

THE FAMILY ALBUM

by Steve Zeisler

Thirty years ago this summer, I traveled with my parents and sisters from Chicago to Marion, Ohio, to celebrate my grandparents' fiftieth wedding anniversary. My father is one of nine children, so by the time his parents' fiftieth anniversary rolled around the family had grown fairly large. I sat in the grandchildren's row when the photographer took the family portrait. Even at that young age I was impressed by the event and by how highly my grandparents were regarded by all.

It's probably healthy to occasionally look at life from the perspective of a grandchild; to look at the events and learn the lessons that grandchildren, seeing what has gone before them, are especially in a position to see and learn. This morning I would like to ask you to enter into the events of Genesis 48 and 49 by imagining yourselves to be in the position of Ephraim and Manasseh, the two grandsons of Jacob. We will learn some very helpful lessons here if we try and take their seats and look at events through their eyes.

Jacob has reached the end of his life. He has been contemplating his death for some years and has frequently spoken of human mortality and contemplated eternity. His grandchildren have been called into the presence of this wizened, bedridden patriarch. Jacob's strength has been sapped. He is almost blind. He must struggle forward and lean on a staff in order to bless the children. Despite these limitations, however, he has a commanding presence. Here was a man who had learned the lessons of a long life and had come to know God intimately. He had experienced both failure and triumph. Once he had seen a ladder descend from heaven and the angels of God descend and ascend it. Once he even wrestled with God, and suffered a dislocated hip for his efforts. But Jacob also had to learn to forsake his wily ways and trust God for that which he sought to earn by craftiness. All of these varied experiences had by now, at the end of his life, conspired to make him the confidante of God. He had earned the respect and love of all, not for any attribute of his own, but because he had become a spokesman for the Lord.

This then is the man to whom Manasseh and Ephraim come, seeking his blessing. These young men must have had mixed feelings as they approached. Then sensed that their grandfather was a man who was well worth listening to. They had heard of his history, and they respected and loved him. But they must have been a little disconcerted also. Jacob was the head of a family of shepherds who lived in Goshen, and shepherds were looked down upon by the Egyptians. These boys had been born to one of the most prominent and influential families in the land. Their father was Joseph, second only to Pharaoh in power; their mother was the daughter of an Egyptian high priest. Every door of opportunity was open to them. And here they had to submit themselves to the blessing of an ancient nomadic shepherd whose only qualification would seem to be his relationship to his God. Although they were unaware of it, their destinies will be decided at this meeting. Which world they will enter—the world of Israel and his family, or the world of Egypt—will be decided during this encounter. These two brothers had left the capital of Egypt, the cultural center of the world, to travel to Goshen, the area where only lowly shepherds and animals lived, to meet their grandfather for the last time. We can only imagine what must have been going through their minds. Genesis 48:1-7:

Now it came about after these things that Joseph was told, "Behold, your father is sick." So he took his two sons Manasseh and Ephraim with him. When it was told to Jacob, "Behold, your son Joseph has come to you," Israel collected his strength and sat up in bed. Then Jacob said to Joseph, "God Almighty appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan and blessed me, and He said to me, 'Behold, I will make you fruitful and numerous, and I will make you a company of peoples, and will give this land to your descendants after you for an everlasting

possession.' 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. But your offspring that have been born after them shall be yours; they shall be called by the names of their brothers in their inheritance. Now as for me, when I came from Paddan, Rachel died, to my sorrow, in the land of Canaan on the journey, when there was still some distance to go to Ephrath; and I buried her there on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem)."

Notice that Jacob addresses himself to Joseph only. Jacob's eyesight has failed; he is unaware that his grandsons are also present. They stand in the back of the room, listening as Jacob's dialogue wanders through the past and into the future. Jacob gives immediate indication of what is most important to him on this solemn occasion when he will bestow his blessing on the children of his favorite son. He makes early mention of the promise of God which he received at Luz, the promise that he would be made a great nation. Jacob then looks into the future and sees individuals and families swept up in the stream of salvation. But he also thinks about the past. He remembers especially his beloved Rachel, and brings to mind details that preceded her death.

