

Abraham Lincoln warned often of the dangers of success and prosperity. He said that "nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character, give him power."

Thomas Carlyle, the 19th century Scottish philosopher, wrote, "Adversity is sometimes hard on a man;

But for one man who can handle prosperity there are a hundred that will stand adversity."

It is when we are suffering that we often seek God most earnestly, that we confess sin and repent, that we cry out to God for salvation, that we really listen to others, we seek help, we find humility, we become broken and softhearted, we gain compassion.

This is not always true... but it is often true, particularly of the people of God.

When we are successful, prosperous, important, powerful... often all of these things go by the way.

We become arrogant, unadvisable, unkind, and hard hearted... we forget or ignore God.

You see this over and over in the Bible as in everyday life.

So, I want to look at all these things through the eyes of the man, Jacob, named Israel, as he lives out the last 17 years of his life.

17 years after the first 130. 17 years of blessing.

How does he see the blessing? What does it mean to him?

How is this important for his descendants, the nation of Israel after they are rescued from slavery in Egypt?

How is this an example to us?

Really, we are going to focus on one simple lesson...

How to enjoy the blessing of God

First let us reflect upon the first 130 years of Jacob's life. This is the context for understanding the blessing he receives in Gen. 47.

Clearly Jacob was not the sort of person who deserved the promise and blessing of God.

He started out grasping, deceiving, struggling for all he got.

In fact, it was the birthright and the blessing, the very promise of God, that he stole from His own twin brother, Esau.

Thus Esau wanted to kill Jacob. **Gen. 27:41-46** But, the few days became years... decades...

Jacob fled to Haran and God met him on the way, but Jacob didn't know much about God then.

In Genesis 28, at a place Jacob names Bethel, God reminds him of the promise, but Jacob makes it into a bargain. **Gen. 28:10-22**

This is important. Jacob has made a vow... if the Lord brings him back to Canaan... "Then the Lord will be my God."

Jacob makes it to Haran and finds a wife, Rachel, after he was tricked into marrying Leah... four wives, if you count the maids.

Jacob is then mistreated by his father-in-law and learned to live by his wits. He was hard working but didn't trust anyone.

This is what his name meant... Jacob = struggling, grasping at the heel

In Haran he works, unappreciated, for his father-in-law for 20 years and God gives him a family.

And, as his family grows we discover that it is as dysfunctional as Jacob himself is.

Then Jacob tricked his father-in-law and fled. He wanted to get back to Canaan.

He was obeying God and returning to the land that God had promised to he and his fathers.

He stumbles upon an angel army camping out nearby.

But, He knows that he will have to face his brother, Esau... Jacob is terrified. Esau has 400 men with him... warriors.

He prays. But, he's never experienced answered prayer, nor does he know much about God or prayer.

So he prepares to rely on his own cowardly plan... sending his possessions and family out in front.

But, then, in the night, God attacks Jacob, wrestles him, cripples him, changes his name and blesses him.

Jacob will never be the same. He now realizes that he's more dependent upon God than ever.

His new name is "Israel" = Struggles with God. It describes him. It describes his life. It describes his descendants.

And, then, God works a miracle. Esau's heart is changed. God changed it. God saved him, though differently than he had prayed.

But, though saved by God and blessed by God, his family is still a colossal mess.

We learn in Gen. 34 of the destructiveness of sin, the strategies of the world... it is truly a seductive and wicked place.

Jacob's family has been infected by sin along with everyone else. It is a horrible scene. His sons become angry murderers.

So, Jacob returns to Canaan and remembers his vow. he makes the Lord his God and worships Him.

And, God protects Jacob from his enemies... God literally puts the fear of God in them...

Then, Jacob obeys God. He builds the altar that God commanded him to build... and he names the place.

"El-Bethel" = the God of Bethel = the God of that place where He keeps His promises and expects us to keep ours.

God has proved Himself. Jacob has paid attention. Now God has spoken. Jacob commits himself.

No turning back. You're my God. Nobody else. No other Gods. Only the God who will never fail. Jacob is learning.

Now God speaks again to Jacob.

God then speaks His name to Jacob, "El-Shaddai" = God Almighty = the God who can do anything!

God next reconfirms His promise with Jacob... Why? Life with God is all about depending on His promises.

It is a promise of nations, kings, and land. But, notice this: It is all future. Jacob will never see the fulfillment in this life.

But, then the love of his life, Rachel, dies... in childbirth. That is indeed a mixed blessing.

Then one of his sons sins and offends his father, Jacob.

Jacob's father dies.

Then Jacob's sons grow jealous of his favorite, Joseph, and they get rid of him. Jacob thinks Joseph is dead.

Then there is incest in the family. It is clear that Jacob's sons are a mess.

Years pass, 22 years, and then famine strikes. The family is now starving and becoming destitute.

