

Genesis 47:27-48:22 Looking Back to Face the Future

Introduction

How do you view your life thus far? Do you see it as a success or a failure or a mixture of the two? Or would some other form of words be more appropriate to describe the range of experiences and life circumstances you have gone through? For the vast majority of people a narrative account of their lives would indicate that in their youth they were idealistic in their dreams of how their lives might turn out. There were some things that turned out far better than they dared to dream and other circumstances or events that were very disappointing. The narrative would feature some high points and celebrations of which the person was rightly proud, but also moments of sadness or of struggles through which they or close family and friends had experienced. Our judgement will be seriously affected by our age. Someone in their teens and twenties may have high hopes regarding their potential career, or of a potential marriage and family life. A person who is already retired from employment is of an age to have a quite different take on their life and of the potential time that remains for them in this life. A decade ago the polling organisation MORI conducted a major survey of people across the age spectrum and found that people in the 35-54 age band were characterised in their responses as ‘grumpy, disillusioned, dissatisfied and permanently pessimistic’, often attributed to longer working hours and the unpleasant experience of commuting on over-congested roads on the way to and from work! This research organisation called them ‘the Meldrews’ after the miserable character Victor Meldrew, played by actor Richard Wilson, hero of the BBC Comedy *One Foot in the Grave*. At the time the comedy was commissioned by the BBC in the later 1980s, the social group to which this fictional character was set was the ‘over-55s’, who had been more pessimistic in outlook than any other group at that time. However, this series first broadcast in 1990 and running for the next decade, no longer represented this age group who had become the most contented of their age categories by the end of the Twentieth Century [*The Times*, 27 August 2002]. How do you view your life? What is it that excites and challenges you? What is it that you fear or struggle with? The Christian does not answer these kinds of questions without attempting to see something of God’s bigger picture for our lives. We look back to God and what Jesus did for us on the cross and forward to Jesus’ second coming and the end of this age when God’s ultimate purposes for His creation and His Church will be realised. The sense of perspective is made visible as we gather around the Lord’s Table and utter words that include: *On the night in which Jesus was betrayed He took bread and when He has given thanks He broke it... For when ever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes* (I Corinthians 11:23b-24a, 26).

How did Jacob view his life? To what was he looking back to as his anchor on which to draw inspiration in order to continue with his earthly pilgrimage? This passage in Genesis 47 and 48 gives us some clues with respect to the perspective of this aged patriarch. It will also give us an opportunity for reflection on our own lives as we begin to pass through another year of our lives.

1. The Occasion (Genesis 47:27-31)

(a) The imminent death of Jacob (Genesis 47:27-29a) ²⁷ *Now the Israelites settled in Egypt in the region of Goshen. They acquired property there and were fruitful and increased greatly in number.* ²⁸ *Jacob lived in Egypt seventeen years, and the years of his life were a hundred and forty-seven.* ²⁹ *When the time drew near for Israel to die...* The narrator sets the scene for Jacob’s imminent departure. The last moments of Abraham, his famous grandfather were summarised

very briefly in Genesis 25:7-10: *Abraham lived a hundred and seventy-five years.* ⁸ *Then Abraham breathed his last and died at a good old age, an old man and full of years; and he was gathered to his people.* ⁹ *His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah near Mamre, in the field of Ephron son of Zohar the Hittite,* ¹⁰ *the field Abraham had bought from the Hittites. There Abraham was buried with his wife Sarah.* It is a peaceful picture of the departure of an elderly man whose time had come, with an emphasis at best on the place of his burial in the Promised Land, on the small piece of property that he had owned. In a similar way his son Isaac's departure was simply stated in Genesis 35:27-29: *Jacob came home to his father Isaac in Mamre, near Kiriath Arba (that is, Hebron), where Abraham and Isaac had stayed.* ²⁸ *Isaac lived a hundred and eighty years.* ²⁹ *Then he breathed his last and died and was gathered to his people, old and full of years. And his sons Esau and Jacob buried him.* Once again the focus albeit a gentle one is on the land, in the place God had promised to them. This family pattern was particularly important to them, as it was the only concrete link they had to the inheritance God had promised to their descendants in the future. However, the last moments of Jacob's life cover parts or the whole of four chapters here in Genesis. There will be three deathbed scenes. The first a meeting with Joseph his favoured son to ensure that his last wishes would be carried out; then there is a second meeting with Joseph, but on this occasion his two sons Manasseh and Ephraim were also present and they receive a blessing from Jacob. The third scene is the gathering of all the sons as they heard his final words prior to his death, followed by his funeral arrangements. Death cannot be postponed by any of us. It will come to all of us in turn. Even aged patriarchs must eventually experience the common lot of fallen humanity *and then he died...* The question for you and me, therefore, is this: am I ready to meet my maker? Have I repented of my sins and trusted Jesus alone for salvation? I trust each one of us can answer yes to this question.

