

GENESIS—WEEK 38

THE EYES CLOSE



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Cover Picture is Jacob Blessing the Children of Joseph by Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn (1606–1769) on display at Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Kassel.

Jacob dies in the presence of Joseph, just as God promised. Joseph and his brothers bury Jacob in the cave in Machpelah. Then Joseph dies and is embalmed for future burial in the Promised Land.

But there are hints that this will not be easy.

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Thank you.

Genesis 49:22–50:26 — *The Eyes Close*
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1 Genesis 49:22–27 (ESV)

“Joseph is a fruitful bough, a fruitful bough by a spring; his branches run over the wall. The archers bitterly attacked him, shot at him, and harassed him severely, yet his bow remained unmoved; his arms were made agile by the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob (from there is the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel), by the God of your father who will help you, by the Almighty who will bless you with blessings of heaven above, blessings of the deep that crouches beneath, blessings of the breasts and of the womb. The blessings of your father are mighty beyond the blessings of my parents, up to the bounties of the everlasting hills. May they be on the head of Joseph, and on the brow of him who was set apart from his brothers.

“Benjamin is a ravenous wolf, in the morning devouring the prey and at evening dividing the spoil.”

Joseph is now two tribes instead of just one (making him more fruitful). Joseph has been—and will be—mightily blessed by God.

But notice the undercurrent of Jacob’s legendary love for Rachel. Jacob didn’t just double Joseph’s share when he claimed Manasseh and Ephraim as his own. He also compensated for Rachel’s relative barrenness. She now has three sons.

The tribe of Benjamin will, indeed, turn out to be fierce adversaries (see 1 Chron. 8:40 & 12:2 and Judges 20:12-48). But that’s not Jacob’s point here. Rachel was Benjamin’s first prey, when she died giving birth to him. Jacob lost the love of his life that day, and Benjamin replaced her.

Morning is often a reference to the beginning of life. The imagery here is intentional.

Once again, we see that Jacob didn’t have the power to make his predictions come true, even when they’re deathbed blessings. Jacob wanted Rachel to be the mother of his children. That desire was crushed time and again. Jacob was massively blessed, but not in the way he wanted. Judah will be his signature tribe.

Clearly, Jacob developed a close relationship with God. He surely prayed many times for Rachel to get pregnant. Yet, God denies this particular heart’s desire.

In Genesis 30:22–24, when Rachel finally does have a son, scripture describes this as God hearing Rachel’s prayers, not Jacob’s. Then, a short time after God changes his name to Israel, and says, *“A nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall come from your own body,”* Rachel dies.

At that point, Jacob didn’t know that Joseph was alive; he thought that Benjamin was all that was left of the love of his life. He had received many encouraging signs from God, but one of his most fervent prayers was, yet again, slapped back hard. God didn’t just say no that time; He finalized it.

Take heart. If monstrously discouraging setbacks can happen to Jacob, they can happen to you.

2 Genesis 49:28–50:3 (ESV)

All these are the twelve tribes of Israel. This is what their father said to them as he blessed them, blessing each with the blessing suitable to him. Then he commanded them and said to them, “I am to be gathered to my people; bury me with my fathers in the cave that is in the field of Ephron the Hittite, in the cave that is in the field at Machpelah, to the east of Mamre, in the land of Canaan, which Abraham bought with the field from Ephron the Hittite to possess as a burying place. There they buried Abraham and Sarah his wife. There they buried Isaac and Rebekah his wife, and there I buried Leah—the field and the cave that is in it were bought from the Hittites.” When Jacob finished commanding his sons, he drew up his feet into the bed and breathed his last and was gathered to his people.

Then Joseph fell on his father's face and wept over him and kissed him. And Joseph commanded his servants the physicians to embalm his father. So the physicians embalmed Israel. Forty days were required for it, for that is how many are required for embalming. And the Egyptians wept for him seventy days.

Jacob knows they will be returning to Canaan. God told him so back in Chapter 46.

Then he said, “I am God, the God of your father. Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for there I will make you into a great nation. I myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you up again, and Joseph's hand shall close your eyes.” — Genesis 46:3–4 (ESV)

And that's just reaffirming God's original promise made to him at Bethel.

“Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” — Genesis 28:15 (ESV)

So, Jacob knows he will rest with his fathers. Despite his love for Rachel, Jacob does not choose to be buried with her. He will be buried in the cave at Machpelah.

Jacob has learned his lesson well. His will is now totally aligned with God's covenant.

