

# SURPRISE BLESSING

SERIES: THE STORY OF JOSEPH



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Genesis 47:28–48:22

14th Message

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*Genesis 47:28–48:22*

When I was fifteen years old, my group of friends threw me a surprise birthday party. It was a surprise because I didn't know they were planning it. What made it extra surprising was that it was about six months after my birthday. That meant a lot to me. It was a blessing to me. The fact that I wasn't expecting it was a big part of the blessing.

Do you like surprises? Sometimes we don't. Have you ever gotten a gift from someone that you didn't like or need? And you think this is why God invented Amazon wish lists!

Sometimes we want to know what to expect. We get gifts on our birthday. Mothers get honored on Mother's Day. It's comforting for me to know that Father's Day is coming up, and my children have been spending months planning the best way to let me know what an amazing dad I am!

So what is it? Do we like surprises? Or do we like to know what's coming?

Our series on the story of Joseph is starting to get to the end, but before it concludes, there are several loose ends that Jacob needs to wrap up. He's nearing the end of his life, and he needs to take care of some things.

As he does that, he will surprise us. The choices Jacob makes will be unexpected. We'll see how Joseph responds to those, and we'll ask how we respond to a surprise blessing.

Let's think about what we want from God. Most of us have a list. Some of them are generic: we want to stay healthy; we want a stable job; we want good friendships and community. Some lists are really specific: we'd like healing in a relationship or guidance on a particular decision.

But what happens when God does something we don't expect? How do we react?

As we watch this story, we're going to see how Jacob's unexpected choices mirror the way God acts. My prayer for us is that we would prepare ourselves to receive the unexpected from God.

## Jacob's burial

Our passage opens with a request from Jacob to his son Joseph.

**Genesis 47:28-31:**

**And Jacob lived in the land of Egypt seventeen years. So the days of Jacob, the years of his life, were 147 years. 29 And when the time drew near that Israel must die, he called his son Joseph and said to him, "If now I have found favor in your sight, put your hand under my thigh and promise to deal kindly and truly with me. Do not bury me in Egypt, 30 but let me lie with my fathers. Carry me out of Egypt and bury me in their burying place." He answered, "I will do as you have said." 31 And he said, "Swear to me"; and he swore to him. Then Israel bowed himself upon the head of his bed.**

Does anything strike you as odd in the way that Jacob speaks to his son? Other than the request to put his hand under his thigh, which is an ancient way of making a promise.

What's really odd is that Jacob begins by saying, "If now I have found favor". Here is a father, speaking deferentially to his son. He's putting himself below his son. So right at the beginning of our story, we are already off-balance. The normal dynamics of power and status have already been upset.

God had already promised Jacob that what he's asking for would happen. Back in Genesis 46:1, he told 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." So here is Jacob asking Joseph to do what God has already promised.

What I want us to notice is the beautiful artistry of this story.

The last time we saw a vow like this was when Abraham makes his servant promise to find a wife for Isaac. That promise resulted in the birth of Jacob. This promise has to do with his death.

But there's more. Joseph was in Canaan for 17 years before going to Egypt. He was Jacob's favorite son. His father gave him all the good things in life. Decades later, Jacob will come to Egypt. He will spend 17 years in Egypt being cared for by his son, who gives him all the good things in life. The father favored the son, and now the son favors the father.

Good art has symmetry. The different elements balance each other, whether it's music or painting or sculpture or literature. Or life. There is order and beauty and echoes. The life of Jacob and Joseph is a work of art.

But there's even more. Now, if you don't like numbers or math, you can tune me out for a minute. Bruce Waltke, an Old Testament commentator, has pointed out a fascinating progression in the age of the Patriarchs.

- Abraham lived to 175 years – that's  $5 \times 5 \times 7$ .
- Isaac lived to 180 years – that's  $6 \times 6 \times 5$ .
- Jacob lives to 147 years – that's  $7 \times 7 \times 3$ .

He points out that the squared number is increasing by 1 while the other multiplier decreases by 2. In each case, the sum of the numbers is 17.<sup>1</sup>

Now, maybe that seems a bit too numerical for you. But you can't argue with Waltke's conclusion. Here's what he says:

*The patriarchal chronologies constitute a rhetorical device expressing the profound biblical conviction that Israel's formative age was not a concatenation of haphazard incidents but a series of events ordered according to God's grand design.<sup>2</sup>*

Put simply, the life of the Patriarchs is a work of art, beautifully crafted by God.

In all the small groups I lead, we always take turns sharing our life story. I love seeing the connections and symmetry and nuance and order of how God works in peoples' lives. It's beautiful. Can you see that in your life? Can you see God's artistry in your life?

I've seen this in my life, but I've seen it in others as well. Bruce Maez joined our Recovery ministry when it started 19 years ago. He was a part of the ministry. Then Bruce became a volunteer. Next, he served as the Recovery director, and now he's our Recovery Pastor. Talking to Bruce, you can see the brushstrokes of God's work leading him to where he is now. Can you see the artistry of God?

