

SOVEREIGN GRACE CHOOSES AND BLESSES

Genesis 48: 8-22

Please review this week's catechism question.

Did you meet anyone new at Sunday worship?

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever made a commitment and/or a promise to someone or some organization with every intention of keeping your commitment but, in the end, you broke your commitment/promise? Why did you not keep your word? How does it feel to not fulfill your promise?

Every human being has at one time or another failed to keep a promise or to honor a commitment. No one has always kept his or her word. When we become Christians we promise to follow Jesus until the day we die. We often in our music sing about our intention to follow Jesus forever. Consider this line from the song, "I could sing of your love forever": "For I will always sing of when your love came down." The question we must each face is this: Given my fickle nature, how do I know that I will sing of God's love forever? What confidence can I have that I will persevere in my faith to the end of my life and so inherit eternal life (Matt. 24:13)?

In this passage Israel, while he is dying, gives his blessing to Joseph's two sons. His blessing is full of confidence and certainty over the future of these two boys. How can he be so sure that Ephraim will be greater than Manasseh and that his descendants will leave Egypt and go to Canaan? How can he be so certain?

Israel is so certain for the same reason we can have confidence in our own persevering in faith: God is sovereign over human hearts. God's grace overcomes all resistance to the purpose and plan of God. When God determines to do something, nothing and no one can resist his will. This story in Genesis 48 tells us why Israel and why we can be sure that our future will be one of salvation and not destruction. We will discover four reasons why we can be confident that we will sing of God's love forever.

STUDY

In verses 1-8 Israel has been addressing Joseph. Beginning in v. 8 he turns his attention to his two grandsons. In response to Jacob's question to who was with them in the tent Joseph replies, "These are the two sons God gave me here." Review Genesis 41: 41-57. What is Joseph recalling by describing these two young men as the sons God gave him in Egypt?

Joseph is recounting the great miracle that God did. When all seemed hopeless, in less than a day Joseph went from being an imprisoned slave to become the second most powerful man in Egypt by interpreting Pharaoh's dreams. He went from living in the filth of a prison to the luxurious living of the noble class in the most powerful nation on earth. He went from feeding prisoners to ruling over an entire nation in order to feed the world. He married into the nobility of Egypt by marrying the daughter of the priest of On. She bore him Manasseh and Ephraim. Therefore, when Joseph tells his father, "these are the two sons God gave him," he is not simply saying what we say, that every child is a gift from God. He is remembering the ways in which God overcame every obstacle and turned the most hopeless of situations into the most glorious situation.

Israel calls the boys close to him. He hugs them and kisses them. What emotion is Israel expressing in v. 11? What is he recalling by saying this to Joseph?

He is expressing his awe of and gratitude to God. Against all hope he has received Joseph back and seen his grandsons grow into young men (around 19-22 years old). Israel calls to mind the twenty-two years of mourning and despair that he experienced from the day his eleven murderous sons showed him Joseph's torn and bloody coat. He lived for 22 years believing Joseph to be dead, filled with bitter grief. What miracles God has wrought by bringing Joseph back from the dead as it were as the Savior of Israel and the ruler of the nations.

When we consider the ascendancy of Joseph to be the vice-regent in Egypt and the reunion of Joseph with his father and brothers, what do we learn about God?

Joseph's ascendancy to vice-regent of Egypt and his restoration to his father and his brothers cannot be explained in any other way than by saying that God rules over human hearts. Because he is sovereign he is able to rescue the helpless. Joseph himself said in 45:7-8, "God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God." God is so great that he is able to accomplish his good and perfect will through the evil wills of evil men. No one can successfully resist God if God is determined to save or to destroy. "The righteous cry out and the Lord hears them, he delivers them from all their troubles." Because God is sovereign we are never in a hopeless situation. No matter how black life may appear, no matter how much of a corner we may feel we've been backed into, there is always a way out because "nothing is impossible for God." We are not at the mercy of Satan or evil people.

We can have confidence that we will sing of God's love forever because God delivers the helpless

Compare Genesis 48: 8-16 with 27:14-29. What are some of the similarities between these two passages?