Just think how expensive Jacob's “school of hard knocks” education was. It's been a long road—half the book of Genesis. (Esau sold his birthright to Jacob in Chapter 25.) Many people have suffered—Jacob more than anyone—but in the end, he gets it.

Character development is a constant theme in the Old Testament. All these terrible things happen, but they're always about someone's development. Growing saints seems to take priority over everything else.

Of course, this goes nuclear in the New Testament—with God Himself paying an enormous price for our growth—but for now, let's consider how God's education is worth the tuition. If our growth is one of the principal things that matters, then any pain and suffering is worth it.

Can you see that in your own life?

3 Genesis 50:4–10 (ESV)

And when the days of weeping for him were past, Joseph spoke to the household of Pharaoh, saying, “If now I have found favor in your eyes, please speak in the ears of Pharaoh, saying, ‘My father made me swear, saying, “I am about to die: in my tomb that I hewed out for myself in the land of Canaan, there shall you bury me.” Now therefore, let me please go up and bury my father. Then I will return.’” And Pharaoh answered, “Go up, and bury your father, as he made you swear.” So Joseph went up to bury his father. With him went up all the servants of Pharaoh, the elders of his household, and all the elders of the land of Egypt, as well as all the household of Joseph, his brothers, and his father's household. Only their children, their flocks, and their herds were left in the land of Goshen. And there went up with him both chariots and horsemen. It was a very great company. When they came to the threshing floor of Atad, which is beyond the Jordan, they lamented there with a very great and grievous lamentation, and he made a mourning for his father seven days.

Why is Joseph speaking to *the household of Pharaoh*? Shouldn't he be speaking directly with Pharaoh himself?

Well, it's unlikely that the Pharaoh who promoted Joseph to power is still alive. That Pharaoh dreamed of seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine. Two years into the famine, Jacob moved to Egypt and then lived another 17 years. So, this is 26 years after the dream—plus the “two whole years” while the cupbearer forgot about Joseph's dream interpretation skills. The same Pharaoh ruled then too.

Each Pharaoh rules for a generation—however long he (the firstborn son) outlives his father. In ancient Egypt, that would normally be less than 28 years. And even if the Pharaoh who promoted Joseph ruled for more than 28 years, his imprisoning the cupbearer didn't necessarily occur at the beginning of his reign. He has to live 28 years *after that* to still be around. That's unlikely.

So, the current Pharaoh probably was a kid growing in the royal household while Joseph was running things. He knows Joseph and respects him, but the spiritual connection isn't there. Things are still pretty good; he lets them go home to bury Israel and sends a nice entourage with them.

But the relationship is starting to fade.

As we'll soon see in Exodus, Jacob's descendants are destined to be brutally abused by the people who once respected, even treasured, them. That's how it is in a world of sin.

Keeping promises isn't a lost art; it never was an art. People keep promises when it's in their interest to. That's the truth behind Sam Goldwyn's quip, “A verbal contract isn't worth the paper it's written on.”

We don't know if Pharaoh made a written law protecting Jacob's family. If so, their freedom would have been harder to take. Still, a Pharaoh has absolute power; he can rewrite any law he doesn't like.

Israel's enslavement was sure to happen eventually.

4 Genesis 50:11–15 (ESV)

When the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, saw the mourning on the threshing floor of Atad, they said, “This is a grievous mourning by the Egyptians.” Therefore the place was named Abel-mizraim; it is beyond the Jordan. Thus his sons did for him as he had commanded them, for his sons carried him to the land of Canaan and buried him in the cave of the field at Machpelah, to the east of Mamre, which Abraham bought with the field from Ephron the Hittite to possess as a burying place. After he had buried his father, Joseph returned to Egypt with his brothers and all who had gone up with him to bury his father.

When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, “It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him.”

All this and Joseph’s brothers still don’t get it. What could possibly make them say, “*It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him*”?

The standard Christian psychology answer is that they don’t understand forgiveness and grace. That’s true, but their concern isn’t as silly as you might think.

Joseph’s initial treatment of his brothers when they visited Egypt was almost sadistic. Because he lost control and revealed himself, we’ll never know how he planned for his scheme to end. Where was he going with that anyway? What was he trying to teach them?

We don’t know if Joseph even had a planned ending; it’s hard to imagine a good one that would fit. He seemed to be just jerking them around while he tried to think of something. If so, there’s a sinful element to what Joseph did back then.