Kaloma Smith pastors University AME Zion Church next door. His parents used to listen to Ray Stedman's sermons on the radio when they lived in Jamaica. Now he serves next door to PBC. Kaloma is a good friend of this church, and he and I pray together every week. Can you see the artistry of God?

I had coffee this week with Bonnie Gray, a member of our church, who is releasing a book this fall sharing the story of her life. Twenty years ago, my wife and I were in the Intern program with her. In that season, God used people in this church to help her work through parts of her story. Now she's back, sharing her story so that others can find similar healing. Can you see the artistry of God?

Nothing in your life is a concatenation of haphazard events. And I'm not just saying the cultural cliché, "everything happens for a reason." It's not a reason. It's not the universe. It's the creator of the universe, ordering events according to his grand design to bring glory to himself and demonstrate love toward his creation. Everything happens through the brushstrokes of the hand of God.

Sometimes the challenges of our lives make that hard to see. But can you see it? Can you see God's artistry in your life?

## **Jacob adopts Joseph's sons**

Jacob begins by securing a burial place for himself. Then he moves toward blessing the next generation. Next week we'll see a comprehensive blessing on all of his sons. But before he does that, he wants to do something unique for the sons of Joseph. First, he adopts them. Then he gives them a special blessing.

Here's how the adoption plays out:

### **Genesis 48:1-7:**

**After this, Joseph was told, "Behold, your father is ill." So he took with him his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. 2 And it was told to**

**Jacob, “Your son Joseph has come to you.” Then Israel summoned his strength and sat up in bed. 3 And Jacob said to Joseph, “God Almighty appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan and blessed me, 4 and said to me, ‘Behold, I will make you fruitful and multiply you, and I will make of you a company of peoples and will give this land to your offspring after you for an everlasting possession.’ 5 And now your two sons, who were born to you in the land of Egypt before I came to you in Egypt, are mine; Ephraim and Manasseh shall be mine, as Reuben and Simeon are. 6 And the children that you fathered after them shall be yours. They shall be called by the name of their brothers in their inheritance. 7 As for me, when I came from Paddan, to my sorrow Rachel died in the land of Canaan on the way, when there was still some distance to go to Ephrath, and I buried her there on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem).”**

Jacob tells Joseph a story. First, he goes back and recounts the blessing that God had given him at Luz; the city also called Bethel. Based on that blessing, Jacob takes Joseph’s two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, and adopts them as his own. Not only that, he places them above Reuben and Simeon, the two oldest sons. Jacob takes those two sons of Joseph and gives them the highest position among his own sons.

It’s a curious thing to do. We have no indication that Joseph would be expecting this. It’s a surprise kind of blessing. One of the interesting things about this decision is that it makes everything a bit more complicated.

Jacob had twelve sons. That’s the number of fullness, of perfection. But now, he has fourteen sons. He’s adopted two more. But in some ways, it’s only thirteen because Ephraim and Manasseh take Joseph’s place. When they get into the Promised Land, it’s only twelve portions of land because Levi, as the priestly tribe, doesn’t get a portion of land.

Did you know there are three to four different lists of the twelve tribes, depending on how you count them? The twelve patriarchs, the twelve territories, the twelve tribes. The list in Genesis 35 is different from the list in Numbers 1, which is different from the list in Revelation 7. There’s always twelve, but there are slight differences for certain reasons.

I mention this because I think we are sometimes tempted to put what God does into a very narrow box. It has to fit within the bounds of what we expect. But God’s work is always a bit more creative and unique than we sometimes give him credit for. I think God likes to surprise us. Is God surprising you?

Sometimes the surprise blessing of God comes through grief. That is the case here. Jacob is dying, and he’s grieving the premature loss of his wife. Out of that death, Jacob adopts two new sons and gives them the highest place among his inheritance.

We’re coming out of a season of a lot of grief. We’ve lost people we love. We’ve lost a year of activities and interactions. But out of loss often comes something new. This new relationship for Ephraim and Manasseh came out of the grief Jacob felt.

Is there a new thing that God is creating for you? Have some doors closed so that others can open? Out of whatever grief you are experiencing, is there new birth?

Eight years ago, the property next door to our church went on the market. In response, as elders we prayed about whether God was leading us to purchase it. We presented that opportunity to you, and in six months, we raised pledges for more money than we expected. So we made an offer, but we were outbid.

That process led us to re-evaluate where God was calling us to be as a church. We received a fresh sense that God wants us here, on Middlefield Road in Palo Alto. So for the last 5+ years, we’ve embarked on several projects to invest in our property. Now we’re almost completely done (as soon as the playground is complete). And with the pandemic ending, we are poised to see how God is going to work through us here in Palo Alto.

One door is closed, and another is opened.

Maybe you can only see the closed doors. Maybe you are only aware of the grief and pain of what was lost. But I want to invite you to see past that. Is there something new being born? This was true for Joseph and his sons. But as the story continues, we’ll see how he reacts to this surprise.

## **Jacob blesses Joseph’s sons**

Now that Jacob has said he wants to adopt Joseph’s children, he goes about blessing them.

