
Sweet and Hard Providences

Genesis 49:28-50:26

Pastor Russ Kennedy

Life is full of obstacles. We have all experienced those hard times when life takes a sharp turn that throws us off balance. How you think about life will make a great difference how you respond to those times. The lens of your heart, the focus of your thinking, will determine how well you handle the hard providences.

We have gone through 6 months of unexpected hardship... (COVID)

One of the hardest providences is coming to the end of life.

This text is filled that sort of obstacle as well. In it there is dying and grieving and responding to life's hardships. Once again, it looks as though God's promises may be dim and His purposes unfulfilled. His people are in Egypt, not the Promised Land. We are gathered around the death bed of Jacob, the clan's last great patriarch. The tears are probably starting to flow. Most of us can feel the hardness of this moment. And yet, mingled in is a certain sweetness as well.

Mourning in Hope (49:28-50:14)

Jacob had gathered his boys around and blessed, prophesying of their destiny as God's purposes and their character will intertwine down through the centuries.

Faith in the Dying (49:28-33)

Jacob exhibits faith as he dies.

²⁸ All these are the twelve tribes of Israel. This is what their father said to them as he blessed them, blessing each with the blessing suitable to him. ²⁹ Then he commanded them and said to them, "I am to be gathered to my people; bury me with my fathers in the cave that is in the field of Ephron the Hittite, ³⁰ in the cave that is in the field at Machpelah, to the east of Mamre, in the land of Canaan, which Abraham bought with the field from Ephron the Hittite to possess as a burying place. ³¹ There they buried Abraham and Sarah his wife. There they buried Isaac and Rebekah his wife, and there I buried Leah— ³² the field and the cave that is in it were bought from the Hittites."

³³ When Jacob finished commanding his sons, he drew up his feet into the bed and breathed his last and was gathered to his people.

He believes the promises of God concerning the land. He commands his sons to lay him to rest in the land where the patriarchs were buried. This field had been purchased and set aside for their graves. He wants to be buried in the land God promised in the place of his fathers.

How does this kind of faith both encourage and challenge us? It is hard for us to answer a question like this because we avoid thinking about dying. Our culture is a lot about the pursuit of eternal youth. Christians are also often poured into the world's mold of focusing on our looks, our health, our diet and so on. I have heard all the arguments that we are stewards of our bodies and so... No, I think too often that is simply a veneer of spirituality over deep seated cravings largely shaped by our world.

Why do I say this? Because when we talk about dying you become distinctly uncomfortable. You do not want to think about dying. It is something far away. It is an enemy to be avoided at all costs, yes. But, like everything else, if we do not think about it Biblically and plan for it

practically, it will come up on us and we will not be prepared. Jacob has come to the time of his death in faith. He has thought about what believing God means for when life ends. And so, he dies well.

The Puritans were convinced that unless one was ready to die well, one would not live well. They left us a great legacy of both. They lived well in the midst of sweet and hard providences. And they died well with faith and humility. So, let us determine that we will die well – that we will so grow in our faith in God and our walk with God that the day of our dying will be a passing through from dimness to unimaginable brightness.

Faith in the Grieving (50:1-14)

Joseph exhibits faith as he grieves.

50 Then Joseph fell on his father's face and wept over him and kissed him. ² And Joseph commanded his servants the physicians to embalm his father. So the physicians embalmed Israel. ³ Forty days were required for it, for that is how many are required for embalming. And the Egyptians wept for him seventy days.

