follows: ten donkeys loaded with the good things of Egypt, and ten female donkeys loaded with grain, bread, and provision for his father on the journey. 24 Then he sent his brothers away, and as they departed, he said to them, “Do not quarrel on the way.”

Throughout our story, clothes have been a symbol of prosperity. Jacob gave Joseph a robe. His brothers stripped it from him. When his master’s wife assaults Joseph, he leaves his garment in her hand, symbolizing his decline from favor. And when Pharaoh restores him, he is given garments of linen. You can track prosperity in this story through the clothes.

So it is no surprise that Joseph gives his brothers clothes to demonstrate his favor. It’s equally unsurprising that he gives Benjamin five changes of clothes. We see that favoritism continues to be an issue in this family.

But there’s another issue too. Joseph’s last words to his brothers are curious. The ESV translates them, “Do not quarrel on the way,” but the original language describes becoming agitated. I think the NET Bible probably has it closer with the translation, “As you travel don’t be overcome with fear.”

Remember that Joseph had already sent his brothers back to their father twice with hidden purposes. They are glad to be reunited with him, but as found out later in the story, there is still lingering doubt about whether he plans to take revenge on them.

So as hopeful as this trip is, it’s still laced with favoritism and fear. The family is making a big move, but there are all these underlying dynamics from the past. Does that sound like your family at all?

At this point in the story, moving to Egypt is primarily an economic blessing. Their lives will be easier in Egypt. However, as the story continues, the focus begins to shift.

Jacob meets with God

In the next section, the brothers arrive back to the land of Canaan and update their father on all that has happened.

Genesis 45:25-28:

So they went up out of Egypt and came to the land of Canaan to their father Jacob. 26 And they told him, “Joseph is still alive, and he is ruler over all the land of Egypt.” And his heart became numb, for he did not believe them. 27 But when they told him all the words of Joseph, which he had said to them, and when he saw the wagons that Joseph had sent to carry him, the spirit of their father Jacob revived. 28 And Israel said, “It is enough; Joseph my son is still alive. I will go and see him before I die.”

Jacob has been through a lot. At first, he can't believe the news that Joseph is alive. When Jacob eventually does, notice what he says about going to Egypt. He doesn't decide to go to escape the famine. He doesn't go for fertile land or a bigger house, or a better life. Jacob says, “I will go and see him before I die.”

Jacob decides to move to Egypt to reunite with Joseph. I wonder if Jacob is thinking of Joseph's dreams from long ago. His son is now the “ruler over all the land of Egypt.” Isn't this what Joseph dreamed? Does Jacob recognize God's plans in the words of his sons?

I think he must. But as this journey begins, Jacob needs some kind of confirmation from God. Genesis 46:1 tells of the beginning of his story

Genesis 46:1:

So Israel took his journey with all that he had and came to Beersheba.

Have you ever arrived at a place you've been before and suddenly been overcome with emotion? Some location unlocks a whole set of memories and emotions. I think that's what happened to Jacob. He left Hebron, where he'd been living for decades and started the journey to Egypt, but first, he arrives at Beersheba, the Southernmost city in the Promised Land.

Think for a moment about Jacob. Consider all the emotions he is feeling.

- For years he has been trying to provide for his family during a devastating famine. He has no doubt seen members of his family die.

- Then he decides to send his sons to Egypt to buy food. He watches ten of them leave, no doubt wondering if he'll see them again.

- Sometime later, Jacob agrees to send his favorite son on a second journey to Egypt. Now he watches all eleven of his sons leaving on a dangerous journey.

- When Jacob's sons return, not only do they tell him that Joseph is alive, but he has won the lottery. Jacob can move to Egypt and live a life of prosperity. No more worrying about finding enough food for his family.

- When Jacob arrives at Beersheba, he finds memories waiting for him.

- The last time Jacob was in this city, he was also leaving the Promised Land. His brother Esau wanted to murder him for tricking him and stealing their father's blessing. So Jacob ran away in fear.

- Now Jacob is leaving the Promised Land again. This time he is leaving to reunite with his son, whose brothers did try to murder him, even if it was unsuccessful. Instead of running away from family, Jacob is running to family.

The memories are strong, and the emotions are so mixed. Once again, Jacob finds himself in Beersheba, crossing the boundary of the Promised Land. He is at a crossroads.

As the pandemic gets better and life starts to return to normal, many of us feel like we might be at a crossroads. Do you find yourself at your own Beersheba? What crossroads are you at?

There's one other voice in the back of Jacob's mind. It's God making a promise to his grandfather Abraham. In Genesis 15:13, God tells Abraham, “Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years.”

Jacob is standing at a crossroads, about to leave the Promised Land. He had to wonder whether his next step would invoke this promise. Here he was bringing the sons of Abraham to “a land that is not theirs.” Will this be the beginning of those four hundred years?

Jacob must have been a mess. He must have been terrified and excited and fearful and hopeful. So God meets him there.

Genesis 46:1-4:

So Israel took his journey with all that he had and came to Beersheba, and offered sacrifices

to the God of his father Isaac. 2 And God spoke to Israel in visions of the night and said, “Jacob, Jacob.” And he said, “Here I am.” 3 Then he said, “I am God, the God of your father. Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for there I will make you into a great nation. 4 I myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you up again, and Joseph's hand shall close your eyes.”

God meets Jacob in Beersheba. He calls him by name, and God goes back to the promise he gave to Abraham in Genesis 12: “I will make of you a great nation.” Jacob is worried about those 400 years of oppression. God jumps before that to simply say that it will be worth it.

