

THE GOOD LIFE

SERIES: THE STORY OF JOSEPH



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Genesis 46:28-47
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Genesis 46:28-47

Easy question: How old are you? (Well, maybe it's not so easy for some of us. Every once in a while these days, at least for a few moments, I can't remember how old I am.)

Harder question: How have the years treated you?

In Genesis 46:28-27:12, Jacob is asked the first question. He isn't asked the second question, but he answers it anyway. The unasked question, and Jacob's answer, gives us window through which to evaluate our years and ascertain where we go from here. And what makes for a good life, anyway?

The latter part of Genesis mostly features the story of Joseph, but, as we have seen in our study, the story of Joseph is part of the larger story of Jacob's family, which is part of the even larger story of Abraham's family, which is part of the even larger story of all the families of the earth.

As we pick up the story, Jacob is in the process of relocating his family to Egypt.

Charged with the presence of God

Genesis 46:28-30:

He had sent Judah ahead of him to Joseph to show the way before him in Goshen, and they came into the land of Goshen. 29 Then Joseph prepared his chariot and went up to meet Israel his father in Goshen. He presented himself to him and fell on his neck and wept on his neck a good while. 30 Israel said to Joseph, "Now let me die, since I have seen your face and know that you are still alive."

The word translated "presented" is always used elsewhere in Genesis of a divine appearance. The fact that it is used here in reference to the appearance of Joseph highlights the importance of this meeting. When Joseph presents himself to his father Jacob, who had concluded

more than twenty years ago that his son had been killed, it's almost as significant as an appearance of the Lord.

The Lord had appeared to Jacob at two crucial junctures in his life, first outside the city of Luz when he was running from his brother Esau and second on the banks of the River Jordan before seeing Esau again after twenty years. Now, Jacob's long-lost son appears to him, as if he were alive from the dead. The meeting is charged with the presence of God. Have you ever had a meeting with someone that seemed charged with the presence of God?

When Jacob saw his brother again, Esau fell on his neck (Genesis 33:4). Now, Jacob's son falls on his neck. Joseph, who has wept multiple times since seeing his brothers again, weeps again, this time at the sight of his father, and he weeps a long time.

By the way, if Jacob had any intention of bowing before Joseph, Joseph, by falling on his neck, prevents him from doing so. When Joseph was a boy, he dreamed that his father would bow one day bow before him. Joseph seems unconcerned whether the dream is fulfilled literally, demonstrating, once again, that the divine purpose for Joseph's dreams was not to fulfill them but to test Joseph, his brothers, and his father—to shape their character.

Posture toward death

And what of Jacob, who has often been called Israel since he wrestled with God on the banks of the River Jabbok? The losses he suffered and the potential for more loss caused him to worry that he would die in sorrow (Genesis 37:35; 42:38; 44:29, 44:31). When Jacob thought Joseph had been killed, he mourned for many days and wept. (Genesis 37:34-35). Now, as his son weeps on him, Jacob's posture toward death has been revolutionized. When Jacob had heard that Joseph was alive, he said, "I will go and see him before I die" (Genesis 45:28).

Jacob has seen the face of God by the River Jabbok and was surprised that he survived. He then saw the face of Esau and survived, though he was worried that

his brother would kill him for what he had done. Now, after seeing Joseph again, he's ready to die. As it turns out, Jacob would live for another seventeen years.

Of course, the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the greater Joseph, revolutionizes our posture toward death. If you believe in Jesus, you know that you too will be raised from the dead, which means that you're ready to die, which further means that you're ready to live, really live, free of the fear of death (1 Peter 1:3, Philippians 1:21-26).

The pandemic, of course, has raised the specter of death for many of us, but death is not the worst thing that can happen to someone. Not knowing Jesus is the worst thing that can happen to someone.

Now that his family has joined him in Egypt, Joseph has to find a place for them to live.

Joseph's plan

Genesis 46:31-34:

Joseph said to his brothers and to his father's household, "I will go up and tell Pharaoh and will say to him, 'My brothers and my father's household, who were in the land of Canaan, have come to me. 32 And the men are shepherds, for they have been keepers of livestock, and they have brought their flocks and their herds and all that they have.' 33 When Pharaoh calls you and says, 'What is your occupation?' 34 you shall say, 'Your servants have been keepers of livestock from our youth even until now, both we and our fathers,' in order that you may dwell in the land of Goshen, for every shepherd is an abomination to the Egyptians."

