

“The State of Jacob’s Faith”
 Sermon for 11 October 2020
 Texts: Gen. 43:1-15

Do you remember who was voted most likely to succeed in your senior year of high school. Do you remember voting for her? What was she like, what qualities did you consider in casting your vote? Or, maybe it was a guy. Let me put before you two candidates for “most likely to succeed” and you choose. But, remember this: God is with both of them. God has so declared. The first one has lived the majority of his adult life penniless, powerless, propertyless, family-less and fatherless. Additionally he is wifeless, and childless. He was destitute and had done hard time (never mind that it was for crimes he did not commit). He was both hated and was treated spitefully (although that rancor should have been directed at someone else, his father). He was of diminished social standing, had no rights and was entirely dependent on God for anything and everything. If you have guessed that the name of this candidate is Joseph, you would be right on. So what has he got going for him that would garner your vote for the one most likely to succeed? The second candidate becomes rich, is propertied, has a father (but alienated himself through contempt, deception and abuse), has his own wives and children, a family life, and a vast, successful pastoral business (sheep, goats, camels and cattle). He is in full possession of his rights, never imprisoned (except by his own proclivities to fear, lust and greed) and lives free. His name? Jacob, who happens to be father to Joseph. Is Jacob more likely to succeed, with all he has going for him? Surely with all these advantages should count for something!

But how they turn out turns sociology on its head! The poverty and deprivation of Joseph do not auger for success and Jacob who has no such deficits of upbringing, childhood development, parenting and so forth should succeed, or turn out better. But that is not how it turns out. If we turn to the Word of God we learn ***why divine will is more determinative than socialization***, and social position. Success, or failure depends on the hand of God. Joseph sees the hand of God in his life, trusts God and succeeds. Jacob, although he has more positive reasons to affirm the hand of God—God was with him wherever he went, provided for him, protected him and guided him—arrives at the opposite pole. He ends up poorly, speaking in terms of faith and spirituality: he ends up ***desolate, dismal and unbelieving and embittered***. Joseph, on the other hand, ends up ***faithful, hopeful and rewarded***. God’s will trumps sociology every time, all the time. Let’s look into these matters more deeply.

Turning to our third focus (part three: the state of Jacob’s faith): we find there is some controversy over the subject. There are some who maintain Jacob (or Israel), as the patriarch, must have finished well. That’s what it means to be a patriarch, heroic faith by definition, right? And there are some who conclude quite the opposite: he did not finish strong but had a tepid and insipid faith (Gen. 43:13-15). It can’t be both, can it? Which is it? Frankly, I was unaware of this controversy until I was researching Gen. 43. In the first category, scholars like Griffith Thomas (1946), H.C. Leopold (1942) and

George Bush (1979, not either president!): asserts “At length Jacob recovered his spiritual equilibrium and consented to let Benjamin go, Thomas, p. 417;” “Jacob’s words (May God Almighty grant you mercy before the man, and may he send back your other brother and Benjamin) are not a timid wish but a powerful benediction spoken in faith “ (Leopold, p.1068); and “It is not the sullen consent of one who yields to fate while his heart rebels against it. No; he yields in a manner worthy of a man of God. . . Jacob urged using all means possible to conciliate the man . . . then committing the issue of the whole to God.”¹ (Bush) * I think this represents isogesis (reading meaning into the text!) or hyperbole!

Bob Deffinbaugh disagrees also. 1. the release of Benjamin had been reluctant, only under pressure; Jacob appears more influenced by fear than faith. 2. Jacob appears to be wishing more than praying (“May God do such and such” . . . “I ask that you”). The text further suggests Jacob gave into carnal pressure, shame and fear (vv.8-9) and depicts passivity on Jacob’s part. If I am bereaved of my children, I am bereaved (v. 14) seems more an expression of fatalism, than of faith! Even if we liken it in tone to the words of Queen Esther, If I die, I die, Esther is not heralded as a heroine of the faith, she, too, sounds fatalistic. A national hero, but not a faith hero. I agree with Bob.

Jacob, we find, was a markedly poor leader at this stage of his life. He delayed; don’t do today what can be put off until tomorrow. He denies reality: no problem is possibly as bad as it seems. He believes honesty is not the best policy. Always look out for number one, Jacob asserts. Make sure that you blame everyone else for any problems. If our efforts fail on their own, try bribery. When all else fails, pray and then, trust God. Read in this manner, it is no surprise that in the Hebrew “Hall of Faith,” Jacob’s faith is cited only in blessing his sons—a rather minimalist accomplishment, a damning with faint praise.

Gen. 45:25-27 gives us an unfiltered look at Jacob’s desolate end state:

25 Then they went up from Egypt, and came to the land of Canaan to their father Jacob. 26 They told him, saying, “Joseph is still alive, and indeed he is ruler over all the land of Egypt.” But [his heart grew numb] he was stunned, for he did not believe them. 27 When they told him all the words of Joseph that he had spoken to them, and when he saw the wagons that Joseph had sent to carry him, the spirit of their father Jacob revived.

Jacob’s faith was in the tank and this has had a depressive effect on his sons. They, too, are a mass of fear, guilt and anxiety—they are sin-straitened that comes with living a lie. While I know we covered Jacob’s lament (42:36):

¹ p.313. (As cited in Deffinbaugh, “The Fears of Jacob and the Tears (of Joseph?)” #43 in “Genesis:From Paradise to Patriarchs,” p. 4 and fn. 69, pp.12-13.)

