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February 18th: Genesis 48 & Matthew 6:19-34

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Jacob blesses Ephraim and Manasseh. Money and worry.

Some passages referenced:

Hebrews 11:21 (Jacob's faith in blessing the sons of Joseph); 1 Chronicles 5:1 (Reuben, Joseph, and Judah and the firstborn portion); Joshua 24:32 (Joseph's portion in the land); Genesis 33:18-20 (Jacob's plot near Shechem)

Matthew 20:15 ('good eye' and generosity)

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Genesis chapter 48. After this Joseph was told, Behold your father is ill. So he took with him his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim.

And it was told to Jacob, Your son Joseph has come to you. Then Israel summoned his strength and sat up in bed. And Jacob said to Joseph, God Almighty appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan, and blessed me, and said to me, Behold, I will make you

fruitful and multiply you, and I will make of you a company of peoples, and will give you this land to your offspring 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. And the children that you fathered after them shall be yours.

They shall be called by the name of their brothers in their inheritance. As for me, when I came from Paddan, to my sorrow, Rachel died in the land of Canaan on the way, when there was still some distance to go to Ephrath. And I buried her there on the way to Ephrath, that is Bethlehem.

When Israel saw Joseph's sons, he said, Who are these? Joseph said to his father, These are my sons whom God has given me here. And he said, Bring them to me, please, that I may bless them. Now the eyes of Israel were dim with age, so that he could not see.

So Joseph brought them near him, and he kissed them and embraced them. And Israel said to Joseph, I never expected to see your face, and behold, God has let me see your offspring also. Then Joseph removed them from his knees, and he bowed himself with his face to the earth.

And Joseph took them both, Ephraim in his right hand towards Israel's left hand, and Manasseh in his left hand towards Israel's right hand. And he brought them near him. And Israel stretched out his right hand and laid it on the head of Ephraim, who was the younger, and his left hand on the head of Manasseh, crossing his hands, for Manasseh was the firstborn.

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

When Joseph saw that his father laid his right hand on the head of Ephraim, it displeased him. And he took his father's hand to remove it from Ephraim's head to Manasseh's head. And Joseph said to his father, Not this way, my father, since this one is the firstborn.

Put your right hand on his head. But his father refused and said, I know, my son, I know. He also shall become a people, and he also shall be great.

Nevertheless, his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his offspring shall become a multitude of nations. So he blessed them that day, saying, By you Israel will pronounce blessings, saying, God make you as Ephraim and as 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 will bring you again to the land of your fathers. Moreover, I have given to you rather than to your brothers one mountain slope that I took from the hand of the Amorites with my sword and with my bow. Genesis 48 continues the extended coda of the book of Genesis.

It's important to read this against the backdrop of the rest of the book. Half of the book of Genesis is given to the story of Jacob and his sons. And here we're coming to the end of that story and the summing up of its themes.

And there is a retrospective flavor to this chapter that I think is particularly important to reflect upon. The story of the blessings of the sons of Joseph is singled out as a paramount example of Jacob's faith in Hebrews chapter 11, verse 21. You can think of all the different things that happened to Jacob in his life, and yet it's this particular event that stands out to the author of the book of Hebrews.

In verse 21 we read, By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff. This chapter concerns a pivot point in the story. Jacob is no longer going to be the patriarch.

He's about to die and Joseph is about to take his place as the leader of the brothers. And then he's looking towards those who will succeed, the sons of Joseph, Ephraim and Manasseh. And this sheds light on the rest of the story because Jacob recounts his own life experience in his blessing of Ephraim and Manasseh and his selection of them as those who would particularly represent him.

He recalls the events of chapter 29, the meeting with God at Bethel. And there's a chain of blessing, a passing on from generation to generation. We can see this in the story of Isaac where he's blessed for the sake of Abraham.

We can see it in the story of Jacob where he is blessed by the fear of Isaac. So there's a chain from one generation to another. And as he blesses the sons of Joseph, Jacob is looking back upon his own life and the way that God has led him.

He takes the sons of Joseph and declares that they will be like Reuben and Simeon to him. They will be adopted, as it were, as his sons, not just his grandsons, but as those who will represent him more directly. When we think about the tribes of Israel, Ephraim and Manasseh are counted among the tribes, even though they're the grandsons of Jacob rather than his sons.

Why is this? It's because Joseph receives the firstborn portion. And as the firstborn portion, he receives a double portion. And that double portion is that each of his sons receives a full portion.

This is described in 1 Chronicles 5. The sons of Reuben the firstborn of Israel, for he was the firstborn, but because he defiled his father's couch, his birthright was given to the

sons of Joseph, the son of Israel, so that he could not be enrolled as the oldest son. This is why we do not have a tribe of Joseph, except on rare occasions. We have a tribe of Ephraim and Manasseh, and those tribes stand for Joseph.