⁴ And when the days of weeping for him were past, Joseph spoke to the household of Pharaoh, saying, "If now I have found favor in your eyes, please speak in the ears of Pharaoh, saying, ⁵ 'My father made me swear, saying, "I am about to die: in my tomb that I hewed out for myself in the land of Canaan, there shall you bury me." Now therefore, let me please go up and bury my father. Then I will return.' " ⁶ And Pharaoh answered, "Go up, and bury your father, as he made you swear." ⁷ So Joseph went up to bury his father. With him went up all the servants of Pharaoh, the elders of his household, and all the elders of the land of Egypt, ⁸ as well as all the household of Joseph, his brothers, and his father's household. Only their children, their flocks, and their herds were left in the land of Goshen. ⁹ And there went up with him both chariots and horsemen. It was a very great company. ¹⁰ When they came to the threshing floor of Atad, which is beyond the Jordan, they lamented there with a very great and grievous lamentation, and he made a mourning for his father seven days. ¹¹ When the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, saw the mourning on the threshing floor of Atad, they said, "This is a grievous mourning by the Egyptians." Therefore the place was named Abel-mizraim; it is beyond the Jordan. ¹² Thus his sons did for him as he had commanded them, ¹³ for his sons carried him to the land of Canaan and buried him in the cave of the field at Machpelah, to the east of Mamre, which Abraham bought with the field from Ephron the Hittite to possess as a burying place. ¹⁴ After he had buried his father, Joseph returned to Egypt with his brothers and all who had gone up with him to bury his father.

It is a faith that obeys. It is a faith that goes to great lengths even in the midst of great sadness and loss to keep his word and honor his father.

Joseph moves with quiet determination. This was going to take quite a long time. He orders the embalming, which would take 40 days. Israel (Jacob) would be embalmed in the Egyptian fashion. They had almost perfected the art. Their science of embalming has left us Egyptian mummies giving us opportunities to study the Egyptians as people. It is quite possible then that Jacob was embalmed and placed in a sarcophagus.

In the Egyptian culture, the proper period for mourning was seventy days. Joseph chooses to follow the customs around him, still determined to take his father home to Canaan. At the end

of the time, he seeks and is granted permission to visit Canaan and bury his father. So great is his witness to the Egyptians that when he goes, a great host of Egyptians goes up with him. All of the court and many of the people trek to Canaan to grieve with Joseph. Yet, the respect he has earned and relationships he has built were never at the expense of his testimony. All know that this man is full of faith in God.

Upon their arrival in Canaan, Joseph and the Israelites all begin to express their grief in their own way. It is a time of deep lament and much weeping. The Canaanites are surprised at the great grief and the great company of Egyptians who join in with sorrow and sympathy. So they bring Jacob to his resting place and bury him in the field with his fathers and his beloved wife.

We are challenged by this kind of faith. We are too often and too easily derailed by difficulty. But this is exactly the right time to demonstrate a great faith, a faith that will commit to delighting in God and doing God's will regardless. So it is a faith that both grieves and obeys. People will see and notice. In hardship, trusting in God will both baffle and entice people. It will be a witness of the graces and goodness of God.

Comfort in Submission (50:15-21)

But all is not well in the household. In the weak hearts of Joseph's brothers, dark lies and deep fears begin to arise.

The Heart of Fear (v.15-18)

Now that Jacob is dead, Joseph's brothers begin to fear for their lives.

¹⁵ When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him." ¹⁶ So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this command before he died: ¹⁷ 'Say to Joseph, "Please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you." ' And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke to him. ¹⁸ His brothers also came and fell down before him and said, "Behold, we are your servants."

After all the years of care and provision, they now begin to suspect Joseph. They begin to impute to him what is not true. Their emotions of fear come from lies that they believe. They are saying in their hearts and to one another that Joseph has not taken revenge against them because of their father. Now that Jacob is dead, Joseph will be free to exact his revenge. They think that he has hated them all along and has not wanted to bring grief to his father. They have to be thinking that Joseph has been lying and deceiving them all along. In their hearts, they twist his strengths of patience and persistence into cold and calculating laying in wait. With their hearts filled with the false thoughts, they are afraid.

