

The Gospel According to Joseph

“Better than We Deserve”

Genesis 46:28-47:31

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“How are you doing?” That’s the kind of greeting we sometimes give each other without expecting a profound answer. I often respond to it with an ambiguous “Fine.” On some days, that means “I’m doing quite well today”; on other days, it is an acronym for “Frantic, Insecure, Neurotic, and Exhausted.” I just don’t have the energy to go into detail about my problems, and you probably don’t want to know anyway. In my former church in California, there was a young man who, whenever you asked him how he was doing, would reply, “Better than I deserve.” That is certainly accurate as a description of how Jacob and his sons were doing at this point in the story. Joseph’s brothers had gone on their second trip to Egypt in desperation, hoping just to be able to buy sufficient grain on which to survive until the famine was over. Perhaps they would even be able to get their imprisoned brother Simeon released. But they did not get what they bargained for—they got so much more! Instead of merely getting enough grain to stay alive, they were told to bring their whole family down to Egypt, so that they could live on the fat of the land (Gen. 45:18). They did not merely get Simeon back and return Benjamin safely to his father; they also received the news that Joseph was alive—and the ruler of all Egypt! The brothers were treated far better than they deserved.

So too was Jacob. He let Simeon rot in an Egyptian dungeon, rather than risk his beloved Benjamin. After Benjamin’s departure for Egypt, Jacob lived on a knife edge of fear, wondering if he would ever see him again. Not only did Benjamin return safely, but Jacob received Joseph back as well, as if from the dead. The donkeys that went off, bearing a small gift for the mysterious ruler of Egypt, returned pulling carts laden with the best things of Egypt—proof that the brothers’ incredible news was true.

That is a wonderful picture of how God deals with us. When we come to God through Christ, we don’t get what we deserve. We get far more than we could ever have imagined. We are forgiven for all of our sins and transgressions, adopted into God’s family as sons and daughters, made co-heirs with Jesus Christ of a glorious eternal inheritance (Rom. 8:17), and thus made more than conquerors in life and in death (Rom. 8:37). Even here on earth, we sometimes experience the rich bounty of God’s provision, so that we can say with the psalmist, “The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance” (Ps. 16:6). We have a great deal for which to be thankful.

Yet our hearts are often blind to God’s mercy and grace. We moan and complain about anything that is wrong with our lives instead of celebrating and being thankful for what is right. I certainly do. I take for granted the many rich blessings God has given me and fixate on any aspect of my life that isn’t the way I would like it to be. At work, I ignore everything I love about where God has placed me and complain about the relatively few negative elements (such as grading papers and quizzes). At home, I forget all of the great aspects of life with my wife and children

and grumble in my heart about the little things they do that bother me. I regularly forget all of the ways in which God has placed me in a pleasant place and murmur instead about some little thing he has withheld.

Our grumbling hearts lead us to ponder the central element of this passage: Jacob's encounter with Pharaoh. When Pharaoh asked Jacob how old he was, he probably intended it merely as a polite conversation starter, an ancient "How are you doing?" In a society that venerated age, this was an invitation for Jacob to boast a little. Yet in response, Jacob told him, "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" (Gen. 47:9). Given the opportunity to bear testimony to the Lord's power and grace before the most powerful man in the world, it seems that all Jacob could muster was, "My life has been nasty, brutish, and short." Well, not quite. There is actually more to this statement than meets the eye, and when we explore the ways in which Jacob is profoundly right, as well as the ways in which he is profoundly wrong, we can see how those perspectives should shape our own response to both good times and difficult times in our own lives.

HOW JACOB WAS WRONG

First, let's think about some of the ways in which Jacob was profoundly wrong when he said, "The days of my sojourning have been few and evil." To begin with, he was not dead yet, nor was it time for him to die. Yet his impending death had been on his mind for some time. When he saw Joseph's bloodstained robe, he was sure he was about to go down to Sheol in sorrow (Gen. 37:35). When the brothers wanted to take Benjamin down to Egypt on the second trip, Jacob's concern was that if anything happened to his son on the journey, it would kill him (42:38). When Jacob heard that Joseph was still alive, he declared that he would go to see him before he died (45:28). Even when he finally saw him, he said, "Now let me die, since I have seen your face and know that you are still alive" (46:30). Yet Jacob still had another seventeen years to live in Joseph's company (47:28), the same length of time that he spent with Joseph during the first years of his life. As Mark Twain might have put it, the reports of Jacob's impending death were greatly exaggerated.