(b) **The solemn request made by Jacob** (Genesis 47: 29b-31)...*he called for his son Joseph and said to him, 'If I have found favour in your eyes, put your hand under my thigh and promise that you will show me kindness and faithfulness. Do not bury me in Egypt,* ³⁰ *but when I rest with my fathers, carry me out of Egypt and bury me where they are buried.'* *'I will do as you say,' he said.* ³¹ *'Swear to me,' he said. Then Joseph swore to him, and Israel worshipped as he leaned on the top of his staff.* The sense of continuity with his ancestors and the expectation that his son Joseph would follow on in the same convictions was strong and clear. There was more going on here than following on in a tradition; there was a firm taking hold of the promises of God and acting in their light, despite there being no visible evidence that the Promised Land would belong to the descendants of Abraham. This is important to both the Old and New Testament people of God. *We live by faith not by sight* (II Corinthians 5:7). It is easy to say the words but living consistently this way involves resisting huge pressures from many people around us, even some Christians, who think very differently. In a thoughtful article about people's perceptions of how their lives are going entitled: 'For goodness sake, just stop whingeing', journalist Libby Purves, reminded her readers: 'The history of humanity tells us that great reforms are made and great civilisations built out of optimism and energy and the willingness of individuals to work together, without much immediate personal gratification, for a good purpose' (*The Times*, 27 August 2002). This is important for us to grasp as a church when decisions small and large are made, especially the latter when the visible benefits may be after our day. Hebrews 11:6 reminds us: *And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to Him must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him.* The timescale on which we operate as Christians doing God's work is much longer than our lifetime. We are signing on to something more amazing and more significant than we can ever grasp. Yet with humility also recognise that much of what we do appears to be so insignificant in the greater scheme of things. Yet because God has given each of us gifts and abilities to serve Him whether it is to perform an apparently miniscule behind the scenes task