Now they begin to try to manipulate and appease Joseph. They send a message that is probably not even true. It is doubtful that Jacob told them this. But here is the message. "Our father told us to let you know that you should forgive us." At least, there seems to be a clear admission of all the evil they had committed. But this is intended to be manipulation. Joseph has enormous power over their lives. They think they are very vulnerable. Rather than taking Joseph at his word and believing the best about him, they are now going to impute bad motivations even to the good he has done for them. As many people will do, they attribute to him their own faults. Their own weaknesses, sins and failures become dark shaded glasses

through which Joseph is seen. Rather than approach him open handed with honesty and humility, they come and cower in his presence.

The Heart of Trust (v.19-21)

How would we respond to this?

These brothers continue to sin. Isn't it true that we would be prone to thoughts and words like these, "Well, if this is what they think, then this is what I am going to do." Maybe we would say in anger, "How dare they think like this. After all they did to me and all I have done for them, how dare they impute such motivations to me! How do they know what I am thinking?" Or maybe we would stand over them with our power over them and let them suffer for a while. After all, they are the ones who are badly mistaken. So, let them cower for a while.

¹⁹ But Joseph said to them, "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? ²⁰ As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. ²¹ So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones." Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.

But notice how Joseph responds to them. When they speak to him like this, he breaks down and weeps. He is broken hearted. He has acted with a good conscience before God. It breaks his heart that his brothers would think such of him. This is startling. This is neither what we expect nor how we tend to respond.

What is going on in Joseph's heart that squeezes tears from his eyes? What does he believe so strongly and desire so submissively that he weeps when misunderstood? Ah, brothers and sisters, here is a great heart that understands and trusts in God.

He understands his true place before God (v.19).

Here is humility in the powerful. While he has great authority, he keeps his heart humble before God. He is not God. He is not in God's place and he will not try to be God to them. How much trouble we have with others when we try to be the God in their lives! How much trouble we get into when we make idols (gods) of people in our lives. We need to be humble in our relationships so that we do not try to control them. And we need to know how to honor those we are responsible to without elevating them above measure or expecting what is not possible.

He trusts in the good purposes of God (v.20).

He recognizes that God is working through the evil men do to bring about the good He has purposed. Now this is a very important truth. It is central to the redemptive themes of the Bible. Evil is not outside of God's control. He never does evil. But the evil in the world and the evil done by men is part of how God intends to bring about good for His people. The great evil of unjustly killing the pure and innocent Son of God is how redemption is accomplished. God is at work in the evil people do around you and even to you so as to accomplish His purposes. Some of those purposes involve you directly. Some of the evil done against you may be and often actually is for the good of others. Do you believe this? Do you believe this so strongly that you would weep when misunderstood?

He desires to continue to do good for them (v.21).

He promises to provide for them. He assures them that they have no need to fear. He speaks kindly to them. He comforts them. The sweet and hard providences of God have taught his heart and tenderized his words. He is gracious and kind. What a convicting and challenging example this is. We are often so unlike this. I know it is easy to think of some

big thing that troubles you. But what about in your common relationship with your spouse, your parents, your boss, others in ministry? Is your heart so organized by truth and oriented toward God that you move with good toward others who hurt you?

The effect is to calm their fears and cultivate their relationship. There is a great unity of spirit that is evident here. But Joseph had to take the initiative in responding well. He could not sit back and wait for them to get it right. He was poised to forgive them. Now that they have openly acknowledged their evil, he immediately forgives them. His forgiveness is not begrudging. It is generous, gracious, and full of kindness.

Here is our Redeemer as well. His rules with absolute power and yet He is poised to do us good. His heart is one of mercy. We should not cower before Him. Yes, we must bow in submission. But the doctrine of His providence is not a hard doctrine, but a sweet one.

Is this the way you believe in the providence and purposes of God? Is this what rules your heart? Is this what fuels your affections? Is this what directs your words? Is the trajectory of your forgiveness guided along the path of trusting in God's hand? Do you see God's fingerprints on everything?

Direction in Expectation (50:22-26)

Joseph lives scores of years and like his father, gathers his family as he comes to the end of his days.

²² So Joseph remained in Egypt, he and his father's house. Joseph lived 110 years.

