

“PICTURES OF THE CHURCH AS A SOURCE OF BLESSING TO THE WORLD”

I. Introduction

- A. The British atheist Richard Dawkins recently made headlines for referring to himself as a “cultural Christian.”
1. What he meant by this is that, although he is not a believer in Jesus Christ, he has great fondness for certain residual elements of his nation’s Christian heritage.
 2. Of course, without Christianity itself, the cultural side-benefits that Dawkins so appreciates would not exist.
 3. Nevertheless, he is correct in recognizing that the Christian religion brings numerous blessings to the cultures in which it gains a foothold.
 4. As Western civilization took shape, Christian assumptions about human nature and justice were woven into the fabric of its laws, institutions, and common life.
 5. In the words of the 19th century Presbyterian theologian Charles Hodge, “Christianity is the basis of the common law of England [and America].”
 6. It is no surprise that, as our society drifts further and further away from the Christianity that shaped it, it is experiencing significant moral decay and social dysfunction, and is becoming increasingly authoritarian and corrupt.
 7. Make sure that you are praying for the Lord to work through these unsettling circumstances to bring people to Christ.

- B. Genesis 47 shows how the people of God brought blessings to the land of Egypt when they sojourned there.
1. This was an initial fulfillment of what God had promised Abraham back in Genesis 12 when he said that the covenant people would be a source of blessing to all the families of the earth.
 2. Of course, the ultimate fulfillment of that promise is the salvation Christ brings to people drawn from all the families of the earth.
 3. But it is also true that the peoples of the world experience a number of temporal benefits due to their association with God's people.
 4. In this present age, the lives of believers are intertwined with the lives of the unregenerate.
 5. It was for this reason that, when the Israelites were exiled to Babylon later in their history, God commanded them to "seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare." (Jer. 29:7)
 6. That is a good description of what happened to Jacob's family during the initial stage of their time in Egypt.
 7. They sought the welfare of Egypt, and in Egypt's welfare they found their welfare.
 8. As we study this passage today, we will consider how it provides us with several pictures of the ways in which the church's presence in the world is a source of blessing to the world.

II. As Those with Little Worldly Status

- A. We begin our study of this passage by looking at the audiences that Joseph's brothers and father had before Pharaoh.

Exposition of Genesis #56

1. As you can see, the five brothers selected by Joseph to represent the rest of the family were quite deferential in their approach to Pharaoh.
 2. They referred to themselves as “your servants” three times.
 3. They made their request to live in Goshen in a very courteous manner.
 4. And Pharaoh was pleased to grant this request because of his esteem and gratitude for Joseph.
 5. Thus, the result of this first audience with Pharaoh was that the covenant family was blessed by Pharaoh’s kindness to them.
 6. Living in Goshen was both physically and spiritually beneficial for Jacob and his family.
 7. In addition to being suitable for shepherding their flocks, Goshen was far enough away from where the Egyptians lived to enable God’s people to maintain their distinct religious identity.
- B. When we turn to consider the meeting that Jacob had with Pharaoh, we see some significant differences compared to the meeting between Jacob’s sons and Pharaoh.
1. Unlike his sons, Jacob does not refer to himself as Pharaoh’s servant.
 2. Jacob is not disrespectful, but he does not pay the kind of deference to Pharaoh that his sons did.
 3. Also, we are twice told that Jacob blessed Pharaoh.
 4. This is significant because, as the writer of Hebrews points out, “the inferior is blessed by the superior.” (Heb. 7:7)

5. By blessing Pharaoh, Jacob puts himself in a position of superiority over Pharaoh.
 6. And Pharaoh does not take offense at this.
 7. In fact, he is amazed at the sight of this man.
 8. He can tell that Jacob is very old, and this prompts him to ask about Jacob's age.
- C. Jacob responds by telling Pharaoh that he is 130 years old.
1. Then he adds this curious statement: "Few and evil have been the days of the years of my life, and they have not attained to the days of the years of the life of my fathers."
 2. We can understand why Jacob would characterize his days as "evil."
 3. His life was filled with many conflicts and sorrows.
 4. But imagine how surprising it would be for Pharaoh to hear Jacob describe 130 years as "few."
 5. Jacob probably said this because he was comparing himself to his father and grandfather, who lived to be 180 and 175, respectively.
 6. Still, we have no reason to believe that 130 was any less astounding an age in those days than it is today.
 7. One of the signs of God's blessing upon the patriarchs was the fact that they lived such long lives.
 8. Pharaoh seems to have recognized this.

9. He could tell that he was in the presence of an extraordinary individual.
 10. This is what made him willing to receive Jacob's blessing.
 11. Compared to a great ruler like Pharaoh, Jacob was sorely lacking in worldly status.
 12. Nevertheless, Jacob's relationship with the Lord made him into a man who commanded Pharaoh's respect.
 13. One lesson that we can draw from this is that, even when a believer is of little significance by worldly standards, the fact that he lives in communion with the living God is something that sets him apart from the people of the world.
- D. Jacob's blessing of Pharaoh was not just a formality.
1. Jacob was asking the Lord to promote Pharaoh's welfare, along with the welfare of the nation he governed.
 2. This reminds us that, while we are not to be conformed to the pattern of this world, we are called to do what we can to contribute to its peace and prosperity.
 3. The apostle Paul made this point in his first epistle to Timothy when he wrote, "I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way." (1 Tim. 2:1-2)
- E. One other thing to note about Jacob's meeting with Pharaoh is his use of the word "sojourn."
1. Jacob saw his entire life, and the life of his ancestors, as a pilgrimage.

2. He thought this way because he believed God's promise to give him a homeland.
3. He had a pilgrim identity because he knew that he had not yet entered into his inheritance.