Joseph has designs on Goshen, which, as we learn later, is the best land in Egypt. If Pharaoh agrees, Goshen will officially belong to Jacob's family. Joseph carefully prepares his brothers for their appearance before Pharaoh.

If the brothers can convince Pharaoh that they are mere shepherds who live off the land, then he will know that they're not a political threat and that they will not be a drag on the economy. Moreover, the Egyptians' disdain for shepherds will make it more likely that they will leave Jacob's family alone as a distinct people in its preferred land, which was located on the eastern edge

of Egypt and would allow for an easy departure when the time came (Numbers 33:5).

Indeed, the land of Canaan, not the land of Egypt, even the best of the land of Egypt, was the promised land. The Lord told Abraham that his offspring would be afflicted sojourners and servants in a land that is not theirs for four hundred years but that he would bring them back to the promised land (Genesis 15:13-16). Moreover, the Lord had promised Jacob, "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" (Genesis 46:4).

Shrewdly, Joseph uses the Egyptians' hatred of shepherds to the advantage of his people.

Pharaoh's response

Genesis 47:1-6:

So Joseph went in and told Pharaoh, "My father and my brothers, with their flocks and herds and all that they possess, have come from the land of Canaan. They are now in the land of Goshen." 2 And from among his brothers he took five men and presented them to Pharaoh. 3 Pharaoh said to his brothers, "What is your occupation?" And they said to Pharaoh, "Your servants are shepherds, as our fathers were." 4 They said to Pharaoh, "We have come to sojourn in the land, for there is no pasture for your servants' flocks, for the famine is severe in the land of Canaan. And now, please let your servants dwell in the land of Goshen." 5 Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Your father and your brothers have come to you. 6 The land of Egypt is before you. Settle your father and your brothers in the best of the land. Let them settle in the land of Goshen, and if you know any able men among them, put them in charge of my livestock."

Joseph's plan, executed by his brothers, works to perfection. Pharaoh grants his family the land of Goshen. Moreover, Pharaoh puts the family in charge of his livestock, which solidifies its status in Egypt. The Lord is with Joseph (Genesis 39:2, 21, 23).

The people of God get the best land in Egypt, but it's not the best land. The best land for the people of God in Canaan, the promised land, but they're not yet ready to possess it. The best land for us is the new Canaan,

the new promised land—that is, the new and eternal creation, and the time is coming, but is not yet here, for us to possess it.

Pharaoh's invitation to Jacob's family prepares the people of Israel to welcome immigrants once they become established in the promised land. The Lord would later command them, "You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God" (Leviticus 19:34).¹

The unasked question

Genesis 47:7-10:

Then Joseph brought in Jacob his father and stood him before Pharaoh, and Jacob blessed Pharaoh. 8 And Pharaoh said to Jacob, "How many are the days of the years of your life?" 9 And Jacob said to Pharaoh, "The days of the years of my sojourning are 130 years. Few and evil have been the days of the years of my life, and they have not attained to the days of the years of the life of my fathers in the days of their sojourning." 10 And Jacob blessed Pharaoh and went out from the presence of Pharaoh.

When the Lord made his covenant with Abraham, Jacob's grandfather, he told him that he would be a blessing and that all the families of the earth would be blessed in him (Genesis 12:1-3). Jacob, fulfilling the family covenant, blesses Pharaoh, which involves praying for his welfare. Of course, Pharaoh has already been blessed immeasurably by Joseph, Jacob's son.

Jacob answers Pharaoh's question, "How many are the days of the years of your life?" Jacob's father Isaac lived to 180, and his grandfather Abraham lived to 175. As of now, Jacob has lived 130 years. His son Joseph would live to 110, so 130 doesn't seem to be too few, especially for someone who's not dead yet.

Jacob also feels compelled to answer a question Pharaoh didn't ask, which would have gone something like, "How have the years treated you?" Jacob's assessment is that the years of his life have been "few and evil," making them most unpleasant.

Jacob does what many of us often do. Aren't we often wondering how we've done, how we're doing?