It is interesting to speculate whether Jacob's description of his life would have been different if he had met Pharaoh after those last seventeen peaceful years, rather than before them. His dying words in chapters 48 and 49 suggest so. Either way, his statement shows us someone so turned in on himself by a life-shattering event that he had lost the ability to recognize anything else that God had given him. God had intervened in Jacob's situation and dramatically turned it around, and yet it seemed that Jacob was still determined to define his life by his pain, rather than by God's redemption of that pain. He had been deeply and painfully sinned against, and that had become the defining story of his life.

Nor does it seem that there was any ownership of the part that Jacob's own sin had played in making his life miserable. To be sure, others had sinned against him in significant ways. His father, Isaac, had favored his older brother, Esau, creating deep family rivalry. Esau wanted to

kill Jacob, forcing him to flee from his home and family. His uncle Laban had deceived him and abused his trust, marrying him first to unwanted Leah and then using him as cheap labor to care for his flocks. Finally, Jacob's own sons had deceived him and stolen Joseph away. Yet Jacob had not exactly been an innocent bystander in his own life, merely observing as bad things happened to him. He had been an active participant in each of those situations, sinning as well as being sinned against, making for himself much of the trouble that would return on his own head.

In light of that reality, it would seem that a more sober evaluation would have been that Jacob's life had actually turned out much better than he deserved. Look at all of the ways in which God had fulfilled his promises to him: from wandering at Bethel, fleeing his home with nothing but a walking stick, Jacob had now become the patriarch of a family of seventy persons. God was fulfilling his promise to make him into a great nation. What is more, God was protecting and providing richly for that nation. The Lord sent Joseph ahead of them to Egypt and raised him to this position of leadership, so that Israel would be kept alive and not die. God's incredibly generous provision for his people is a key theme in this passage. When Joseph's brothers appeared before Pharaoh, he told Joseph to settle his family in the best land of Egypt (Gen. 47:6)—a command that Joseph faithfully followed (47:11). They received a pleasant place to live in the land of Goshen, where they could safely and comfortably raise their flocks and their families.

Their life in Egypt during this time was also significantly better than that of the native population. During the famine, the rest of Egypt was desperate for food, to the point that they sold their land, their cattle, and themselves to Pharaoh, becoming his indentured servants (Gen. 47:20–21). They ended up working land that had formerly been theirs, but now with the requirement to send a fifth of the produce to Pharaoh in token of his ownership. The Egyptians were grateful for this agreement, for by it Joseph preserved their lives, just as he had preserved the lives of his own family (47:25). Indeed, by ancient standards it was a modest rate; the average was around a third.¹ But this slavery and bondage for the Egyptians in their own land contrasted sharply with the freedom and prosperity of Jacob's family. Though strangers and aliens in the land of Egypt, they were granted an inheritance there by Joseph (47:11) and do not seem to have had to come repeatedly to their brother to beg for food. For the Israelites of Moses' day, it must have seemed strange to remember a time when they were the prosperous class in Egypt and the Egyptians were in bondage, rather than vice versa.

Before Jacob left the Promised Land, God promised to be with him and go down to Egypt with him (Gen. 46:4). Without that, all of the other blessings would not have been enough. The blessing of God's presence and favor, the blessing for which Jacob had struggled all of his life, continued to rest upon him, in spite of his continued sinfulness and self-centeredness. In fact, the Lord even promised that Joseph's hand would close Jacob's eyes (46:4). In spite of Jacob's idolatrous focus on Joseph, God did not snatch away the object of his idolatry. Instead, he mercifully promised him the comfort of having his favorite son with him at the end. God certainly dealt with Jacob far better than he deserved.