or a perceived major contribution on a public platform, at any given time, we do both equally to the glory of God. What is important is that our world view shapes in a powerful way what we might do in the present. There are people who viewed history as inevitable evolutionary progress. Everything is automatically getting better –so I don't need to stick my neck out on behalf of the powerless and the oppressed as it will all turn out okay in the end! Until the carnage of World War One sank in that was possibly the majority view in Western Europe. I doubt there are many people today who have such a naïve view. The hardline atheists have largely given up such a view, generally arguing that the world just is as it is and we must live with it. 'Good' and 'evil' are simply moral categories that humans have used to interpret it. Yet this revised perspective is equally unconvincing as most people are convinced that most of the evils in the world are created by sinful human beings whose thoughtless or selfish actions are harmful for other less powerful people. A second, eastern, worldview is a cyclical one where we have many lives and keep coming back for a repeat until finally, eventually, we disappear into nothingness! Our circumstances in this reflect how we behaved last time round. This worldview allows people to evade taking responsibility for social justice and providing for the most needy and vulnerable in society. By contrast, a Christian worldview sees every human being as a creature created in the image of God and therefore of great value. He or she sees the created order as something for which we are responsible so careful stewardship of natural resources and the environment around us is our duty, not something to be left to a future generation to take care of. Hebrews 11:13-16 provides a summary of the attitude of the patriarchs to their lives under God. *All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth.* ¹⁴ *People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own.* ¹⁵ *If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return.* ¹⁶ *Instead, they were longing for a better country – a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them.* Decisions for us about building projects or church-planting initiatives are not about the present, but faith step investments in the future. We have benefited on many occasions from faith investments of people long since departed, not least in these buildings in which we meet week by week. Out thinking about mission and God's work in this community must take into account not just today but potentially the years after we have passed on. Jacob's request to Joseph was a clear and bold statement. We will not see with our own eyes the fulfilment of the Abrahamic covenant promises, but we will make a public demonstration of our faith in them by going through the inconvenience of being buried in the land. When Joseph agreed to honour his father's request Genesis 47:31 records: *Israel worshipped as he leaned on the top of his staff.* Was this singing or prayer? God alone knows for certain exactly what happened, but it was a declaration of his faith in the presence of his faithful son. Some Bible commentators seem to think this developed worldview came much later in Israel's history. I disagree. Job, a patriarch from this era would declare: *I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end He will stand on the earth.* ²⁶ *And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God;* ²⁷ *I myself will see Him with my own eyes – I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!* (Job 19:25-27). The psalmist Asaph after some real struggles which he confesses to God because of hardships he had endured, wrote these words in Psalm 73:23-26: *Yet I am always with You; You hold me by my right hand.* ²⁴ *You guide me with Your counsel, and afterwards You will take me into glory.* ²⁵ *Whom have I in heaven but You? And earth has nothing I desire besides You.* ²⁶ *My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever.* In Genesis 50:24-26, maybe half a century, or more, later Joseph will make his last public request to the same effect, demonstrating his loyalty to the same covenant promises from God. Do you and I have that same confidence in the promises of God? I hope and pray that we do.

2. The Covenant (Genesis 48:1-7)

(a)**Families of Faith** (Genesis 48:1-4) *Some time later Joseph was told, 'Your father is ill.' So he took his two sons Manasseh and Ephraim along with him. ² When Jacob was told, 'Your son Joseph has come to you,' Israel rallied his strength and sat up on the bed. ³ Jacob said to Joseph, 'God Almighty appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan, and there He blessed me ⁴ and said to me, "I am going to make you fruitful and increase your numbers. I will make you a community of peoples, and I will give this land as an everlasting possession to your descendants after you."* The witness of older saints as a role model to younger people is so important. Paul who mentored Timothy the younger pastor at Ephesus, never tired of reminding him of the godly example of his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice; he wrote: *But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, ¹⁵ and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus* (II Timothy 3:14-15). For some young Christians who don't come from a Christian home choosing to 'adopt' older Christians as mentor 'parents' or 'grand-parents' or older Christians making a point of getting alongside those who need role models and encouragement is important. Over the years I have observed a number of good examples of this practice which has done great good for their good and for God's glory. For those of us who are parents and / or grandparents take the opportunities you have to read Bible stories or pray with your children or grandchildren. Let them see in life that your faith is a '24x7' reality, not just something we hide away and take out on Sundays. Then at the end of life gather them round when that is possible and share something of your testimony and encourage them to live a life faithful to God. I was so thankful to God of the privilege our family had to get down to Lancaster the day before my dad died. My brother and his family were also present in that side room of the hospital. Each of the grandchildren were spoken to and encouraged to commit their lives fully to God and be faithful to Him unto the end of their days as my dad had modelled for us as a family. Oh that each of us as believers will be able to do that at the end of our days. Jacob shared his testimony that day possibly for the first time with Joseph's sons? The anchor point of his faith journey from his encounter with God at Luz (later known as Bethel) in Genesis 28:10-22, was a point of reference for the rest of his days. Each of us as Christians will have our anchor points along the faith journey. Have you begun yours yet? Are you walking faithfully along that pathway today?

