

Genesis 46-47
Joseph and God's plan to save the world
Christ Church Liverpool
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I love the M6 Toll. For those not familiar with this wonderful invention the M6 toll is a short stretch of motorway near Birmingham that you can pay to go on and which takes you away from the dreadful bottlenecks and traffic jams of the main M6 round Birmingham. The M6 toll is a wide, flowing motorway, with few lorries, no jams and a service station with a very nice Costa coffee shop and a little lake at a place called Norton Canes. If ever I'm heading south on business or for pleasure and I'm called on to make a choice it's the M6 toll. It's quicker, more efficient and less trouble.

The reason I always choose to M6 toll over the free alternative is that my experiences of the M6 round Birmingham are terrible. Taking that road always leads to delay, hassle and stress. Given my experiences I would be a fool not to take the toll road and it would need a pretty big reason (like the other road being closed) to persuade me to take the main M6.

That, in a very trivial way, illustrates the dilemma that the great patriarch Jacob faces in these chapters.

He has been separated from his beloved son Joseph for over 20 years and has only just found out the boy, now a man and Prime Minister of Egypt no less, is alive.

Jacob, naturally, longs to be reunited with his son. But that would mean a journey to Egypt; and the experience of this family with journeying to Egypt was not a positive one. Jacob's grandfather, Abraham, went to Egypt at a time of famine, just like the one Jacob was now experiencing. While there he gave his wife into Pharaoh's harem and, having brought terrible curses from God on the Egyptian royal household, was sent away with a flea in his ear and his spiritual integrity in tatters.

The next time there was a famine in Canaan Jacob's father, Isaac, was specifically warned by God not to go to Egypt. Instead God commanded Isaac to stay in Canaan, the land that he had promised to Abraham, Isaac and their descendents.

You can read those stories in Genesis 12 and 26 if you like later.

So you can see why an invitation to go to Egypt would create some problems for Jacob. When he first learns that Joseph is alive, he is overwhelmed with enthusiasm and joy and sets out almost at once in the wagons Pharaoh has sent for him and his entourage.

But by the time he comes to Beersheba, a site of holy significance to both Abraham and Isaac and a place of many family memories, his enthusiasm has cooled somewhat. Jacob, the inheritor of the promises to Abraham and Isaac, is not sure what to do. Would it not be wicked for him to do what his forefathers should not have done? Would his going to Egypt have consequences as

disastrous as Abraham's visit? Was this leaving the place of promise a rejection of the Lord, the God of promise?

It's no wonder that Jacob is afraid! Like me on the M6 in Staffordshire. Jacob is going to need a very big sign that going to Egypt, the M6 of his world, is the right thing to do. And a very big sign is exactly what God gives Jacob...

In a night time vision, the very last such encounter anyone will have with the Lord, the living God, until Moses at the burning bush four centuries later, God speaks to Jacob, in exactly the same way he spoke to Abraham and will later speak to Moses, calling his name twice, and tells him that he should not be afraid to go South, even to pagan Egypt, because it is through his family's time in that nation that all God's purposes and promises will be fulfilled.

This is not an abandonment of their God because, v4, the Lord will go with them.

Jacob is to follow God's command to go because it will have three hugely important consequences, three consequences that ring down the centuries and still affect each of us here this morning. Following God's command to go...

1 Turns a family into a nation (34:1-27)

At the beginning of the story of Joseph the people of God are a family. Especially they are a family of 12 with Jacob as the head. And it turns out that he is a pretty rubbish head of the family as we have seen over the weeks this year looking at his involvement in the lives of his sons and, last year, when we looked at Jacob's own younger days.

But Jacob is more than the head of a family with 12 sons. As we read through these two chapters of his story here, more than anywhere else in Genesis, we find two names for this man; he is Jacob, but he is also Israel, the father of a nation.

And the purpose of this journey from Canaan to Egypt is to make this people, v3, into a great nation in that pagan land.

It's a process that, in fact, has already started. The genealogies of the Bible might seem a little bit like hard work to you and me but none of them are there without reason. And the point of the very carefully constructed family tree here in Genesis 46 is to show us how, with grandsons, great grandsons and the occasional daughter Jacob's family, including him, Joseph and Joseph's two sons born in Egypt, comes to seventy people.