Jacob reminds me of John, languishing on the isle of Patmos, receiving the heavenly vision which he recounts in the book of Revelation. Jacob is on his deathbed. He seems little concerned with the present, but rather reaches in his mind to the future where he sees fulfilled the promise of God to him. Now he turns to Joseph and his sons and the line that will proceed from them. Jacob is "in the Spirit on the Lord's day" as was John on the island of Patmos.

Jacob begins to refer to his grandsons as his own sons, and thus elevates them to a position of sonship. He places them on an equal footing with Reuben and Simeon so that they will each become heads of tribes, and, as such, a byword for blessing in Israel (Gen.48:20). Thus Jacob links these two young men forever with Israel as heads of tribes and channels of blessing to others. He takes them from worldly Egypt and places them in the forefront of God's plan of salvation. Some commentators regard it as curious that the writer of Hebrews chooses this occasion for his basis for declaring that Jacob was a man of faith. Hebrews makes no mention of the incident of the ladder descending from heaven; Jacob's wrestling with God at Peniel; his bravery on encountering Esau again; his worshiping God in Canaan. Jacob's qualification for being called a man of faith makes no mention of these mighty acts, but instead says, "Jacob, as he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph and worshiped" (Heb.11:21). A blind, feeble old man adopts his grandchildren and calls them his own sons. That act is exalted as the exercise of a man of faith, according to Hebrews. Here we find the essence of the man Jacob.

We may well ask why this is so. The reason is that here Jacob demonstrates his deep desire to share with others the truth that had transformed his own life. Here, in the final hours of his life, the old patriarch takes great pains to draw others into the circle of God's favor. Although Manasseh and Ephraim must have known something about their father's family and God's promises to them, their Egyptian upbringing made those things seem distant and uncertain. Thus, we find that with almost his dying breath, Jacob is anxious to draw into fellowship with God those who have not known that fellowship previously. What a wonderful example Jacob is to us as we come into contact with people who do not know the love of God; those who are unaware that they may yet come to be called sons of God. All we have to do is look around us and we will find on every side people who are yet living in Egypt, seeking to make the best use of the worldly system. We do not have to look for opportunities to be evangelists, to show concern for others; opportunities abound on every hand. As he neared the end of his life, Jacob was still looking for a way to share the truth that had changed him.

There are some historical elements to this encounter that deserve comment. In the ancient world, the eldest son was entitled to inherit a double portion of his father's estate. Reuben had forfeited that right, and Jacob had elected Joseph, the eleventh of his twelve sons, to it. Furthermore, Jacob is honoring the memory of Rachel. They had loved each other through thick and thin, through good times and bad throughout their years together. By doubling Joseph's inheritance, Rachel's descendants are added to as well. Despite Jacob's affection for Joseph as his premier son, and for his wife Rachel, however, what is important to see here in his reaching out to two young men who had come to this family occasion in Goshen. Following this encounter with their grandfather, their destiny would be forever cast with the people of God

The biblical doctrine of the sovereignty of God and the election of believers focus us with a paradox. Scripture teaches that God chooses his own before they are allowed to petition him, before they could deserve it or work for it. Although paradoxes are by their nature difficult to grasp, there is a very wonderful side to the doctrine of God's election of us, and that is this: we did not do anything to deserve it. God chose us before the foundation of the world, not because we performed well, or were wise enough to ask him for his interest in us; not because we sought him first, not because we pleased him, but because he loves us and his favor and choice rested upon us.

Therefore, the good side of that is: you can never undeserve it; you are not in a relationship of performance with the Lord. Every other relationship you have—family, marriage, work, whatever—in some way is based upon your performance. You have to do well and keep doing well in order to win the respect and approval of the one to whom you are related. In the best marriages or friendships, of course, this is minimized. But every human relationship will at one time or another come down to performance. But here we find the grandsons of Jacob, without any effort on their part, being adopted as sons by Jacob. They had done nothing to earn his adoption; they had been born in a foreign country, and yet they hear their grandfather say, "They shall be mine." They would become heads of tribes and thus be a source of blessing. They had been chosen.

If you are in Christ, you too have been adopted. What a blessing: to know that it does not depend on us! If we are his children, it is because God took the legal action that Jacob took here. We have accepted; we have an inheritance; we are his.