²³ And Joseph saw Ephraim's children of the third generation. The children also of Machir the son of Manasseh were counted as Joseph's own. ²⁴ And Joseph said to his brothers, "I am about to die, but God will visit you and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob." ²⁵ Then Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, "God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones from here." ²⁶ So Joseph died, being 110 years old. They embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt.

The Richness of his Life (v.22-23)

In language conveying the fullness and richness of his life, Joseph sees the great-great grandchildren of Ephraim. He is there at the birth Manasseh's grandson. He has loved long, enjoyed much, and seen the beginning of the fulfillment of his father's blessings on Ephraim.

The Instruction upon his Death (v.24-25)

Then he comes to the end of his life. He gathers his brothers and family around him. He has now lived in Egypt for around 93 years. He seems settled and content with the providences and provision of God. But he also believes that God will fulfill what He has promised. God will visit His people and bring them up out of Egypt and bring them into the land He had promised.

Since God will do this, then they must promise to take his bones back to Canaan and bury them with his fathers. What he believes emerges in the instructions he gives. His faith produces works, as it always does. So, when God brings the Israelites up out of Egypt, then they are take his body home to Canaan.

In the faith Joseph has and the instruction he gives, Moses sets the stage for the book of Exodus. Just as God had promised, He will visit His people. He will bring them up out of Egypt. And He will bring them into the land. As Israel hears this book for the first time, they are in the middle of God's visiting them and bringing them to the land. He who has begun

this work in what Joseph believed will assuredly actually bring to completion what He has promised.

The Anticipation of his Return (v.26)

The family hears both his faith and his instruction. So, when he dies, like his father, he is embalmed in the Egyptian manner. He is put in a coffin. The day will come when that coffin will be carried by Ephraim's sons back to Canaan. There, Joseph will be buried. But what he does not know is that it will be hundreds of years until that day. And it will be centuries until he reaches his final resting place in the new heavens and new earth.

Reflect and Respond

The great challenge in the Christian life is faith. I am not talking about the faith at the moment of our salvation. I am talking about faith that believes God moment by moment through all the sweet and hard providences. We have seen faith in the dying and faith in the grieving. We see faith that looks forward in hope. We have seen faith that moves now in obedience. Is this your faith? Do you believe God moment by moment? Do you truly trust Him even as you are trusting in Him? Is your life marked by the stability and steadiness that comes when resting in Christ?

How will we do well even when people sin against us? How does Joseph not strike back when he has opportunity? How do we love people who have wronged us and move toward them with compassion, gentleness, and assurance? How do we seek their good when they have sought our harm? How do we not become angry, bitter, cynical, and hard? We must believe with all our hearts the doctrine of God's providence. We must believe that God is working in all things for our good and for His glory. We must believe deep in our souls that God is making us like Christ. Bitterness, anger, hardness, frustration are all symptoms that we have put our hope in people and failed to rest in God's good providences. In the midst of both sweet and hard providences, God's purposes and providences are our necessary truths.

Just as God had promised to visit Israel and bring them up out of Egypt and bring them to their Promised Land, so God has visited His people in Christ. Jesus has come into this world to deliver us from it and to bring us home to God. This great Exodus is our redemption. Our redemption is what God has done to save us from sin and to bring us to God.

Joseph rested even in death that God would finish what He had promised and what He had begun. Paul rests in that very same great truth. "He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion in the Day of Jesus Christ." (Philippians 1:6 ESV) In the midst of conflict threatening the partnership between Paul and the church, Paul was confident that God would complete work of the gospel. So do we. We know that God's purposes and promises will be completed, even until the day of His return. We rest in the assurance of that great truth. It is how we can have hope in the greatest hardships, comfort others understanding the providences of God and rest with quietness and godliness in the day of our death. That which God has begun, from creation to eternity, from Genesis to Revelation, from your birth to your death, He will complete. He will complete it at the Day of Christ when He will be magnified and glorified.

So may God cause you rest in Him in the sweet and hard providences of life.