Now if you read the commentaries on Genesis you'll see that some people get themselves all in a knot about whether there really are 70 people in this list (feel free to count for yourself later!) and, if so, why they are counted this way: do you include the two sons who died in Canaan but exclude Joseph's two sons? Why are the four wives not counted? Was there really only one daughter?

But those are all, if you'll forgive the expression, stupid questions. Because this isn't a census. Jacob isn't trying to

do a roll call to make sure nobody gets left when the wagon stops at a service station for a loo break.

The 70 doesn't point to a numerical reality (though clearly there were at least 70 actual individuals in the party) but a theological reality. A truth about God and his work.

Because if you read through the whole of Genesis we have come across this number 70 before. Seventy is the number of nations of the earth in chapter 10. Seventy is a number of people that symbolises completeness. The motley, hungry crew who headed out of the famine stricken land of Canaan under the leadership of a man so old and frail he needed to lean on his staff just to stand up, were not just another group of refugees fleeing for food. They were a country in miniature. They were the beginnings of the nation of Israel.

And when they arrive in Egypt, we learn, they are, 47:27, fruitful and increasing greatly in number. So much so that in a few generations time there are so many of them that the Egyptians consider the Israelites a threat to their national security.

The family, which goes to Egypt as a fledgling nation will end its time in Egypt as a whole nation, a people of over 1 million. But in order for that to happen they have got to follow God's command to go. In Canaan they are not only at risk of starvation but, even more seriously, of compromise as they marry Canaanites. For Israel the Egyptian rejection of them, sending them to live in a separate part of the land in Goshen, the area round the town of Rameses, will be a great blessing that will enable them to become a nation. Following God's command to go turns a family into a nation.

That principle applies absolutely to us too. When Jesus issued his great commission to his disciples, a small family of just 12 men, to go into the world and make disciples he, too, was turning a family into a nation.

God's people today still go out into the world in order to bring about God's purpose of growing the nation so that it becomes not a group of a million of two but, instead, a great multitude that nobody can count. Of course for us the family doesn't become a nation mostly by breeding. So as much as we rejoice in the many pregnancies in the church family the bringing up of children is only one way, not the main way, in which the nation of God's people grows now.

Instead we grow as people who do not know Jesus Christ, and therefore cannot know God his father, come to believe in him and join God's people. The command to go for us is not one to go and settle in one corner of Egypt, or Liverpool, so we can reproduce, but to go and spread ourselves through Liverpool, throughout the world, so that we can lead people to Christ.

Working where we do, in the urban heart of a post-Christian society, seeking to bring the good news about Jesus to mostly educated, cynical, Western European people that is a hard ask isn't it? Not the kind of thing you would probably choose to do if you could avoid it. But it is in following God's command to go that the family becomes a nation.

In all our internal discussions about how we learn best as a church family, where we should meet, what we should study, what buildings we should buy all the rest of it we all need to remember what our calling is. This is a particular problem for all of us who are elders, LifeGroup leaders and involved with the running of the church's activities: we need to remember that our task is still to see the family become a nation. Our job, all of our jobs, is to follow God's command to go, knowing that what that looks like in practice is seeing the church grow as people become Christians. Secondly following God's command to go...

2 Blesses all people for a while (47:13-26)

Even recessions have their winners – as the world's record 164 billionaire's can testify, even if Bill Gates now has to take second spot to a Mexican telephone company founder with a mere \$53 billion. That's a whole \$500million behind Carlos Helu.

And Pharaoh would, no doubt, have said the same. From being a pretty rich king he becomes, in three years, the owner of the entire country – all the cash, all the movable assets, all the land and all the people.

Joseph, Pharaoh's number one investment banker, takes nothing for himself (investment bankers take note!) and makes a fortune for his client. Even the greatest king in all the world, who is not a believer, is brought huge blessings by God's servant Joseph and the family. It's noticeable that when Jacob meets Pharaoh in chapter 26 the blessing doesn't go from the king to the poor peasant farmer from Canaan but the other way round. Twice we are told that, after his long journey, Jacob blesses Pharaoh; and v13-26 of chapter 37 tell us how that works out.

Lots of people get a little bit worried about Joseph's ethics in this chapter. Is it right for him to sell the grain for high prices or shouldn't Joseph just give it away? Is it proper for him to take the land, and even the freedom of the Egyptian farmers in return for keeping them alive? In fact isn't it rather presumptuous of me to describe what hap[pens here as bringing blessing to the Egyptians when it might seem to us to be robbing them blind?