III. As Those with Significant Worldly Influence

- A. In the next part of our passage, we see how Joseph was made into an instrument of blessing for both Pharaoh and the Egyptian people.
 1. Through Joseph's efforts, the people were saved from a devastating famine.
 2. As a result, Pharaoh amassed a great deal of wealth and property, and the Egyptian people became his servants.
 3. We might read this and think that Joseph took unfair advantage of these people, forcing them to give up everything they had in order to have enough food to eat.
 4. But we have to understand that there was no such thing as government-provided welfare in the ancient world.
 5. People were expected to pay their own way, even if they had to indenture themselves in order to do so.
 6. This could actually be a beneficial arrangement.
 7. After all, if your crops failed or if some other kind of disaster struck, you were in real trouble, often with no one to help you out.
 8. But if you were someone's slave, that person would be obligated to provide you with food and shelter.
 9. That is what Joseph did for the people of Egypt.

10. By binding them to Pharaoh's service, he made Pharaoh responsible for them.
 11. And the people were grateful that Joseph did this, telling him, "You have saved our lives."
- B. Joseph serves as another picture of how believers can be a source of blessing to the world.
1. Unlike his father, Joseph *was* in a prominent position.
 2. He was the most powerful of all of Pharaoh's officials.
 3. And he used his position to make a significant contribution to the well-being of Egyptian society.
 4. This shows us that there are times when the Lord gives certain believers considerable earthly influence and works through them to do a great deal of good.
 5. Unlike the people of the world, who tend to worship power and wield it for selfish ends, God's people know that power is given by God and should be used to restrain evil and promote what is good.
- C. It is significant that the report about Joseph's dealings with the Egyptians is set alongside what happened to the people of Israel after they moved to Egypt.
1. Immediately after the section that explains how Joseph saved the people of Egypt from the famine, verses 27 and 28 relate how Jacob's family settled in Goshen and prospered there.
 2. They gained great possessions.
 3. They were fruitful.

4. They multiplied greatly.
5. That language brings to mind God's covenant promises.
6. The Lord was beginning to fulfill those promises, even though the covenant people were living in a land that was not their own.
7. In seeking Egypt's welfare, they found their own welfare.

IV. As Those Who Long for a Better Country

- A. This brings us to the last part of our passage, where we see that Jacob did not lose sight of God's promises.
 1. God was faithful to what he had promised Jacob when he instructed him to go to Egypt.
 2. God was with Jacob.
 3. God made Jacob prosperous and caused his family to grow into a great nation.
 4. For many years, the covenant people enjoyed a relation of mutual blessing with the Egyptians.
 5. Of course, this would come to an end four hundred years later, when a Pharaoh came to power who paid no regard to what Joseph had done for his nation.
 6. Instead of appreciating the ways the Israelites had contributed to Egypt's welfare, that Pharaoh and the Egyptian people began to see the Israelites as a threat, and this caused them to oppress God's people.
 7. There is an important lesson for us in this.

8. While the church's presence has brought many benefits to the nations of the West, it should not surprise us to see this being ignored and the church being looked upon with increasing disdain.
 9. The same thing happened to God's people when they were in Egypt.
 10. And we can draw encouragement from the outcome of that episode, as God eventually brought judgment upon Egypt and deliverance to his people.
 11. The Lord's purpose to build his church will never be thwarted.
 12. As the prophet Daniel foretold, the kingdom of God "shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever." (Dan. 2:44)
- B. Our text also tells us that after living in Egypt for seventeen years, Jacob eventually reached the point when he knew his days were drawing to a close.
1. Jacob knew that he was going to die in the land of Egypt.
 2. But he did not want to be buried in Egypt.
 3. So he made Joseph promise to take his body back to Canaan and bury him in the cave where Abraham and Isaac were buried.
 4. This was not a matter of sentiment, like when a person who loves to sail asks to have his ashes scattered at sea.
 5. This was an act of faith on Jacob's part.
 6. He trusted that the Lord would make good on everything that he had promised him.

7. Jacob believed that he would not remain a sojourner forever.
 8. God promised that he would bring him back to the Promised Land, and Jacob was confident that God would keep that promise.
 9. Jacob's instructions about his burial gave expression to his faith that the Lord would one day bring him into the inheritance that he had promised him.
 10. By making Joseph swear that he would bury him in Canaan, Jacob also ensured that his family would be reminded that their true homeland was not in Egypt.
- C. It is vital for believers to cultivate a heavenly-minded perspective as we live in this present age.
1. While some contend that being heavenly-minded makes us of little earthly good, this is not at all the case.
 2. On the contrary, it is by keeping our focus on the fact that we belong to a better, heavenly country that we can be of greatest benefit to the world.
 3. As C.S. Lewis famously noted, "If you read history you will find that the Christians who did the most for this world were precisely those who thought the most of the next." [*Mere Christianity*, 134]
 4. The reason why this is true is because if your focus is only on the things of this world, you will inevitably make the things of this world into an idol.
 5. And when people do that, they live selfish lives and contribute to the world's further degradation.
 6. But when you know that you have a glorious inheritance in heaven, an inheritance that can never be taken away from you, then you are

free to use your life to benefit others.

7. When, like the author of the book of Lamentations, your soul says, "The LORD is my portion," your hope does not depend upon anything in this world, but upon the Lord your God. (Lam. 3:24)

V. Conclusion

- A. There is a great deal of malice and misery in this world.
- B. But imagine how much crueler and darker a place it would be were it not for the civilizing and humanizing influence of the people of God.
- C. That influence is made by believers from all walks of life, the vast majority of whom are quite ordinary.
- D. So make sure that you seek the welfare of the place in which you sojourn.
- E. For in its welfare, you will find your earthly welfare, even as you trust that your ultimate welfare has already been secured by Christ and is being kept for you in heaven.