Scholar Robert Alter observes that Jacob has gotten everything he wanted but "not in the way he would have wanted, and the consequence is far more pain than contentment":

*From his "clashing" (Genesis 25:10) with his twin in the womb, everything has been a struggle. He displaces Esau, but only at the price of fear and lingering guilt and long exile. He gets Rachel, but only by having Leah imposed on him, with all the domestic strife that entails, and he loses Rachel early in childbirth. He is given a new name by his divine adversary, but comes away with a permanent wound. He gets the full solar-year number of twelve sons, but there is enmity among them (for which he bears some responsibility), and he spends twenty-two years continually grieving over his favorite son, who he believes is dead. This is, in sum, a story with a happy ending that withholds a simple feeling of happiness at the end.*²

Let's make sure that we're not so obsessed with getting what we want that we go about getting it in the wrong way, leaving us unsatisfied in the end.

Much of Jacob's struggles he brought on himself. Even so, the Lord has appeared to Jacob, blessed him, shaped him, and surprised him, not least by letting him see Joseph again. Moreover, Jacob is in a position at this point in his life to bless Pharaoh, a point that the narrator emphasizes by mentioning twice. Jacob, though he has struggled greatly, has much to be thankful for.

The best of the land

Genesis 47:11-12:

Then Joseph settled his father and his brothers and gave them a possession in the land of Egypt, in the best of the land, in the land of Rameses, as Pharaoh had commanded. 12 And Joseph provided his father, his brothers, and all his father's household with food, according to the number of their dependents.

Joseph has successfully provided for his family in a time of famine. He has relocated them from Canaan, where there was no food, to Egypt, where he had stored up food. Not only has he relocated them, he has also resettled them in "the best of the land," the land of Rameses, also called Goshen.

Jacob lives out his years in the best of the land, together with a son he thought he lost (Joseph), another son he thought he lost (Simeon), and a son he feared

losing (Benjamin), not to mention the rest of his sons and family—seventy in all. And though he pronounces himself ready to die, he's not done yet: he has seventeen more years to go—and more blessings to hand out.

Even if you're ready to die, as Jacob was, remember: you're not dead yet.

A little sit-down

How have the years treated you? At the age of 130, Jacob looks back on his years and concludes that his years have been evil.

I know Jacob better than I know any other person from the Hebrew Scriptures. In the men's groups I lead, we always study the Jacob story. It has everything. I've spent a lot of time with the man. At this point in his story, I want to have a little sit-down with my old friend.

I want to say, "Jacob, I know the years have been hard. You and I both know you brought a lot of it on yourself. But really, your days have been evil? All of them?"

"Your son Joseph was lost—you thought he was dead—but he's been found. You have him back—alive from the dead, as it were. You thought you lost Simeon, and you thought you were going to lose Benjamin, but look, they're here too. And Judah, who you treated as if he weren't even your son, was willing to sacrifice everything for you and your family. All your other sons and their wives are here—and all the little ones.

"Especially because of your blatant favoritism, you don't deserve any of this—but here they are. In all, you've got seventy people with you. That's quite a clan. Moreover, you and your family were starving in Canaan, but Joseph has settled all of you in the best of the land.

"I know you've had your share of family conflicts, which have mirrored your conflict with the Lord, but can't you see that the Lord has met you and formed you in and through these conflicts, even your conflict with him?"

"Remember when you were running from Esau, who wanted to kill you because you stole his blessing, and you lay down to sleep in Luz, that God-forsaken pagan border town, using a rock for a pillow, with no one to turn to, and the Lord appeared to you in a dream? You saw the angels of God ascending and descending on a ladder between heaven and earth. The Lord made promises and said, 'Behold, I am with you and will keep

you wherever you go.' You woke as said, 'Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it.' You said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

"Remember when, twenty years later, you came back to meet Esau and a man wrestled with you all night long on the banks of the River Jabbok, a man who turned out to be the Lord? For all you had done, you would have expected to be destroyed by such an encounter, but you said, 'For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered.' I know you were wounded in the hip, but haven't you been reminded, with every halting step from that day until this day, that you need to depend on the Lord?"

"The Lord blessed you there, by the river where you were wounded. He gave you a new name, Israel. Israel! Remember the covenant the Lord made with you? Remember his promises? The nation of Israel came from you! The Messiah, the wounded Savior, came from you! The church, the Israel of God, the wounded people of God, came from you!"

"And then when you met Esau again, and you thought he was going to kill you, he embraced you instead, didn't he? Esau, the brother you betrayed, gave you the embrace you wanted from your father but never got.

"Oh, the grace!"