If that's a question you have, and it was certainly the question I had when I started studying this passage, I think there are three things we need to know.

The first one is that this story isn't here to teach us ethics. It's not about what we ought to do should we ever find ourselves in monopoly control of an entire nation's food supply – which probably isn't going to happen anyway.

The second point is to remember that Joseph works for Pharaoh. So even if Joseph wanted to give all the grain away (and we simply have no idea what he thought about it!) he wasn't free to do that! He had a responsibility to his employer to do what Pharaoh wanted.

But the third, and most important thing to remember, is that there are different kinds of slavery. Living in the C12st west, and perhaps especially living in Liverpool, our perception of slavery is built on the racially based slave trade of the C17th and 18th which saw ships of African

men and women, usually sold by their tribal chiefs or captured and sold by other tribes, transported to the United States for work on cotton plantations and, largely, treated as subhuman by their masters.

But not all slavery has been like that. And it's important not to read our ideas back into somebody else's culture. Even among God's people selling your dependents or yourself to pay your debts was a perfectly normal and proper thing to do. It was how people dealt with bankruptcy.

Slaves could come from any nation and many of them rose to be very wealthy and powerful – as Joseph did in Potiphar's house. Indeed it may well be that even as Prime Minister Joseph's legal status was still that of slave to Pharaoh.

In the next book, Exodus, the people of Israel cry out to God not because they are slaves so much as because they made to do forced labour building cities rather than tending flocks. They are made to work incredibly hard and their children are killed. In fact one of the big problems for the Jews is that they are treated worse than the Egyptians – who we know are already slaves!

If you look at the response of the people of Egypt to what Joseph does they don't seem to take it as a piece of opportunistic exploitation. Instead they praise him, v25, for saving their lives. Joseph is a kind and benign ruler – the rule that 20% of the crops belong to Pharaoh was much more generous to the farmers than the laws of most countries of the time that 33% went to the king.

Pharaoh is enriched, the people are fed; the blessing of Jacob the patriarch has truly come to Egypt.

Still today God's people, following his call to go, bring temporary blessings to many millions. There is planet of huffing and puffing from secular humanists who say that the missionary movement destroyed other cultures and imposed western values. Sure some missionaries were mistaken in some of their zeal, Yes some exploitative people did go overseas in the name of Christ. But the end of widow burning in India was brought about by Christians. Christians tried to make it unacceptable to bind babies feet in China. They released people from the fear of the witch doctor by introducing real medicine to much of Africa.

Still today it is Christians who bring medical aid, education, water and personal love and compassion to all sorts of parts of the world secular agencies refuse to go to. The secular humanists I know don't spend their summer holidays building hospitals in Congo or orphanages in Romania; they spend them hiking in the Himalayan foothills or spending three months travelling by train through Patagonia.

That's not a criticism really; after all if you think this life is all there is and that the survival of the fittest is how life comes about why would you want to live for anybody other than yourself? We're not to be here to criticise others. But we must recognise this morning that we should bring blessing to all people.

That if the world is not a better place for the presence of God's people in it, if Liverpool is not a better city because Christ Church is here then we are failures. God's people going in obedience to his command is meant to bring blessing to all people. And even if the things we do don't lead people to become Christians, even if they don't repent and die in their sin, that doesn't mean those good things don't count.

The challenge to every Christian here this morning, from the experience of Jacob and Joseph, is that the people who live where we live ought to be blessed, in this life, by us being here.

Maybe that's because you keep the office clean. Maybe it's because, like one of my friends, you take it on yourself to pick up all the dog poo on your street. Maybe you don't just do what you have to do in your job but all the extra things to make the sick well, the poor more comfortable or the company more profitable.

If your apartment block has Christians it in should be a nicer, better place to live than if you weren't there. You can't make it perfect – any more than Joseph could make Egypt perfect – but you must make it better. Ask yourself this morning: what do I contribute to my street? What do I contribute to my company? What do I offer on my course that would not happen if I wasn't there?

