

“THE BLESSING OF EPHRAIM AND MANASSEH”

This chapter serves as the prelude to the testament of Jacob, the catalogue in chapter 49 of the specific blessings that Jacob bestowed upon his twelve sons from his deathbed. Before those blessings were pronounced, Jacob first pronounced a special blessing upon Joseph’s sons Ephraim and Manasseh. This was another part of the fulfillment of the dreams that Joseph had had many years before, those God-given dreams in which it was revealed to Joseph that he, though the second-youngest among Jacob’s twelve sons, would be exalted above all the others. That was exactly what happened as a result of the blessing that is recorded in this chapter. By adopting Ephraim and Manasseh to be his own sons, Jacob made them full heirs alongside his other sons. And this resulted in Joseph receiving a double-portion of the inheritance. Later on in Israel’s history, when the Lord brought his people into the Promised Land, the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh were each given an allotment within the land. Joseph received a double-portion of the inheritance, the portion of the firstborn. This shows us that the blessing that Jacob pronounced upon Joseph’s sons was much more than an instance of a grandfather wishing his grandsons well from his deathbed. This was the means by which the Lord continued to carry out his redemptive purposes for the nation of Israel. Jacob serves as a mediator of the covenant blessings in this passage. As we study this passage tonight, I want us to consider three important points about the blessing that Jacob bestows upon his grandchildren here: the importance of passing on the covenant blessing; the fact that the

Lord uses a mediator to pass on the covenant blessing; and the vital role of faith in passing on the covenant blessing.

First, we will consider what this passage tells us about *the importance of passing on the covenant blessing*. The chapter begins with Joseph being told that his aging father is ill. And how does Joseph respond to this news? He takes his two oldest sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, and goes to see Jacob. This in itself is very significant. Joseph was in a position of great power in Egypt. His sons probably had everything they could have asked for: the best education, good career prospects, good marital prospects. But by bringing his sons to the bedside of the dying patriarch, Joseph was demonstrating that there was something that was much more important than all of that. Though Ephraim and Manasseh had all that Egypt had to offer at their disposal, the thing that Joseph wanted most for them was that they would share in the blessings of the covenant. He wanted them to be heirs of the covenant in Israel, not heirs of the riches of Egypt. We can see this by noting what Joseph says about his sons when Jacob asks about them. He says that they are the sons whom God has given him. He sees them as a gift from God, and he wants them to be a part of the people of God.

What we see here in Joseph is something that should be present in the heart of every Christian parent: the desire for your children to be heirs of the covenant promises. We all want good things for our children. We want them to grow up to be productive and successful members of society. We want them to be well-adjusted. We want them to have happy families. These are all good things, and we should want them for our

children. But the thing that matters more than anything else is that they live under the blessing of the covenant, that they walk as faithful followers of Jesus Christ for all of their days. And in order for that to happen, we have to impress the priority of the covenant upon our children. They need to see and hear, both by the things that we do and by the things that we say, that there is nothing in life that is more important than living under the covenant blessings that our God promises us in the gospel.

We can also see the importance of passing on the covenant blessing in this passage by noting the simple fact that Jacob takes measures to ensure that he conveys the blessing to others. He knows that it is not something for him to keep to himself. It is something to be passed on to Joseph and his children, and to the other heirs of the covenant. And notice how Jacob passes it on. He tells Joseph what the Lord had said to him. He recounts the appearance of the Lord to him at Luz, or Bethel, and he relays the promises that the Lord had given him at that time. Even the name by which Jacob refers to the Lord is significant. He calls him “God Almighty,” which you can see by the ESV footnote is a translation of the Hebrew name *El Shaddai*. This name for God was used by the patriarchs on a number of occasions. It describes God as the All-powerful One, the One who so often overpowered nature in his dealings with the patriarchs to ensure that his purposes for them were brought about. So many times in Genesis we have seen the Lord bringing about his purposes in the midst of seemingly impossible circumstances. Time and time again, he proved himself to be God Almighty, the All-powerful One. This is the God who is the source of the blessing that Jacob is passing on to Joseph and his

sons. He is a God who is able to accomplish everything he promises, even when circumstances suggest otherwise.

We turn now to the second point that I want us to consider tonight: the fact that *the Lord uses a mediator to pass on the covenant blessing*. We have noted the significance of this before in our study of Genesis. The patriarchal blessing really meant something. Earlier on in his life, Jacob was willing to deceive his own father in order to obtain his blessing. And his brother was so angry about Jacob's having done so that he wanted to kill him. The patriarchal blessing was a pronouncement of God's grace. And it was an effectual pronouncement, which can be seen by the fact that Isaac was not able to retract it after it had been given. When Ephraim and Manasseh received Jacob's blessing, they really received what Jacob declared over them.