They are Joseph's tribes. In preparing to bless the sons of Joseph, Jacob recounts the story of his life and the way that God has led him to that point. He recalls his return to the land and Rachel's dying on the way before reaching Ephrath or Bethlehem.

Now there's a common theme between Rachel's story and Jacob's story. He's going to die before reaching the promised land. He has asked Joseph to promise that he will bury him within the promised land, but he's going to die outside of the land.

He's going to wait until he's going to be brought into the land. And in the same way as Rachel, he's going to die on the way. And the experience of Joseph and his brothers will be the same.

They're going to die on the way. They're going to have to wait to be brought into the promised land. His eyes are dimmed.

He uses expressions like, who are these? And there seems to be some sort of repetition of themes of the blessing scene in Genesis chapter 27. It's that episode that hangs over the whole story of Jacob to this point, the switching around of the two sons. But yet here there seems to be a reaffirmation of that in some ways.

He switches the older and the younger. Something similar happened in chapter 38 as the two sons of Judah, Perez and Zerah switched order as they came out of the womb, reminding us of Esau and Jacob and reaffirming the switch of the two. We also see here that grandsons are being named as sons in the same way as Perez and Zerah were named as sons.

Joseph is displeased by the switching of the order of his two sons. He thinks that they should be blessed in the order of their birth. But Jacob insists this is the way that it must be done.

He blesses Joseph through Ephraim and Manasseh. As I noted earlier, this is how Joseph receives the double portion. There's a threefold character to Jacob's blessing.

The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked. The God who has been my shepherd all my life long to this day. The angel who has redeemed me from all evil.

So on the one hand God is the one whom he serves, depends upon, fears, is oriented towards, prays to and relates to as father and as the God of his fathers. And then there's God who is the one who provides throughout his way, who directs his path, who gives life and strength and all that he needs. And then finally God is associated with the angel, the one who redeems in times of need and distress, the one who is the kinsman redeemer in

many respects, the one who sticks closer than a brother and this is important within Jacob's life.

He says in them let my name be carried on. His name being Israel. Later on when the kingdom is divided it's through Ephraim and Manasseh that the name of Israel is continued.

And then there's also this promise that people were blessed through them. This draws our mind back to the promise made to Abraham when he's first called. That he would be a blessing and that through him all the nations of the earth would be blessed.

What did the author of Hebrews see here then that made this passage stand out as such a singular example of the faith of Jacob? Perhaps it is because here Jacob affirms all that God has been doing in his life. He looks back on his life and he sees God's hand throughout it all. He's able to see even in the struggles and the difficulties and the other things that he experienced as obstacles at the time that God's hand was present.

He recounts God's dealing with him in the events of Bethel, God's preservation of him from all the things that assaulted him and the way that the angel was with him in that. He believes also that there is a legacy to be passed on and he passes on a blessing that he himself has received. He reaches that point in his race where the baton is to be handed on to the next generation.

He has fought the fight, he has finished the race and he has kept the faith and he's passing something on. His has been a difficult life. His life has been painful and miserable and a struggle in many respects but yet he's able to see God's hand in it, he's able to see a blessing in it and he's able to see in the next generations that this blessing will be continued and borne by others still to come.

As we have already noted at the end of the previous chapter he insists that he will be buried in the land and he says that again here. It's important for him that his destiny is there. He is dwelling in Egypt as a sojourner.

His story has not yet fully ended. He has to be returned to the land and the blessing that he gives also speaks to God's consistency, that God is one who does not change. The same God who has been with him will be with the sons of Joseph.

He wrestled with the angel but yet recognised that the angel is the one who redeemed him from all evil. He also recognises in the angel his true father, his true brother, the true one that has been faithful to him even as the males in his family were struggling against him or causing him difficulty. Whether they were his sons, whether they were his father, whether it was his uncle or whether it was his brother.

All these men were against him but yet the angel as his kinsman redeemer was with him throughout and was protecting him and guiding him. He reaffirms also the promises

given to Abraham and passes them on to some people who will succeed him. What is that land that he refers to at the end here? He wants Joseph to bury him in the land but also wants Joseph to know that he is a sojourner too.

So he gives Joseph a portion of his land within the land of Canaan. That portion seems to play upon the word for Shechem perhaps. But where is this land? It's land that he took with his sword and his bow from the Amorites but there's no mention of this in the actual text previously.

I think it's most likely part of the land that he purchased near Shechem and so he fought for the land and he also purchased it most likely. In Joshua chapter 24 verse 32 we read, So the way that this land is described there would seem to be some common features between it and the land that's given to Joseph. A question to consider.

Jacob is presented to us as an example of faith in Hebrews chapter 11 specifically with reference to this event. What are some of the things that we can learn from the example of Jacob when it comes to speaking about our own life stories and God's involvement in them? Matthew 6 verses 19 to 34. Matthew 6 verses 19 to 34.

How great is the darkness? Look at the birds of the air. They neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns and yet your heavenly father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow.