(b)**The Responsibilities of Faith** (Genesis 48:5-7) ⁵*'Now then, your two sons born to you in Egypt before I came to you here will be reckoned as mine; Ephraim and Manasseh will be mine, just as Reuben and Simeon are mine. ⁶ Any children born to you after them will be yours; in the territory they inherit they will be reckoned under the names of their brothers. ⁷ As I was returning from Paddan, to my sorrow Rachel died in the land of Canaan while we were still on the way, a little distance from Ephrath. So I buried her there beside the road to Ephrath' (that is, Bethlehem).* Rachel had borne fewer children than Leah, but now, as was a known custom of that era, a grandfather could adopt a grandchild or children and that is what Jacob did. The secular law Code of Hammurapi from that era even allowed a slave to be adopted as an heir in this manner: 'If the father during his lifetime has ever said "My children" to the children whom the slave bore him, thus having counted them with the children of his first wife'... they have an equal right to share in the inheritance of his estate' (Victor Hamilton, *Genesis* Volume II, p. 629). In life through the enforced separation from Joseph and his family the aged patriarch had missed out on assisting them or spending time with them. The past could not be changed but he endeavoured to compensate them with future blessings when he had died. Jacob had not treated his children fairly in earlier years but now as an older man he wanted to honour these two young grandchildren. We cannot make up for the mistakes of the past but I believe that this meeting of Jacob with his grandsons would have been a significant and defining moment

in their lives. As Jacob here recalls with some emotional pain, the passing of Rachel in childbirth was both unexpected and unsought. Yet despite the distress it caused it did not undermine his future life nor the fulfilment of God's providential plans for his and their lives. We too will have our setbacks and our tears, yet as God's people we trust that His will may come to pass in our lives throughout our lives. Do we need to trust Him for that today? Do we need to confess to Him any doubts or fears?

3. The Blessing (Genesis 48:8-22)

(a) The Blessing of Ephraim and Manasseh (Genesis 48:8-16)

⁸ When Israel saw the sons of Joseph, he asked, 'Who are these?' ⁹ 'They are the sons God has given me here,' Joseph said to his father. Then Israel said, 'Bring them to me so that I may bless them.'

¹⁰ Now Israel's eyes were failing because of old age, and he could hardly see. So Joseph brought his sons close to him, and his father kissed them and embraced them. ¹¹ Israel said to Joseph, 'I never expected to see your face again, and now God has allowed me to see your children too.' ¹² Then Joseph removed them from Israel's knees and bowed down with his face to the ground. ¹³ And Joseph took both of them, Ephraim on his right towards Israel's left hand and Manasseh on his left towards Israel's right hand, and brought them close to him. ¹⁴ But Israel reached out his right hand and put it on Ephraim's head, though he was the younger, and crossing his arms, he put his left hand on Manasseh's head, even though Manasseh was the firstborn. ¹⁵ Then he blessed Joseph and said, 'May the God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked faithfully, the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day, ¹⁶ the Angel who has delivered me from all harm – may he bless these boys. May they be called by my name and the names of my fathers Abraham and Isaac, and may they increase greatly on the earth.' Genesis 49 will record the family gathering when they met together for Jacob's farewell words to all his sons and possibly in the presence of other family members also. Here there is an account of a special time with Joseph and his two sons. Joseph will get two portions of an inheritance in Canaan through his sons, but there were eleven other brothers and the inheritance was for twelve tribes of Israel. What needs to be remembered was that the tribe of Levi was the tribe of the priests and their inheritance was spiritual, dedicated to the Lord with allotted places for them to live amongst God's people. Therefore, the maths does add up so that there were always 'twelve tribes of Israel'! There were three blessing for these young men to which the aged patriarch will refer. (i) The Blessing of Abraham *May they be called by my name and the names of my fathers Abraham and Isaac...* This family had and has a unique place in the purposes of God for His people Israel. It was a powerful statement to Manasseh and Ephraim that though this apparently impoverished and marginalised family appeared to be nobodies in the world's eyes, they were special to God. The lure of the world and its influence must have tugged at their hearts as they grew up into adulthood. What is my identity? Am I a Hebrew or an Egyptian? In every generation human beings have to wrestle with their primary identity. Our referendum in Scotland in September 2014 is an illustration of the battle in this land over the shape and form of what it means to be a citizen of this country. God help these young men to grasp that their allegiance to You and Your covenant promises is more significant in their lives than anything else. Hebrews 11:24-27, in speaking of this very issue says this of the great Israelite leader of a later generation Moses, states: *By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. ²⁵ He chose to be ill-treated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. ²⁶ He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward. ²⁷ By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger; he persevered because he saw Him who is invisible.* Do you see Him? Is He central in your life, your goals and aspirations? (ii) The adoption by Jacob ¹⁶ *the Angel who has delivered me from all harm – may he bless these boys. **May they be called by my name** ...* It was a