You're blessed

As I hear myself talking to Jacob, I realize that I've been talking to myself, because I see myself in Jacob. As I hear myself talking to myself, I can now see that my years, even the difficult parts, have been blessed.

How about you? How do you see your years?

Have they been hard? All of them? Every second of them?

Do you have any family, even if your family has caused you difficulty? Do you have any friends? Any?

Have you had enough food to eat? Do you have enough food to eat now?

Have you had a few conflicts, even conflicts with God, but has he formed you in and through those conflicts?

Has the Lord appeared to you in any way? Have you heard his promises in the Scriptures to be with you and keep you wherever you go?

How close do you think you've come to death? How close do you think you've come to catching, and dying from, a virus in the last year? You probably don't know how many times you've escaped death. You're still here, aren't you?

Have you been wounded in some way? Have your wounds reminded you to depend on God?

Do you believe in Jesus? If so, then you're part of the wounded people of God, and you are destined to reign with Jesus in the new and better—and eternal—promised land, which is way beyond the best land here and now.

Have you ever wanted something from someone, something like an embrace, perhaps, that in the end came to you from someone else?

Oh, the grace!

Can you see? Your years have been blessed. Your remaining years will be blessed. Your years will never end.

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places . . .” (Ephesians 1:3).

Bless someone

What do you do now, now that you know you're blessed? You do what Jacob did. You bless someone else! It's the oldest dynamic in the book. Those who know they're blessed by God turn around and bless others.

When the Lord made his covenant with Abraham and his family, which now constitutes followers of Jesus, he said, “I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing,” adding, “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:2-3). The apostle John echoes the Lord's words when he says, “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

Even people who don't know Jesus know of this dynamic. Years ago, my wife and I were invited to attend the Tech Awards, during which Bill Gates received the Global Humanitarian Award. He encouraged all these very successful tech luminaries to give to humanitarian

causes, saying, “We've been blessed.” I don't know that Bill Gates has any faith to speak of, but he was tapping into the biblical dynamic.

If you know you're blessed, if you really know you're blessed, then you almost can't help wanting to bless someone else. That's how it works. Jesus cries out, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water’” (John 7:37-38). What flows into you, the living water of Jesus' love, reconstitutes your heart. What flows into you then flows out of you.

Snowy day

A woman who volunteered at the Salvation Army one winter morning with some other people from her church tells this story:

One of the other volunteers offered to give several of them a ride home on a snowy morning. As they were driving through a residential neighborhood, they saw an older lady standing in her driveway with a snow shovel. At the next intersection one of the guys in the car asked to be dropped off. They let him out, figuring he was close to home. But instead of going into some nearby house, he walked up to the lady, took her shovel, and started shoveling her driveway.

One of the women in the car witnessed this and recalled:

I felt like jumping out of the car and hugging this guy. I felt like singing and running or skipping and laughing. Just being active. I felt like saying nice things about people. Writing a beautiful poem or love song. Playing in the snow like a child. Telling everybody about this deed . . . My spirit was lifted even higher than it already was. I was joyous, happy smiling, energized. I went home and gushed to my suite-mates, who clutched at their hearts.³

I told you a few weeks ago about a woman who was walking by on our street and told me, “Jesus loves you.” That encounter—and her words—has stayed with me. She blessed me.

Think of someone you know whom you could bless this week. Think of how you might go about blessing that person. Then do it: bless him; bless her. If you want to feel better about yourself, bless someone else.

Little by little

What makes for a good life?

Frederick Buechner writes, “To journey for the sake of saving our own lives is little by little to cease to live in any sense that really matters, even to ourselves, because it is only by journeying for the world’s sake—even when the world bores and sickens and scares you half to death—that little by little we start to come alive.”⁴

If you live to bless others, that’s a good life. A life lived for others is a good life. Anyone can do it. Anyone, regardless of his or her circumstances, no matter how unpleasant the years, can live a good life. Anyone can die the way Abraham, Jacob’s grandfather did: “full of years,” or satisfied (Genesis 25:8).

Anyone—anyone who really wants to—can hear these words from Jesus at the end of his or her years, whenever the end comes: “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

You’ve been blessed. Therefore, be a blessing. Bless someone.

Endnotes

1. See also Exodus 22:21, 23:9; Deuteronomy 10:19.
2. Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1996), 281.
3. David Brooks, *The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life* (New York: Random House 2019), xxx.
4. Frederick Buechner, *The Sacred Journey* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1982), 107.