In Genesis 27 we have the record of how Jacob, the second born son of Isaac, came to possess the promise of God to become a great nation, a blessing that "should" have gone to Esau the firstborn son. Like Jacob in this passage, Isaac, his father was old and virtually blind. The scene in Genesis 27 opens with Isaac, the blind father, asking about the identity of Jacob just as this begins with Jacob asking about the identity of Joseph's sons. Isaac commands Jacob to come near so he can bless him, just as Jacob commands Joseph to bring his sons near to bless them. Isaac embraces and kisses Jacob, just as Jacob embraces and kisses the sons of Joseph. Isaac blesses the younger son, Jacob with the blessing that by human understanding ought to have gone to the firstborn son, Esau. The same happens here, only twice. Reuben is Israel's firstborn son and he ought to be the one receiving this blessing. However, as 1 Chronicles 5:1-2 tell us the rights of the firstborn were taken from Reuben because he had sexual relations with his stepmother, Bilhah and they are here given to Joseph. Then the rights of the firstborn are transferred from Joseph to his two sons so that God's blessing is doubled in the case of Joseph. In addition, within the two

sons, the younger receives the blessing of the firstborn when Israel crosses his hands and puts his right hand upon the head of Ephraim instead of upon Manasseh.

Why does Moses, the author of Genesis, make these connections between these two "blessing" scenes?

There are several points but one of them is to remind us of the fact that this man who is now passing on the promise of God is not a good man. Jacob did not come to this place because of some inherent righteousness or goodness. The first time he mentions God is when he lies to his father Isaac. There is no way you can argue that the reason Israel is the father of the 13 tribes of the nation Israel and recipient of God's promises is because he was such a godly man. This has been a major theme of the entire book of Genesis.

According to vv. 15-16, how is it that this ungodly, conniving, cowardly, lust filled man is passing on the blessing of God?

God has been his shepherd all of his life. God has delivered him from all evil (not harm as the NIV says). If you were to ask Jacob how it is that he got here, what would he say? Would he talk about his will power and his faith? I don't think so. He would say what everyone who is a true Christian would say. I am here by the grace of God. God overcame my unbelief. God convinced me of my need of a Savior. God convinced me that to have him and nothing else is to possess everything. God set his affection upon me. I did not love him first but he loved me and my love is the fruit of his love. God did not bless Jacob because he was faithful. God blessed Jacob and he became faithful.

If you are a Christian reflect on the ways God overcame your resistance and enabled you to believe the gospel.

How ought we to respond to God's blessing us with salvation in spite of who we are?

We ought to be humble, grateful and confident people as we have been chosen by God and rescued according to his pleasure and will, contrary to what we deserve.

We can have confidence that we will sing of God's love forever because God blesses the unworthy.

Verses 12-20 is the "official" adoption ceremony of the two grandsons as sons of Israel. Why does it begin with Joseph bowing before Israel with his face to the ground? What does this tell us about Israel and Joseph and their relationship?

Joseph, the prince of Egypt, prostrating himself before this wizened old shepherd is an amazing sight. While he is the second most powerful man on planet earth, yet he recognizes in his father the authority of God. He knows that what Israel says, God says. He recognizes that the conferring of sonship upon his two sons is an enormous privilege. To be counted among the sons of Israel, the chosen people, is a greater honor than being the ruler of the most powerful nation on earth.

Describe, in your own words the scene in vv. 13-14. Why is Joseph so careful about which son is on which side? What does Israel do that is shocking?

He wants Manasseh to receive the blessing as the firstborn because he is his firstborn son. Israel crosses his hands so that his right hand rests on the head of kneeling Ephraim and his left hand is on the head of kneeling Manasseh. Thus he treats Ephraim as the firstborn.

How does Joseph feel about this?

This makes Joseph angry. "He was displeased" does not capture the intensity of the anger that Joseph felt at Israel's violating human custom. It is the same emotion Abraham felt when Sarah demanded that he get rid of Ishmael his oldest son. It is the same emotion God felt when Er, Judah's son, refused to father a child for his dead brother with Tamar. God killed Er because of his disobedience. Therefore, he grabs his father's hands and seeks to correct this awful mistake. Joseph commands his father to put his right hand on the head of Manasseh because he is the firstborn and deserves to receive the firstborns blessing. Joseph's entire attitude is that this is what he ought to have; it is his right to receive the blessing of the firstborn.