The brothers are sent to Egypt and their old sin, selling their brother into slavery, confronts them.

They are scared, Jacob is scared. The ruler of Egypt has captured Simeon. Another son is gone and they are hungry again.

Now Jacob must send Benjamin, his new favorite the son of Rachel, and Benjamin is taken.

Then it is discovered that Joseph is alive, that he is ruler over all Egypt, and that he wants his family to move there.

Jacob is not so sure. Could this be God's plan? To move away from the promised land again?

But God speaks to him again and reassures him. It is. This is God's plan. And God will bring him back.

So, Jacob goes. He takes all of his family to Egypt.

Life has been long. Life has been hard, a struggle. Relationships have been difficult. Family is not what he hoped for.

But, now they are reunited. He is 130 years old. What does God have in mind for him now?

Blessing.

I. God uses the favor of people to bless you. vss. 1-12

Pharaoh wants to do everything he can to bless the family of Joseph... Jacob's family. And he does.

He could look down on them. After all, we already know from Gen. 46:34 that shepherds are not well thought of in Egypt.

But, no, inexplicably the god-king of Egypt wants to bless this raggedy bunch of bumpkins.

And, this immensely powerful man looks to Jacob for a blessing.

Why? God. I think it is clear that God has been working on Pharaoh. You never know who God will bless you through.

... and who God will use you to bless.

22 years ago Nancy and I were on the verge of starting Seminary in Chicago...

The Shannons... the Almays... Mrs. Dickinson...

15 years ago in Vermillion, SD.

What is the common element? Our need and God's working in other people to bless us.

Many of you have experienced this kind of provision in your life at times and in areas of great need.

II. God uses difficult circumstances to bless you. vss. 13-26

So we see that God is using the famine to bless Israel and his family. It is a time of tremendous hardship for people all over the world.

And, yet, Joseph's power is growing immensely and he is making Pharaoh even more powerful.

And, in all of this, of all the people who live in Egypt... Jacob's family is prospering.

Why? God. God is using this terrible time to show them His favor.

Our second year in Vermillion... the ministry was thriving, but we were not getting paid much... \$10,000 short.

Christmas at McDonalds... Atlanta? \$10,000.

God did that... and He would not have if we didn't need it.

Sometimes it is a friend that God brings along at just the right time. Sometimes a gift. Sometimes a job... or something else...

But, if you were not praying in desperate need, you would not recognize the hand of God in it.

III. God's earthly blessings are temporary. vss. 27-31

Now we get right down to the point of this chapter.

You would think that Jacob might say, "Hey, this is great, lets settle down here and make it our home."

"I like the blessings, let's build three booths and stay." = remember Peter on the mount of transfiguration?

It is in our nature, when things on this earth are really fantastic to want to stay there and keep it awesome!

We want to be blessed by God and then get comfortable in the blessing.

But, listen, God never blesses you so that you can get comfortable! Ever. You don't see that in the Bible ever.

So, Jacob (Israel) calls Joseph to himself for a private meeting, "I'm going to die. Promise me something."

No, "Put your hand under my thigh and swear" = you could not make a more solemn promise.

"Don't bury me here. Bury me back in Canaan." = What is the point of this? What is in Jacob's mind?

Think about it. What is Jacob saying to Joseph at this precious moment?

This is not our home. We don't really belong here, we're just a passing through.

He is saying that he does not want to be here in Egypt forever.

He is saying that all these blessings... all the stuff, land, homes... all of it. Joseph, we're going to have to leave it all.

This is not the promised land. This is not where we belong.

Jacob is remembering the promise. Even all the prosperity has not caused him to forget.

Even Joseph may have forgotten, we don't know. Apparently Jacob thinks he needs the clarification.

But, Jacob has been through God's school of learning by suffering for 147 years...

and clinging to the promise is what has gotten him through all this time.

And, when he struggled to remember the promise, God reminded him... now he is reminding Joseph.

And, it is with this story that God, through Moses, reminded the children of Israel in the wilderness who carried Jacob's bones back.

Egypt is not your home. You are destined for a promised land... a land of blessing, a land of your own.

Those people needed the reminder then. They got grumpy and whiney in the wilderness because they forgot what God was doing.

They were not looking at the promise of God and future blessing.

They were stuck on past blessing... and it wasn't much blessing... they were slaves!

And, it is with this story that God reminds us... this world is not our home.

America is not your home. South Dakota is not your home. Your home is not your home. You are just passing through.

You are on your way to a land that God has promised to you... a place that Jesus is preparing for you.

And, all this stuff, the blessings are for you to enjoy on the way... but you ARE on the way. You can't keep any of it.

So, don't get too attached to the blessings, and bless others with the blessings. **Luke 16:1-9**

What's the point? Live like you are on your way to the promised land.