### Genesis 48:8-10:

When Israel saw Joseph's sons, he said, "Who are these?" 9 Joseph said to his father, "They are my sons, whom God has given me here." And he said, "Bring them to me, please, that I may bless them." 10 Now the eyes of Israel were dim with age, so that he could not see. So Joseph brought them near him, and he kissed them and embraced them.

It seems a bit odd at first that Jacob has been talking about Ephraim and Manasseh, and then he asks, "who are these?" But this is probably the beginning of some kind of a ceremony. It's similar to when I ask at the beginning of a wedding, "who gives this woman to be married to this man?" The formal blessing has begun.

We are meant to hear echoes in this ceremony from ones in the past. Israel is almost blind, just as his father was nearly blind for a similar event. The blessing itself occurs in Genesis 48:15-16 and 20a.

### Genesis 48:15-16:

**And he blessed Joseph and said, "The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life long to this day, 16 the angel who has redeemed me from all evil, bless the boys; and in them let my name be carried on, and the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac; and let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth."**

### Genesis 48:20a:

**So he blessed them that day, saying, "By you Israel will pronounce blessings, saying, 'God make you as Ephraim and as Manasseh.'"**

When we read this blessing, it should be very familiar. Nothing is surprising here. There are two main elements—first, connection to God. Second, fruitfulness on the earth. Love for God. Love for Neighbor. Spiritual intimacy. Relational ministry. The vertical and the horizontal.

So the content of the blessing isn't a surprise, but the order is.

### Listen to Genesis 48:17-19:

**When Joseph saw that his father laid his right hand on the head of Ephraim, it displeased him, and he took his father's hand to move it from Ephraim's head to Manasseh's head. And Joseph said to his father, "Not this way, my father; since this one is the firstborn, put your right hand on his head." But his father refused and said, "I know, my son, I know. He also shall become a people, and he also shall be great. Nevertheless, his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his offspring shall become a multitude of nations."**

Manasseh was the oldest, so he should get the double portion of the blessing. He should get the right hand. But Jacob crossed his hands, putting Ephraim above Manasseh. By this point in the story of Genesis, we should not be that surprised. Isaac was put above Ishmael. Jacob was put above Esau. Manasseh and Ephraim were put above Reuben and Simeon, just minutes ago.

But Joseph is not just surprised by this change of order. He's upset. The language here shows him becoming agitated. The word for "displeased" is from the root word for evil. Literally, this seemed evil to Joseph. So he corrects his father and tries to put it back the way it's supposed to be.

Have you ever felt that way? Something happens out of the ordinary, and you feel something inside of you that desperately wants to fix it. To bring things back to the way you expect. To get back in control. A situation doesn't go as you planned; maybe it even feels "evil" to you. So you frantically scramble to right the wrong.

I've been there. But when we see it in Joseph, we want to tell him, "let it be." Don't try to control the situation. Trust this surprise blessing of God. Maybe we need to hear that. Don't try to control the blessing of God. Receive the surprise.

In a sense, this is the scandal of the gospel—we want to control God's favor. We want to know that what we can expect from him. We want to earn our right standing because when we know the law, we can control the outcome.

We live in a very legalistic culture. There are unforgivable sins, and there are lines you cannot cross. Violators get cancelled. If you follow the rules, you'll be fine.

But God's grace comes as a surprise. We are forgiven. We are restored. We are redeemed. We can't control it. All we can do is to receive the surprise. In some aspects, the grace of God always comes as a surprise.

We should know by now that God's plans will always have a bit of surprise to them. Haven't we seen that over and over again? One of my favorite professors in seminary would always say, "What God has done in the past is both a model and a promise of what he will do in the future. But he is too creative to do the same thing twice. It always looks a bit different."

As I was writing this sermon, it occurred to me that this attitude is something I really respect about Pastor Scott Grant. I've talked through dozens of decisions with Scott, and this is often his attitude. He looks for the fingerprints of God, but he's always open to something new. We'll often be discussing a new direction and he'll say, "let's do it and see what God has for us."

That kind of attitude can be rare. We often want to limit God to work in the exact ways that we've seen him work in the past. We need to be willing to receive the surprise of God's blessing.

We're entering a new season as a church. I can't wait to see how God is going to work in us and through us. But I'm also expecting to be surprised. God's work will have echoes of the past, but it will always be new.

## Conclusion

That surprise party my friends threw me thirty years ago still resonates in my heart. In the same way, the surprise blessing Jacob gave to Manasseh and Ephraim has resonated throughout history.

Eventually, the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh rebel against God and are exiled to Assyria. They are counted among the lost tribes. But through the tribe of Judah comes another surprise: Jesus the Christ.

Today is my last Sunday before I head out on a two-month sabbatical. I'll be back in early August. I'm really excited to have time to rest, read, and reflect on all that God is doing.

But I'm also excited to come back and see the surprise of how God is going to work in and through us at PBC in this next season. His blessing is always good, and it's usually a surprise. Let's look for God's artistry and receive his surprises.

## Endnotes

1. Bruce Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan 2001), Book 10, Act 4, Scene 2. 588.
2. *Ibid.*