Could Jacob not see anything of God's goodness in all of this? Joseph could say to his brothers, "You meant it for evil but God meant it for good" (see Gen. 50:20), but Jacob could only get as far as "You meant it for evil." Yet aren't we often like Jacob? It is easy for us to look around the circumstances of our lives and see all of the ways in which they are not what we had hoped. Perhaps you long to be married, or to have children, or to have a better marriage, or easier children. Maybe you wish for more money to pay your bills, or more time to spend with your family, or less time to spend by yourself.

Perhaps you are praying to be delivered from a life-defining struggle or besetting sin. The list of things that we want goes on and on, and it is not necessarily a list of trivial or evil desires. Our list is often peopled with good things that we desire and genuine evils from which we want to be delivered. Perhaps you have prayed over that list for years, asking God to give you these particular blessings and to free you from these pains. Yet in the process of thinking about all of the aspects of your situation that have not worked out the way you wanted them to, have you missed the good things God is doing in you, as well as all of his blessings that you take for granted? It is just as true for you as it was for Joseph and Jacob that the things others mean for evil, God means for good. None of your pains, your trials, your frustrated hopes, or your difficulties are wasted in God's wisdom. If it were good for you to have the things for which you long, our merciful and generous God would freely give them to you. Perhaps he will give them to you in the future, in a way that will make it all the more evident that they are gifts from him. Perhaps, in his incredible grace, your Joseph will be the one to close your eyes as God grants you at last the longing of your heart. Or perhaps he will strengthen you to be able to live without these good gifts and to testify nonetheless in the midst of that absence that God himself is enough. Perhaps he will give you the grace to endure a lifelong struggle for contentment as you wrestle with an unruly heart that does not easily submit to God's wisdom and find that God's incredible grace is once again extended to you in the midst of your constant griping and complaining. Perhaps even today he will enable you to look around and see some tokens of his undeserved love for you in the people he has brought into your life and the good things that he has actually given you. Even while recognizing the deep and profound challenges of our lives, we may still confess that God has actually treated us far better than we deserve.

HOW JACOB WAS RIGHT

Yet that is not the whole story. Jacob was not completely wrong in his assessment of his life as nasty, brutish, and short. There are some ways in which that characterization was profoundly right. Jacob had truly suffered greatly in his life. Joseph was not the only one who had been dealing with a life of intense pain for the past twenty years; Jacob too had been profoundly grieving. Nor was his life an easy ride before that. In some ways, Jacob's journey was far harder than the path God laid out for his father, Isaac, and perhaps even than that of his grandfather, Abraham. Jacob was not dead yet, but his life would indeed be shorter than that of the other patriarchs: 147 years, compared to 175 for Abraham and 180 for Isaac.

Perhaps because of what he had suffered, Jacob rightly characterized his experience of life here on earth as a sojourn. There was a key shift between Pharaoh's question and Jacob's

answer. Pharaoh asked, “How many are the days of the years of your life?” But Jacob responded, “The days of the years of my sojourning are 130 years” (Gen. 47:8–9). Jacob knew that his time here on earth was not his life; it was merely a sojourn, a temporary stay somewhere, not a permanent residence. He had bounced around from the Promised Land to Paddan-aram, back to the Promised Land, and now down to Egypt. Even though Egypt would probably provide, over the next seventeen years, the best living situation that Jacob had ever experienced, it would never be home. The Lord who promised to go down to Egypt with him had also promised to bring him back up to Canaan (46:4). The departure of Jacob and his family from the Promised Land was only temporary, which is why Jacob made Joseph swear that after his death he would not bury him in Egypt, but would take his body back to the family plot at Machpelah (47:29–31).

Joseph also recognized that the family’s time in Egypt was a sojourn, not an arrival at their permanent destination. That was why Joseph carefully scripted the brothers’ encounter with Pharaoh, making sure that they would be settled safely in Goshen, on the sidelines of Egyptian life, where they could pursue their livelihood as shepherds, which was an abomination to the Egyptians (Gen. 47:1–4). He did not want them to get drawn into Egyptian life, but rather to stay on the margins, so they would be ready to leave when God called. Best of all, Goshen was on the eastern edge of Egypt, conveniently situated for when they finally made their exodus.