They neither toil nor spin. Yet I tell you even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious saying, what shall we eat or what shall we drink or what shall we wear? For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly father knows that you need them all.

But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.

At the end of Matthew chapter 6 Jesus continues his teaching about what it looks like to live in a way that fulfills righteousness. Jesus' teaching here is similar to that of Solomon. What we see in Solomon is wisdom unpacking the logic of the law, seeing the deeper ways in which the principles of the law can be expressed and lived out.

He's recognising shrewd ways that we can conform ourselves to it. Once again Jesus recognises that motives don't float free, but they can be moved in different ways by material situations and conditions. And there's a problem that we face.

The problem is all the things that we invest in on this earth are things that can fade,

things that can fail, things that can be lost and that can be corroded or rusted or tarnished. And this is similar to what we see in the book of Ecclesiastes, as Solomon reflects upon the fact that even if this person builds up this great wealth through wisdom, they may end up leaving it to someone who's a fool and will swander it. Or bad luck can hit them, or they may find that all their wisdom comes to naught in some other way.

The alternative then is to invest your resources in something that will last, something that will endure, and those are spiritual treasures. The other thing that he notices here, that he highlights in his teaching, is that the heart will tend to follow your resources. Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

And there's a logic to that statement that isn't merely condemning the building up of treasures on earth, it's also calling us to invest our resources in things that will last in the things of heaven. The point that Jesus is making is, do you want your heart to be set upon the things of heaven? Well, invest your resources, invest your money in the things of heaven. This is similar to some of the things that Jesus has been teaching earlier in this chapter.

Do you want to care about what God thinks over what your neighbour thinks and what the crowd thinks? Well then make sure to perform your prayer in a secret place where only God can see, and not in front of the audience of your neighbour. You'll perform to whatever audience you have, and so perform to an audience that is of God alone, and then you'll find that that is the audience that you set your heart upon conforming to and pleasing. Put your money where you want your heart to be, and where it is not vulnerable to loss, and where it won't place your heart in the same jeopardy of loss.

Jesus has already used the imagery of the lamp to describe his disciples, and now he uses it to describe the eye. We can speak about things like the apple of our eyes, the thing that we are focused upon, or cherish above all else. The eye orients the body, it turns the head, which moves the entire body in turn.

If your eye is set upon the light, then your entire body will be affected by that. However, if your eye is set upon that which is evil, it will be very different. In Matthew there seems to be a particular meaning that has a bit more of an idiomatic flavour, and it's concerned particularly with generosity.

In Matthew 20, verse 15, we encounter this expression again, where the master says to the labourers in the vineyard, Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity? Or more literally, is your eye bad because I am good? The contrast between the good and the bad eye might be the contrast between a generous person, who looks out and sees people to whom to give, and the envious person, who turns green when they see anything that they want that the other possesses. Now, that is a way in which we deal with the sins connected with money. Do

we have a good eye? Do we have an eye that's fixated upon helping other people? Or are we people that are focused on what we can gain for ourselves and what we envy of our neighbours? Jesus continues to teach about the dangers of money.

Mammon, or money, can become a master. Our powers place us under their power very easily without us realising what's going on. Our liberties can take liberties with us.

Our technologies can render us subject to them. We think that the economy makes us rich, but we can often find ourselves enslaved to its continual growth. It preoccupies our attention.

We become fixated upon it. We can think about similar things with new technologies, which promise to make us free and give us all these new powers, and yet we find ourselves enslaved to our devices. We're not actually freed by them.

They take us away from things that are good. And so, in the same way, money can become a master over us if we're not careful. There is a danger of focusing upon ideas and motivations and not being sufficiently attentive to things.

Money itself, not just our motives concerning money, but money itself is a dangerous trap, and we need to be very wary of how we relate to it. Treated shrewdly, it can be good. Treated foolishly, it can entangle us in all sorts of evil and bondage.

Like Solomon, Jesus draws attention to the creatures and God's concern with and provision for them. Once again, the issue is our attitude to material possessions and provisions. We are to adopt a posture of dependency upon God for our daily needs.

Worry is far more likely to diminish our life than to extend or fill it. There is relief to be found in a reminder of the limits of our power. This isn't a denial of the value of prudence and provision for ourselves, but it's a spiritual posture to be adopted, with anxiety being the alternative.

And there's a connection with the prayer for daily bread here, the contrast between worry and faith. Jesus will return to some of these themes in the parable of the sower, where the concerns of this age and the worries of this age can choke their seed, the deceit of wealth. All of these things are obstacles for our pursuit of the kingdom.

What is our priority? It should be the seeking of the kingdom and God's righteousness. Everything else must be secondary. The kingdom alone is where we will ultimately find security.

A question to consider. Where in this section is Jesus picking up themes from the book of Ecclesiastes? Look back at the book of Ecclesiastes and see some of the parallels between its teaching and Jesus' teaching here.