One of the big challenges of church is to ask whether we, together, make the city a better place to live? What can we do together to make that so? Are there things we can do for young people – speak to Sarah Oliver with your ideas. Are there things we can do for mothers – why not share your vision with Gaynor. Are there things we can do for older people – take your suggestions to Anne. Internationals? Businesses? The arts?

Following God's command to go blesses all people for a while. And, finally, following God's command to go blesses God's people forever.

3 Blesses God's people forever (46:28-47:12 & 47:27-31)

The people of Israel did well for themselves in Egypt. In fact the way their lives there are described deliberately remind us of how Adam and Eve were meant to live in Eden, God's perfect garden. 47:27 – they were fruitful and increased greatly in number.

In a time of famine they didn't just survive; they came right through the troubles and, a couple of decades later, were more numerous and prosperous than ever.

If you look around the world today very often the same applies. In the absence of direct discrimination against Christians the general trend is that genuine, believing Christian people prosper. Mostly Christians do well in marriage and family life and at work and in society because the convictions that shape the lives of Christians – love for God and love for others – are traits that other people find attractive.

But, as great as it is that the people did well in Egypt that's not the real blessing as far as Jacob is concerned.

Pharaoh allocated to the Israelites the very best part of the land of Egypt. Again and again we are told that Goshen is the place to live if you are looking after sheep. They live on the Egyptian equivalent of the South Downs or the Cotswolds or the Lakeland fells.

But did you notice how the story ends? Jacob came to Egypt and was reunited to his long lost son. He saw all his family reunited under the leadership of Judah. His experience of living there was that it was so perfect it was like living in Eden.

Imagine that happened to you. That you won the lottery and retired to the Lake District in a wonderful country house, surrounded by your family and friends enjoying the country and experiencing every good thing life has to offer.

You'd probably want your ashes scattered on the top of Hellvellyn or the surface of Derwentwater or something. But Jacob wants to be buried somewhere else. Jacob knows that the place he belongs is not Egypt, as good as his time in Egypt has been, but Canaan.

He wants to be buried with Abraham and Isaac as a sign that he believes the blessing of God, God's promise, won't be fulfilled in a nice time in Egypt but through the family possessing the promised land.

Jacob, in some way, even understood that Canaan was not the promised land. That although that was the place he needed to be buried his body remaining there was just a signpost of an even greater, an eternal promise, yet to be fulfilled. The book of Hebrews tells us that the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and all of God's people who came after them were longing for a better country, for a heavenly country.

They knew in other words, that the blessing they had been promised by the Lord was an eternal blessing. Jacob didn't need to go to Egypt to be buried in Canaan. He could have stayed in Canaan for that! He needed to go to Egypt in order that God might fulfil his promises to bless the people of Israel forever.

It's the same for us today. Go asks us to following the command of Christ to go and make disciples of all nation. He asks us to demonstrate the love for God and love for our neighbours that lie at the heart of the life of the Christian transformed by grace.

Listening to that command might make your life better now, just as it made Jacob's life better. But that's not the reason for going. The ultimate reason for taking the good news of God to the people around us, and to the nations far away from us, is that this is how God will bless his people forever.

It seemed like a crazy idea to Jacob that God would bring about his purposes to give Israel the land of Canaan by sending them all to Egypt, hundreds of miles away across the desert.

At a global level it seems, doesn't it, like a pretty crazy idea that God would try and accomplish his purposes for

the world by scattering a tiny group of Christians among lots of different nations. That instead of keeping them together in a place where they can build a strong community identity, a common culture, he would make us live in all sorts of different cultures constantly trying to work out what it looks like to live as a Christian in different places with different languages and different customs. That instead of having a Bible in one language and teaching those who came seeking to know the truth about God that language we would need thousands of different Bibles each reflecting the weakness and inadequacy of those languages to describe God.

Locally it seems odd that God would not want Christians to spend most of their time together in Christian communities or monasteries but to go out into the world of work every day, perhaps as the only Christian in a school, an office, a street, a factory or a department. Does it strike you as a bit bizarre that God's plan to bless his people forever doesn't involve living together 24/7 like we will do for eternity but living scattered throughout the city?

Well if we take Jacob's life seriously it won't seem that odd. Because then, as now, God commanded his people to go out into the world. And that going brings about three amazing results; the growth of the family into a nation, the blessing of all people in the places we go and the eternal blessing of God's people as we look forward to our heavenly home.

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