This challenges us to consider how we think about the days of the years of our lives. If our time here on earth is all that there is, and this world is our true home, then it makes perfect sense for us to be devastated when we don’t get what we want. If this world is our life, and if our days are few and evil, then we have lost at the only game that really counts. But if this world is not our true home, but merely a temporary stopping place on the journey to our heavenly home, then that puts an entirely different perspective on both our present sufferings and our present glories.

We understand this when it comes to earthly journeys. If a snowstorm descends while you are traveling and you are forced to take refuge in a cheap hotel, you don’t complain about the color scheme of the room or head to the local store to replace the shower curtain and drapes. You remember that you are only going to be there for a night or two. You can put up with almost anything for a couple of nights, knowing that after that you will be able to go home and laugh about your experience. Alternatively, if you are traveling on business and are given an upgraded suite in a luxurious hotel, you can enjoy it for a night or two without being fooled into thinking that the wonderful amenities are now your permanent right. Marble bathrooms, plush robes, and daily maid service may be lovely, but they are only temporary.

So too, this world is not our true home; it is a temporary stopping place on our greater journey. Our joys here may give us reasons to be thankful to the God from whom all good things flow, but they are not what define us. Our sufferings and disappointments here may bring tears to our eyes and sorrow to our hearts, but we remember that joy will come in the morning (Ps. 30:5). When we reach our true destination, those tears will be wiped away, and those sorrows will be comforted. In the meantime, these sufferings and disappointments come to us from the same hand that gives us our blessings, as an expression of the same fatherly wisdom that knows

exactly what we need to experience in order to grow in our knowledge of our own hearts and our faith and dependence upon him.

The second thing Jacob was right about was his desire to see God's promise fulfilled. You can hear that longing in what he said when he finally saw Joseph: "Now let me die, since I have seen your face and know that you are still alive" (Gen. 46:30). That is almost exactly what aged Simeon said when they put the baby Jesus in his arms:

Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel. (Luke 2:29–32)

There is the same kind of messianic ring to what Jacob was saying, reinforcing the impression that what he saw in Joseph was the product of more than simple parental affection. He had pinned on Joseph all of his hopes of seeing God's promise to Abraham fulfilled.

The idea was natural since Joseph was the firstborn son of Jacob's favorite wife, Rachel. That was why he singled out Joseph in the first place to receive the specially decorated coat (Gen. 37:3). It must have been reinforced by Joseph's dreams, which depicted him receiving homage, not just from his brothers and parents, but even from the entire universe—the sun, moon and stars. These dreams provoked jealousy in his brothers, but Jacob "kept the saying in mind" (37:11). Surely that is why Jacob took Joseph's apparent death so badly, refusing to be comforted by his other children. Mourning the loss of a son is natural; however, unrestrained and inconsolable mourning signals that something else is at work. But now Jacob and Joseph were reunited. They embraced and wept, and Jacob declared, "Now let me die, since I have seen your face and know that you are still alive" (46:30). Why should Jacob have been so ready to die, unless he had seen his hopes for the fulfillment of God's blessing to Abraham restored?

Jacob's expectation that the promise would be passed on through Joseph was entirely reasonable and sensible—and entirely wrong. Joseph is the hero of the story, the most spotless character we have met in the book of Genesis, and the firstborn son of the beloved wife; surely he was the ideal man to carry the Abrahamic blessing. Yet God determined that the line of promise should descend not according to human merit, but rather according to grace. The line through which the Messiah would come would not consist of spotless heroes; rather, it would go through the immoral union of Judah with Tamar, his Canaanite daughter-in-law, whom Judah had mistaken for a prostitute (Gen. 38).