Everything has been changed for Ephraim and Manasseh. Gen.48:8-22:

When Israel saw Joseph's sons, he said, "Who are these?" And Joseph said to his father, "They are my sons, whom God has given me here." So he said, "Bring them to me, please, that I may bless them." Now the eyes of Israel were so dim from age that he could not see. Then Joseph brought them close to him, and he kissed them and embraced them. And Israel said to Joseph, "I never expected to see your face, and behold, God has let me see your children as well." Then Joseph took them from his knees, and bowed with his face to the ground. And Joseph took them both, Ephraim with his right hand toward Israel's left, and Manasseh with his left hand toward Israel's right, and brought them close to him. But Israel stretched out his right hand and laid it on the head of Ephraim, who was the younger, and his left hand on Manasseh's head, crossing his hands, although Manasseh was the first-born.

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 to this day, the angel who has redeemed me from all evil, bless the lads; and may his name live on in them, and the names of my fathers Abraham and Isaac; and may they grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth."

When Joseph saw that his father laid his right hand on Ephraim's head, it displeased him; and he grasped his father's hand to remove it from Ephraim's head to Manasseh's head. And Joseph said to his father, "Not so, my father, for this one is the first-born. Place 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. However, the younger brother shall be greater than he, and his descendants shall become a multitude of nations." And he blessed them that day, saying, "By you Israel shall pronounce blessing, saying, 'May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh!'" Thus he put Ephraim before Manasseh. Then Israel said to Joseph, "Behold, I am about to die, but God will be with you, and bring you back to the land of your fathers. And I give you one portion more than your brothers, which I took from the hand of the Amorite with my sword and my bow."

The formal adoption, the elective choice of Jacob was made before he realized the boys were in the room. God chose us in Christ before we began raising our hands to be considered. But once Jacob realized that he could speak directly to the boys, he spoke with the greatest tenderness and love. "Bring them to me," he said. He embraced them and kissed them. The patriarch began to praise God, saying that he never expected to see Joseph again, but now he even gets to see his two sons. He prays for them, with thanksgiving to the God who had been his

shepherd, the God who had brought him through all the trials and the joys of his life. Jacob praises the angel of the Lord, whom I believe to be Jesus Christ himself, for delivering him from evil on the night when his leg was broken, thus taking away his last line of fleshly defense.

Jacob's prayer speaks of his own life's experiences with God. He makes an extraordinary outreach to these young men, saying that there is something even better than all that Egypt had to offer them. Not only did Jacob choose the two brothers for his own, but he won them for himself. That is exactly how God operates with us. He reaches out in love to give us horizons bigger than anything we had ever dreamed. He allows us to see at times how good are his blessings and mercies, giving us more than we ever imagined. Jacob never expected to see Joseph again, but now he even sees Joseph's sons. God grants us understanding of eternity. We are part of the great transformation that he is doing in this world. It is a wonderful expression of love and joy, of clarity as to the purposes of God. Jacob is not only saying, "You are my sons because I say so," but he is inviting them to rejoice in it. The same message is ours as well. We know that we too are loved of the Lord.

Jacob must have smiled to himself, knowing that he had come full circle from the days when he was a boy. His own father Isaac wanted to bless Jacob and his twin brother Esau. Jacob had been promised preeminence but he could not believe that. Thus he joined with his mother in a conspiracy to receive the blessing by tricking Isaac into giving him what God had already promised he would have. Now the aged Jacob, who also is too blind to see, has his grandsons brought forward for a blessing. And this time Jacob knows, by the Spirit of God, that it is the younger son who will have the larger tribe and the greater name. That is why he crosses his hands in blessing the boys. When Joseph tries to reverse what his father is doing, the old man refuses, declaring that the younger son would be the greater. The point is, these boys would not be in competition with each other. Although one tribe would be greater, the other would also be blessed. Both would be great.

God knows what is best for us. We should not try to compete with others to gain higher standing. All of us are being blessed. Jacob realizes again the foolishness of trying to take what God wants to give. At the end of his life he is seeing repeated scenes from earlier in his life. God wants us to learn what Jacob had learned.