Yes, he now says that he forgives them, but they remember his other side. It’s reasonable for Joseph’s brothers to worry about what he’s going to do next.

Forgiveness is easy to talk about—too easy. Doing it is the hard part. Is there someone you haven’t forgiven? Or someone you have forgiven but that forgiveness isn’t total? Ask God for help.

But it gets worse. Forgiveness can be as hard to accept as it is to give. Even though we are forgiven, many of us are like Joseph’s brothers, struggling to accept it. We don’t understand forgiveness and grace either. This makes us uptight and unable to let the gospel run free in our hearts.

This is a difficult lesson. Forgiveness can be just words. People usually give incomplete forgiveness, and we tend to subconsciously assume that forgiveness received isn’t really complete.

But God’s forgiveness isn’t like that. It takes a lifetime to learn this.

Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting! — Psalm 139:23–24 (ESV)

5 Genesis 50:15–21 (ESV)

When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him." So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this command before he died: 'Say to Joseph, "Please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you."' And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke to him. His brothers also came and fell down before him and said, "Behold, we are your servants." But Joseph said to them, "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones." Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.

At last, Joseph's brothers confess their sin in full and show true repentance. They've come a long way. Joseph's response is essentially a repeat of what he said before.

And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. — Genesis 45:5 (ESV)

But there's one new part—the most important part— *"Do not fear, for am I in the place of God?"*

Notice that Joseph does *not* say, "Do not fear, for I forgive you." He says, *"Do not fear, for am I in the place of God?"* He has one last lesson up his sleeve.

Joseph is saying that he doesn't have the power. The same God who used their evil acts for good is still in control. Despite his apparently high position, Joseph knows he's not the real LORD.

The LORD is God. It's the simplest lesson in the world—and the most important.

Sometimes we get so busy trying to pursue the LORD's agenda that we don't take time to just *be* with Him.

So, in your prayers, instead of asking God to do something, consider spending time just treasuring your relationship with Him. Let the Holy Spirit do the talking. Be silent and give praise and thanks in worship.

What a wonder it is that the God of the universe would want to have a personal relationship with us. What a surprise that Jesus would be willing to go to the cross for that relationship.

We're not only small, we're in rebellion against Him. He must have something really interesting up His sleeve to want to have anything to do with us.

His awesomeness and His love are beyond our imagination.

So is His creation.

<https://apod.nasa.gov/apod/ap110201.html>

6 Genesis 50:22–26 (ESV)

So Joseph remained in Egypt, he and his father's house. Joseph lived 110 years. And Joseph saw Ephraim's children of the third generation. The children also of Machir the son of Manasseh were counted as Joseph's own. And Joseph said to his brothers, "I am about to die, but God will visit you and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob." Then Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, "God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones from here." So Joseph died, being 110 years old. They embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt.

Joseph uses a word here that doesn't sound like much in English but is actually hugely significant: "visit." Any time the Old Testament speaks of God "visiting" his people, pay attention; God does not stop by casually.

The only other time "visit" appears in Genesis, God does a lot more than just say, "Hi."

The LORD visited Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did to Sarah as he had promised. And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him. — Genesis 21:1–2 (ESV)

As Ellen Brody said in *Jaws: The Revenge*, "This time, it's personal." A visit from God is much more than just an answered prayer. God is there—there like He is in the Holy of Holies, there like He is in Christ.

Joseph is making an astonishing prophesy; the return to the Promised Land will involve God's personal presence. That's exciting, but there's an implication here that should make their blood run cold.

The return to the Promised Land will *need* God's personal presence.

Christ was the ultimate visit, and the Holy Spirit is the ultimate houseguest.

Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body. — 1 Corinthians 6:19–20 (ESV)

But the same chilling implication applies. We are blessed by God's personal presence, but it's because we *need* His presence. Our sinful nature is an unending disaster. We are lost, save for God's miraculous intervention.

Spend some time thinking about your role as the temple of the Holy Spirit. We're not good at this. (I know I'm not.)

But the solution is not to try harder; the solution is to get help. Commit yourself to the task and ask God to nudge you forward toward sanctification.

God honors this kind of prayer.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. What is the most intense prayer you've ever prayed?
2. What lessons have you felt God's forcing hand in?
3. What promises have you seen broken?
4. What does incomplete forgiveness look like? Give an example.
5. What aspect of your relationship with God most excites you?
6. What does it mean that we're "the temple of the Holy Spirit"?