God wanted to make it clear that his choice of those whom he calls to be his servants is not based on performance. He can use the good and the bad alike. Entry to his kingdom is not limited to exemplary characters like Joseph; it is open to tax collectors and sinners, prostitutes, drug addicts, and gang members. It is even open to people like me: an arrogant overachiever, who is often far too impressed with his own performance. The promise of the Holy Spirit is extended to "everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself" (Acts 2:39). So there is no room

for pride. God did not choose you because you are cleverer or more moral than your neighbor; it is all of grace. As Paul puts it,

But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. (1 Cor. 1:27–29)

The reverse side of that is that there is no room for favoritism. The message of the kingdom is to be preached freely to all alike: rich and poor, moral and immoral, influential and powerless. We, in our limited wisdom, might favor a Joseph, where God, in his infinite wisdom, has chosen to save a Judah.

PASSING ON THE BLESSING

Even while Jacob was completely wrong in thinking that the blessing would pass through the line of Joseph, he was entirely right in his confidence that there was a blessing to be passed on. Here was a man who had been rendered virtually penniless by famine, the head of a tiny family of seminomadic shepherds. Yet when he met Pharaoh, the mightiest man in the world, it was Jacob who blessed Pharaoh and not vice versa. What chutzpah! In the ancient world, the greater person always blessed the lesser. How audacious it was, then, for Jacob to bless Pharaoh! It would have been an insufferably arrogant act, unless it came from a man who remembered the Lord's promise to his grandfather, Abraham, to bless all families of the earth through him (Gen. 12:1–3). God had blessed Jacob so that he could be a blessing to the nations. So when Jacob met Pharaoh, he pronounced a benediction upon him by faith. Jacob understood that he had something valuable to give to mighty Pharaoh: the blessing of God Almighty.

Ultimately, that blessing for all nations is to be found in the person of Jesus Christ, the true son of Abraham. Whatever else we may or may not have to give to people around us, the greatest treasure we possess is Jesus. The greatest blessing we can pass on to our friends, to our families, and to our children is Jesus Christ. Jesus experienced the pain and suffering that goes with every sojourn here on earth. The days of his earthly sojourn were far shorter than Jacob's—less than even half of the biblical norm for a lifetime, seventy years. Those few days were filled with profound suffering and pain; he was well acquainted with sickness and sorrow, with mourning for dead friends, with betrayal and abandonment by his disciples, and finally with profound separation from his beloved Father on the cross. If anyone ever had the right to characterize the days of the years of his sojourn as nasty, brutish, and short, it was Jesus. Yet we see none of Jacob's bitterness in Jesus, but rather a constant spirit of thankfulness for his Father's good gifts, submission to the bitter aspects of his Father's will, and forgiveness for those who sinned against him. He took these great and lasting afflictions upon himself for us, so that we, his family, might receive the blessing that we had forfeited through our sin and might enjoy life beyond this life, a true home at the end of our earthly sojourn. He also took these sufferings upon himself for the joy that was set before him, for the joy of winning back a people

to become God's special possession in him (Heb. 12:2). Through Christ, God's mercy now rests on aliens and strangers from all nations, as they come to God and receive in him eternal rest for their souls.

In Christ, you do not get what you deserve. Instead, what you get is something so amazing that you could never deserve it: God's overwhelming grace. This grace takes your pain and suffering and weaves it into part of God's glorious redemptive purpose. Your sins are nailed to the cross with Jesus, so that you don't have to fear their consequences anymore, and Christ's perfect righteousness is given to you, so that you now receive the Father's favor, earned by the Son through his obedient suffering. This grace now opens wide the way to our heavenly home and assures us that whatever the circumstances of our earthly sojourn, good or evil, there is a glorious inheritance stored up for us, which thieves cannot steal and moths cannot destroy, and from which no power in heaven or on earth or under the earth can separate us. Our blessing is a promised inheritance that is kept safe for us by God, a true home where glory waits for us in the arms of Jesus.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. How was Jacob's assessment of his life wrong? How was it accurate?
2. How did God treat Jacob, Joseph, and his brothers better than they deserved?
3. How has God treated you better than you have deserved?
4. What of your just desserts have fallen on Jesus instead of you? What of Jesus' just desserts do you enjoy now? What of his just desserts will you enjoy in the future?