The biggest thing God does is to promise Jacob the most precious gift that he can give any of us on this earth. He tells this fearful old man, “I myself will go down with you to Egypt.” You may be leaving the Promised Land, but you are not leaving the giver of that Promise. God's presence will go.

God will not forsake Jacob in Egypt. He points to the future: “I will also bring you up again.” This might be the beginning of four hundred years of affliction, but that season will end. God's people will, in the future, return to the Promised Land.

In the midst of everything that Jacob is feeling, God speaks into it. He knows just what to say to Jacob. It turns out this is the last time we will hear God's voice in the Old Testament until centuries later when Moses hears God from the midst of a burning bush.

The move to Egypt started out as a financial opportunity. But now we see that it is God's will, and this is really all that matters. Nothing matters except that God is with you. Move to Texas. Stay in California. Buy an RV. Escape to Canada. The decision you make isn't the important thing. The important thing is that God is leading you to make that decision. Because when he leads you somewhere, he will go with you.

The perfect family of God

So God met Jacob in Beersheba and encouraged him that this was his plan. Jacob was not running out of fear. He was not acting in desperation. The path he was taking may lead to hard times, but God was with him. So Jacob moved his whole family.

Our passage ends with over twenty verses listing out the names of those who made the journey. I won't read all of those but listen to a few of the highlights.

Genesis 46:5:

Then Jacob set out from Beersheba. The sons of Israel carried Jacob their father, their little ones, and their wives, in the wagons that Pharaoh had sent to carry him.

Genesis 46:8:

Now these are the names of the descendants of Israel, who came into Egypt, Jacob and his sons. Reuben, Jacob's firstborn,

Followed by 20 more verses of names and finally,

Genesis 46:27:

And the sons of Joseph, who were born to him in Egypt, were two. All the persons of the house of Jacob who came into Egypt were seventy.

This is not meant to be a precise counting of the individuals who moved from Hebron to Egypt. The number doesn't include wives and most of the children. Instead, it's a symbolic reference to the sons of Jacob. The number 70 is meaningful. It communicates perfection, completeness, and totality. This is the whole family of Jacob. No one was left behind.

This is not a perfect family, but this is the family of God's perfect plans.

But there is another level of significance to the number 70. Back in Genesis 10, there was a listing of the nations of the world. The sons of Gomer, the sons of Ham, the sons of Cush. Many people call that chapter the Table of Nations. The number of nations listed in Genesis 10 shouldn't surprise you. There is 70.

In fact, this has led to the Jewish idea of the “Seventy Nations” as representing the entirety of the world. These were the nations that Abraham was to bless. This family is moving to Egypt—to one of the nations of the world. The purpose wasn't just to escape the famine. It was to fulfill Abraham's blessing to the entire world.

The simple number 70 tells us two things. First, we are meant to be the whole people of God. Second, our

calling is for the sake of the whole world. We are the whole people of God with a message of salvation for the whole world.

The people of God is comprised of representatives from all seventy nations. We are multi-colored, multi-ethnic, multi-socioeconomic, and multi-personality. So when our Asian American brothers and sisters are suffering acts of hate, we are experiencing acts of hate. When our African American brothers and sisters are grieving the loss of one more innocent black life at the hands of police, we are grieving one more black life. When our Indian brothers and sisters are suffering persecution for their faith at the hands of a Hindu extremist regime, we are suffering persecution for our faith.

We are part of the whole family of God.

But we do not exist just for ourselves. God has made us into the whole family of God for the totality of the world that he created. The seventy people of the sons of Jacob existed for the sake of the Seventy Nations. They were to be a light to the Gentiles. Our calling is the same.

Sometimes I worry that we've forgotten that calling. Last week I suggested that one of the effects of the pandemic has been that we have more conflict with each other. I think another effect of the pandemic has been that we've become self-focused. We're comfortable at home. We work in our pajamas. Many of us have so much more flexibility than we did before.

But God's purpose is not to make his family comfortable. It is to make his kingdom known on earth.

Jacob led his family into Egypt, and at first, they were comfortable. But then they were oppressed for 400 years. All of this was part of God's plan. For the sake of the 70 nations. For the sake of the world.

Sometimes our comfort isn't the biggest issue. In fact, God might ask us to be uncomfortable for the sake of his plans.

This move of Jacob's family began as a financial opportunity. Jacob was escaping the famine. Then we saw how God met Jacob and encouraged him that this was God's plan. Now we see not just the plan of God but the

purposes of God. From making it big to following God to saving the world. This is how Jacob's move unfolds in our story.

Conclusion

It's a big deal to move to a new city. Even today, when we have airplanes and moving trucks and FaceTime and everything that makes us a very mobile culture, life dramatically changes when you move.

Jacob relocated his entire clan of several hundred people not just to a new city but to a new country where they didn't even speak the language. Jacob did this because God called him to. It came as a result of the generosity of an outsider. All the complicated dynamics of being a family were involved. Jacob was terrified.

But God met him. He reiterated that promise to him, and he promised his presence with God. And then he reminded him of God's purposes.

I'd like to close by inviting you to hear God's words to Jacob as God's words to you. Perhaps there is a decision you're facing or something uncomfortable in your life. Or a major move that you need to make or a major move that you're not supposed to make.

Consider that step not just from a worldly perspective. What is God's will? What are his purposes? Here are God's words to you. I'll re-word them a bit, so they apply to us.

I am God, the God of your father. Do not be afraid to do what I'm asking you do to. I myself will go with you. I will not leave you there alone. I will be your comfort.

Amen.