Compare Joseph in v. 12 with Joseph in v. 17-18. What has happened to Joseph in these few moments? Why does he get so angry? Does he remind you of anyone?

Joseph has gone from acknowledging that Israel has God's authority and speaks the words of God to being angry with him and rejecting what he is saying. Joseph believes that Manasseh has a right to get the blessing of the firstborn. He is acting just like us. We come to church on Sunday and affirm that we believe the word of God and then we go home and yell at our kids or fight with our siblings. We profess to believe the word of God but then we refuse to do what it says.

How does Israel respond to Joseph's complaint?

He gently informs him that while Manasseh will become a fruitful people, Ephraim, the younger son will be greater.

What is the content of Israel's blessing upon the boys in vv. 16 & 20?

He adopts them as his own: "May they be called by my name and the names of my fathers Abraham and Isaac." In other words they become full heirs of the promises of God to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He summarizes that blessing by bestowing the gift of numerous descendants on the earth. Finally, he says that in the future the people of Israel will ask the Lord to make them like Ephraim and Manasseh. God's people will ask God to do for them what he did for Ephraim and Manasseh. What God did was make them equal heirs of the promises and then fulfill those promises to them. Additionally, by placing Ephraim in front of Manasseh, contrary to expectation the prayer will be that God will act in grace, not according to works or human merit of any kind.

Why does God do such an arbitrary thing? Why did he choose Jacob over Esau and now Ephraim over Manasseh? (See Romans 9:10-11, 22-24 & Eph 1: 3-6)

There is absolutely no human reason given for the preferring of Ephraim over Manasseh. Just like there is no human reason given for the preferring of Jacob over Esau or Isaac over Ishmael or Abraham over Nahor. There are many reasons God does this that we will never know while we live on this planet. However, there is one reason of

which we can be certain. God does this to show his power, wrath and the riches of his glory, as Paul says in Romans 9. He does it for the praise of his glorious grace as Eph. 1:6 says. God is the one who determines whom he will bless and whom he will curse. Man is not the final arbiter in these matters. God is sovereignly ordaining all things for the glory of his own name and the joy of his own people. Manasseh did nothing to be born first in his family. He did not earn the right to be treated as the firstborn. Who made him the firstborn in Joseph's family? God did. Being the firstborn is a gift and the giver of gifts always has the right to give the gift to whomever he wants. God is not treating Manasseh unfairly. He is treating Ephraim graciously.

How should we respond to God's freedom to do all that he pleases?
What impact should his sovereign grace have upon us?

First, we ought to be afraid. God is in charge, not you. He has power and authority to do all that he pleases and nothing can resist his will. So we should fear him for there is no one like him. He alone is worthy of your respect. You and I ought to approach him not as arrogant and belligerent teenagers demanding our own way, demanding that we be treated fairly. We should approach him with humility and trembling, knowing that we are entirely dependent upon him, he needs nothing from us. We have no claim upon God. Everything we have is a gift, we have earned nothing and deserve nothing. We should seek his favor with fear and trembling, not arrogant demands. We do not have a right to tell God how to run his universe. The second thing this knowledge ought to create in us is enormous gratitude. You are alive and enjoying life by his decree. You are not dead and in hell, which is what you deserve but you are alive and enjoying God's many gifts by his design. If you are a Christian today, you should be full of joy, gratitude, and confidence for the sovereign king has chosen to bless you forever. He has made you alive in Christ Jesus forever. You cannot be harmed since he has chosen you.

We can have confidence that we will sing of God's love forever because God chooses without regard to human status.

How does Israel end his farewell address to Joseph and his sons in vv. 21-22?

He assures them of three things. God will be with them. God will take them back to the land of Canaan. God will give to Joseph's descendants the ridge of land near Shechem that Israel captured from the Amorites.

What does Jacob know is going to happen to his descendants (see Genesis 15: 13-14)? How will these promises help?

Israel knows that his descendants are going to live in Egypt as slaves for 400 years. These promises are meant to strengthen the faith not only of Joseph and his boys but of all the people of Israel during their long years of slavery and misery. God's sovereignty guarantees his promises in spite of the most hopeless circumstances.

If God is not sovereign over all people and all things how does that affect these promises?

What impact do the promises of a sovereign God have upon how you handle adversity and suffering?

We can have confidence that we will sing of God's love forever because God makes promises that can be trusted.