Ephraim and Manasseh probably overheard what follows in chapter 49. There, their recent uncles, and now their brothers, are evaluated by Jacob. How instructive that must have been for the boys. At times Jacob's words were hard as he summarized failure—Reuben's and Simeon's, for instance. At times what he said was enigmatic. When he said of Naphtali, "He is a doe set free, he gives beautiful words" (or fawns)—that must have sounded peculiar to them as it does to us. We can't be sure we know what Jacob meant by that. At other times, his remarks were based on the name of the son in question. "Dan," for instance, means "judge"; so Jacob spoke of Dan's judging others. At times, Jacob's words were based on the son's history, as with Reuben. At other times, his words were based upon what would become of the descendants of the son in question. Thus, Judah would rule in Israel until the Ruler himself came upon the scene, the One who would bring peace. Sometimes, Jacob's words were an analysis of one who had done well. That is what happened with Joseph, who is highly praised for his stalwart heart and his faithfulness. So Ephraim and Manasseh listened as the old patriarch evaluated his sons.

My wife and daughter are involved in a summer project putting years of family photographs into albums. It's always interesting to go back through family photographs and examine the various expressions and activities portrayed. Every now and then a photograph of one of the children emerges that, if we had known at the time it was taken, would have told us something about his or her future. A particular characteristic—a smile, an expression, a certain quality—has not changed in the intervening years. Even a nickname given years earlier will sometimes tell a great deal about that person and what he or she became years later. That, in a sense, is what happening here as Jacob refers to each son in turn. At times their names say things about them that are revealing. A snapshot taken at a moment of failure or success thus becomes indicative of what will happen later in their lives.

As all this is going on, Manasseh and Ephraim are listening intently. It must have struck them, as I hope it will dawn upon us, that God's choice of them was made in order to make something of them. God's choice of us is not just a legal exercise. We have been chosen by God and loved by him because some analysis of who we become is going to be made. That analysis may be either painful or pleasureable. It may be that only the one hearing it can

understand it, but in any case there is an evaluation. Ehpraim and Manasseh, who formerly were among the nobility of Egypt, are now counted among the sons of Israel. They will become heads of tribes, and take their part in God's salvation plan. Thus an evaluation of their lives lies ahead for them, just as they have heard their new brothers' evaluated.

It is my hope that the lesson they learned will also be learned by us. We are God's because he loves us. We cannot lose our sonship by failing him. He has communicated his love to us so that we respond to him because we know the joy he brings to human hearts. We want to do what he wants us to do, to be what he has called us to be, because his grace and mercy and love are magnificent. He is headed someplace with us, and there is coming an evaluation, a summing-up. What a change that day had brought about in the lives of Ephraim and Manasseh! If they had wondered upon leaving home what the future held for them, their wondering had been put to rest. They had been transformed by God's spokesman, given information about themselves, and set on a path they would travel for the rest of their lives.

I hope their experience on that day will be helpful to us. Hebrews says that Jacob was a man of faith because he elevated Manasseh and Ephraim to spiritual standing in the plan of God. Among all the patriarchs, Jacob is the one who sees the multitude coming to faith in the future. Abraham had a hard time just having one child; Isaac had but two; but Jacob had twelve and now thirteen. He saw the multitude descend from him, becoming a family of seventy in Egypt. He knew that the world could be changed through God's plan, and that is why he was enthusiastic to include in that plan as many as he could. Thus, even at the end of his life he is still looking to see if he can include two more.

And I hope Jacob's example will challenge you to not become complacent. Do not become part of the Christian body for your own enjoyment, but seek out others who may yet become part of the great multitude. Among the reasons we are here at all is that with our dying breath, and every breath prior to that, we may reach out and include someone else in the circle, someone who is still living in Egypt but is not aware of it. A song we sang during the Jesus Movement in the sixties went, "Accept Him with your whole heart, and use your own two hands; With one reach out to Jesus, and with the other bring a friend." With his last breath, Stephen prayed that those who were stoning him should not die in their sins. Jesus on the cross offered paradise to the thief crucified alongside him. With their dying breath they were concerned that outsiders be brought into the circle. That ought to burden us to care. As your contribution to this church, help us become a body that is concerned for outsiders. Look for a way to take someone who did not know he might be included and give him standing in the plan of God.

Catalog No. 4049
Genesis 48:1-49:27

Tenth Message

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July 12, 1987

Updated December 16, 2000

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