You have bereaved me of my children: Joseph is no more, and Simeon is no more, and now you would take Benjamin. All this has come against me.

And I pointed out there is not an article of truth in the whole, self-pitying lament! Jacob has been bereaved of no children; Joseph is alive and well; Simeon, while in Joseph's custody, is in no danger of dying. As for taking Benjamin, it is Jacob who is actually hindering Benjamin's reunion with his long lost and presumed dead older brother! All that Jacob supposes has come against him is actually working in his favor! And we, reading the account, are privileged to know the truth of the matter—both as it unfolds and in its retrospect! His sons' fears, as it turns out, are equally baseless; but, in truth, they have acted, in the past, as base, carnal and selfish men—lying and deceiving, plotters of treachery, envious, lustful, covetous and spiteful. They deserved and expected far worse things from Joseph than what they received. Joseph was forgiving, gracious, generous and kind. His fear of God had not only protected him from sin it had refined him—it was all about character grooming him for compassionate, wise, leadership because he loved God. The fear of the Lord was his strength.

How does anyone who lives the majority of his adult life, penniless, property-less, destitute, a prison ward (unjustly) of the state, family-less and fatherless turn out so well, so spiritually grounded and mature? His calling (to be a servant) was his career—he had no trade, no marketable skills, no administrative resume'—yet God raised him up to be governor; second in command to Pharaoh! Joseph? Who is this dreamer? And how is it that another man, his father, whose path was marked by fear, sin, envy, duplicity, lies, lust and folly—who is nonetheless guided, provided for, protected and kept by God—who spent no time in prison, who prospered, gained wealth, wives and family (surely I will do good for you), ends up crippled by suspicions, fearful, distrustful? Desolate, dismal and unbelieving

And what does the disparate trajectory of these two lives (Jacob's and Joseph's) teach us about "life experience and circumstances?" The sociologically determinative factors that we say, supposedly, explain failure and success in this life?

**Proverbs 19:21 Many plans are in a man's heart,
But the counsel/purpose of the Lord will stand.**

[Or as in Proverbs 16:9

A man's heart plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps.]

**22 What is desirable in a man is his [a] kindness,
And it is better to be a poor man than a liar.**

**23 The [b] fear of the Lord leads to life,
So that one may sleep satisfied, [c] untouched by evil.**

Footnotes

a. Proverbs 19:22 Or loyalty

b. Proverbs 19:23 Or reverence

c. Proverbs 19:23 Lit not visited

Man plans, but God disposes. It is the will of God that determines the course of one's life. That trajectory affirms such deficits and circumstances are not determinative! They aren't necessarily even weights, liabilities, burdens, or handicaps! What happens to you is never what matters ultimately (victimhood needn't be that final word!); hurt and pain do not disqualify you—you do! Joseph sees the hand of God throughout it all (all the hard luck and good fortune in his life) and believes that God is for him—Jacob, knows about the hand of God, periodically thanked and worshipped his good God, but now seems fixated on earthly matters, immediate gratification and is ever looking out for number one. So, which man is richer, happier, more prosperous . . . more at peace, more focused and more godly? Yes, and more godly! ***I vote for Joseph!***

Surely man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth from the mouth of God just as we pondered last week!

The brothers appear, I think, to have genuinely repented. What was in Joseph, truly in his heart, comes out in his actions, deportment, his wisdom-based leadership, too. That is as true of Jacob as it is of his sons—unfortunately, what comes forth from the ten is quite different. Yes, Joseph treats his brothers harshly, accusing them of being spies, putting them on the receiving end of injustice—and even threatens them of bondage! THEY REALLY FEARED ENSLAVEMENT.

They had subjected their own brother to the very things they feared most as if they were free to carry out this sadistic social experiment: Let's sell him and see what becomes of his dreams (and aspirations). This is a savagely perverse experiment. I do wonder if this is a root whence some of our mistreatment of others comes from—we subject them to what we fear, or what we dread the most: so see what comes of it, what happens them. It's horrifying! We accuse them of the very things we do as a form of deflection and evasion and self-deceit. Projection occurs, yes, blame shifting happens, yes, but both are settled postures of dishonesty. If the brothers had had nothing to hide, they wouldn't have been motivated to eliminate the spy! It was an attempt to cover-up sin.

And that is, maybe, why, Joseph tests them to see if they are honest men, or to ascertain if there is any honesty in them at all! Do they have the self-awareness to be decent, honorable persons? Self-awareness is rooted in a repentant heart! Can one even deal with them at all?

I say, kindly, that Jacob is a backslidden saint. I note that he never appears to repent of his past evil, he never expresses remorse, or shows sorrow—he never even admits he was wrong! And I add that unfortunate as this condition is, it is not irreversible and, yes, consider how the kindness of our God woos him back in his old age, in the end game of his life. It is all goodness and grace.

A radical reversal (the essence of biblical repentance) is possible at any point in time—just as every car is equipped with reverse! We can stop the car of our life, turn it around and head in the opposite direction. That is what Joseph's brothers did. They put their lives in reverse! Praise God! We can do exactly the same today, noting, there is no salvation without repentance, without a change of mindset, without a change of lifestyle— ***signifying that we have turned from sin and its enticements***, from idols and adultery broadly defined, and, from our hearts, we have turned in trust to the loving Father and the forgiving Son of God.

Repentance, continual and ongoing, is the hallmark of the Christian faith—and, if you are not there yet, if you are not honest yet, now would be the best time to start.

Amen.