The reason why it is important for us to think about this is because it shows us how the Lord uses visible and definable structures to mediate his saving presence to his people. This is a truth that has for the most part been lost among modern day evangelicals, who tend to think of the church only as an invisible organism consisting of all of those who are truly regenerate. That is certainly true, but it is not the sum total of what the Bible has to say about the church. The church also exists as a visible institution, a divinely-appointed institution which the Lord uses to carry out his covenant purposes. We can see this in Paul's letter to the Ephesians, where he says that after Christ ascended into heaven

“he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.” [Eph. 4:11-13, KJV]

The point is that the Lord usually works through some kind of mediating structure to bestow his blessings upon his people. It is true that the Lord on occasion deals with his people directly, as he did by appearing to the patriarchs on several occasions. But the last of those appearances came when Jacob was on his way to Egypt, and it would be over four hundred years before he did so again. So as Jacob neared the end of his life, the Lord utilized the patriarchal blessing to impart the blessings of the covenant of grace to future generations.

In our day, God works through the ministry of his church to impart those same blessings to his people. In the words of John Williamson Nevin, a 19th century Reformed scholar and pastor, “Christ lives in the Church, and through the Church in its particular members.” [Hart, *John Williamson Nevin: High Church Calvinist*, 98] This is the reason why John Calvin referred to the church as the nurturing mother needed by all believers. Listen to what he says in the section in his *Institutes* where he is writing about the church:

“as it is now our purpose to discourse of the visible Church, let us learn, from her single title of Mother, how useful, nay, how necessary the knowledge of her is, since there is no other means of entering into life unless she conceive us in the womb and give us birth, unless she nourish us at her breasts, and, in short, keep us under her charge and government, until, divested of mortal flesh, we become like the angels, (Matth. 22: 30.) For our weakness does not permit us to leave the school until we have spent our whole lives as scholars. Moreover, beyond the pale of the Church no forgiveness of sins, no salvation, can be hoped for” [*Institutes*, 4.1.4]

Such things may sound surprising to us, but the same thing is conveyed in our own Westminster Confession of Faith, which says that “there is no ordinary possibility of salvation” outside of the visible church. [WCF 25.2]

Now of course, this does not mean that the church is the dispenser of salvation. That is not the case any more than Jacob was the dispenser of salvation in this passage. The blessing that Jacob pronounced upon Joseph’s sons had God as its source. Jacob was not dispensing the blessing but declaring it, and this is precisely what the church is called to do in its ministry of word and sacrament. And it is through this ministry that the Lord dispenses his gift of salvation. Joseph did not look for the covenant blessings apart from his father Jacob, nor should today’s believers look for the gifts of God’s grace outside of the church.

Another thing to point out about the blessing that Jacob pronounced upon Joseph's sons is that he purposely placed Ephraim before Manasseh. This is another example of the younger being placed over the older in Genesis. Just as Jacob was chosen over Esau, and just as Joseph was placed above his brothers, Ephraim is placed ahead of Manasseh. The Lord worked in this way in order to lay an emphasis upon the fact that "the covenant blessings are not secured by the course of nature but as sovereign gifts of God." [Kline, *Eerdmans Bible Commentary*, 112] God is free to distribute the gifts of his grace as he pleases.

This brings us to the third point I want us to consider tonight: *the vital role of faith in passing on the covenant blessing*. It is interesting that the writer of the letter to the Hebrews cites this as the representative act of faith in the life of Jacob. He writes in Hebrews 11:21, "By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff." The reason why this blessing was an act of great faith is because it shows Jacob reaching out to God's promise even in the face of his own death. Remember, part of that promise was that the people of Israel would dwell in the land of Canaan and have it as their own possession. By pronouncing this blessing upon his grandsons, Jacob was expressing his confidence that they would have something to inherit. Think about it. How could he give them something that he himself did not possess? The only reason he was able to do this was because he had already taken possession of what God had promised by faith. What was true for Jacob is also true for us. Many of God's promises to us will not be fulfilled in our lifetime. But this should

not make our faith in those promises waver. Like Jacob, we can be so certain of what God has promised us that we can already consider ourselves to be in possession of it.

The blessing that Jacob pronounced upon Ephraim and Manasseh is the same blessing that belongs to us in Christ. It is the blessing of the covenant of grace. And as you hear it, you can take comfort in knowing that the God before whom the saints of old have walked, the God who has been the shepherd of his people all their lives long, the God who has redeemed his people from evil, this God is the God who pronounces his blessing upon you and promises to bring you into his eternal kingdom.