surprise to Joseph what happened that day, but not to Jacob. The blessings of the firstborn should have passed to Reuben, but because of his relationship with his father's concubine Bilhah, that blessing was lost (Genesis 49:3-4); instead Joseph through his two boys gained that place in which the blessing was shared between the two young men. Genesis 27 recorded a generation earlier where Jacob received the blessing due to his elder brother Esau. As a result of this adoption Ephraim and Manasseh would play their part as two tribes of Israel in their own right in the future history of the nation. In worldly terms Esau and his descendants for generations looked more prosperous and blessed in worldly terms, but where are they today? We must force ourselves to look beyond the present time when we seek to judge God's possible blessings on people or the opposite. It is often only as we look back that the hand of God is seen in history. At the time what to us might seem inevitable may have been viewed by the participants as far from certain. However, by faith they trusted God to keep His promises and bring them through these times. It will be no different for our generation as well. (iii) The blessing of numerous descendants ... *and may they increase greatly on the earth.*' When the number of descendants are added up, for example in Numbers chapter two, at the time the nation of Israel left Egypt under Moses, the combined totals for these two tribes would be higher than any other individual tribe. In a culture and religious context in which physical blessings such as the number of descendants one has, were seen as signs of God's blessing it was evident that this had come true in Joseph's family. Under the New Covenant there is no longer evidence that these material blessings are automatically given to God's blessed children. Under the life and teaching of Jesus, for example, in the Sermon on the Mount a different emphasis is promoted as we seek first His kingdom and our needs will be met.

(b) The Sovereign Blessing of God (Genesis 48:17-20)¹⁷ *When Joseph saw his father placing his right hand on Ephraim's head he was displeased; so he took hold of his father's hand to move it from Ephraim's head to Manasseh's head.* ¹⁸ *Joseph said to him, 'No, my father, this one is the firstborn; put your right hand on his head.'* ¹⁹ *But his father refused and said, 'I know, my son, I know. He too will become a people, and he too will become great. Nevertheless, his younger brother will be greater than he, and his descendants will become a group of nations.'* ²⁰ *He blessed them that day and said, 'In your name will Israel pronounce this blessing: "May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh."'* So he put Ephraim ahead of Manasseh. God is sovereign in his blessings. In that context it was assumed the older son will get greater blessings yet even in the Old Testament, it is easy to think of Jacob, Ephraim, Moses, Gideon, David and probably many more other younger children in the Old Testament era who received particular blessings. It is probably true of Jabez, the obscure figure described in I Chronicles 4:9-10. In the New Covenant era, Jeremiah 31:31-34 emphasises a personal relationship with God and Ezekiel 18, our personal accountability before God for our actions.

(c) The Blessing of God's Presence (Genesis 48:21-22) ² *Then Israel said to Joseph, 'I am about to die, but God will be with you and take you back to the land of your fathers.* ²² *And to you I give one more ridge of land than to your brothers, the ridge I took from the Amorites with my sword and my bow.'* It was a promise he had experienced at the key early moment of his life when he left Canaan (Genesis 28:15); and when God called him to return to the Promised Land (Genesis 31:3); and now in the face of death he had no doubts to its veracity also. May this truth be our experience as well, a people to whom Jesus in Matthew 28:20 assured His first disciples and us, alongside to our call to Christian discipleship, *And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.'* Amen