

“... a great nation...”

Most of us would grieve if we had to move elsewhere, leaving behind everything we know and people we love. For the pre-Hebrews, it was a matter of ordinary life. They had to keep moving to find good pastures for their animals, just as nomadic tribes have to function today. But, even Jacob was surprised by a big move in his old age, when Pharaoh gave them northern Egypt as a homeland.

In this relatively small number – 68 not including Joseph’s sons – we have the seed of the nation of nations, Israel, and the seed of the coming royal line of Jesus. For a while they would enjoy peace and prosperity. This would gradually turn into slavery when another pharaoh came to power a few centuries later. By that time the family had grown to 12 big tribes, and when these tribes left Egypt to enter Canaan, together they were a nation.

As I have often discovered, God’s plans can span decades, centuries and even millennia. Time is merely a device used for and by human beings to measure their stay on earth. Outside this construct, there is no time, only eternity. And it is in eternity that God operates. That is why what we pray for may not occur in our own lifetime, but ‘later’ (another word useful in relation to time but not to eternity!).

Here we have God moving a large family to one place. They have endured many moves through hostile deserts, ever since Abraham left the comfort of Babylon. They had to work very hard to maintain life. But, throughout it all, God promised the family a peculiar and spectacular thing – they would become a mighty nation. Some of them would fall and fail miserably, but, thank God, His plans are never thwarted by our sins and failings.

The family were mustered in a land that would give them relative ease and growing wealth, under the protection of Pharaoh and Joseph. God was starting to build His nation.

In our own lives, no matter what our circumstances are, or how hard-done-by we might feel, God’s plans are working. We often fight them or moan about what is happening to us, but God is there, protecting us and moving everything forward. Who is to know when total pain becomes total ease? When total poverty becomes total riches? When total failure turns to total victory? When seeming loss leads to abundant gain. We simply do not know when God will change us

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or our lives!

Who is to know when God will one day, suddenly, send wagons of help, with a new life attached, to those who think they are close to destitution or starvation? Will we accept and move with the plan, or will we reject it and lose out? In my own life I have never had a time of ease or a time when I knew I was settled. No Christian should expect such a time. It is when we settle in our job that God will remove it; it is when we are settled in our finances, that God will take them away; it is when we are settled in our status that God will dash it to the ground. Why? Because we are nomads in this world, of no fixed abode. Yet, how many say amongst themselves “We will do this or that” and expect their plan to remain fixed and sure for the rest of their lives? It is God Who decides on our future, not us.

What does it all mean in practical terms? It means that God might give us a settled time on earth, but we must never imagine that it is our final state. We are to be ready for movement and change, at any time. This is because our lives belong to God, not to ourselves or even to our families. Everything we have is a gift from God, not something we possess personally. When we give back everything to God, He will give it to us again, an hundredfold. But, when we try to possess it, it might very well be removed from our lives.

Verses 1-4

1.

“And Israel took his journey with all that he had, and came to Beer-sheba, and offered sacrifices unto the God of his father Isaac.

2.

And God spake unto Israel in the visions of the night, and said, Jacob, Jacob. And he said, Here am I.

3.

And he said, I am God, the God of thy father: fear not to go down into Egypt; for I will there make of thee a great nation:

4.

I will go down with thee into Egypt; and I will also surely bring thee up again: and Joseph shall

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put his hand upon thine eyes.”

Before Israel reached Egypt he came to Beersheba, where he stopped to offer sacrifices to God. God had returned to him his son he thought was dead, and he was about to have a better life than ever before. So, thanks were especially due.

That night God spoke to Israel in visions, calling him by name. Israel answered and God assured him about his coming venture. ‘Do not be afraid to go to Egypt,’ God said, ‘for I am your God.’ He repeated the promises He had made long ago: ‘I will make you a great nation, and it will start in Egypt.’ A further prophecy was given, referring to a time 400 years in the future, when God brought the Hebrews out of slavery; God would bring them back out of Egypt. And, Joseph would “put his hand upon thine eyes”. That is, Joseph would bury him.

In terms of human perception, this took a long time to come about. God promised Abraham the same things, but it was only now that the plan had some kind of foundation from which a human being could work. And even then, it was to be another 400 years before the seed of Israel would leave Egypt to become their own nation. In between would come a period of crushing servitude to a pharaoh who did not know, or care about, Joseph and his part in the enrichment of Egypt.

Verses 5-14

1.

“And Jacob rose up from Beer-sheba: and the sons of Israel carried Jacob their father, and their little ones, and their wives, in the wagons which Pharaoh had sent to carry him.

2.

And they took their cattle, and their goods, which they had gotten in the land of Canaan, and came into Egypt, Jacob, and all his seed with him:

3.

His sons, and his sons' sons with him, his daughters, and his sons' daughters, and all his seed brought he with him into Egypt.

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4.

And these are the names of the children of Israel, which came into Egypt, Jacob and his sons: Reuben, Jacob's firstborn.

5.

And the sons of Reuben; Hanoch, and Phallu, and Hezron, and Carmi.

6.

And the sons of Simeon; Jemuel, and Jamin, and Ohad, and Jachin, and Zohar, and Shaul the son of a Canaanitish woman.

7.

And the sons of Levi; Gershon, Kohath, and Merari.

8.

And the sons of Judah; Er, and Onan, and Shelah, and Pharez, and Zerah: but Er and Onan died in the land of Canaan. And the sons of Pharez were Hezron and Hamul.

9.

And the sons of Issachar; Tola, and Phuvah, and Job, and Shimron.

10.

And the sons of Zebulun; Sered, and Elon, and Jahleel.”

The next day, Jacob, the children and the wives, were put into the wagons provided by Pharaoh, and the family made their way to Egypt, with all that they had. In the text we are reminded of the names of Jacob's children, beginning with the eldest, Reuben.

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We are also given the names of the grandchildren. Reuben's sons were Hanoch (Also known as Enoch or Chanowk: 'dedicated'); Phallu ('distinguished'); Hezron ('surrounded by a wall'); and Carmi ('my vineyard').

Simeon's sons were Jemuel ('day of God'); Jamin ('right hand'); Ohad ('united'); Jachin ('He will establish'); Zohar (or Zerah: 'tawny'); and Shaul (or Saul: 'desired') who was the son of a Canaanite woman.

Levi's sons were Gershon ('exile'); Kohath ('assembly'); and Merari ('bitter'). The sons of Judah were Er ('awake'); the infamous Onan ('strong'); Shelah ('a petition'); Pharez (Perez: 'breach'); Zerah ('rising'). Er and Onon died at a fairly young age. Pharez and Zerah were twins, whose mother was Tamar. Several descendents later, the family of Pharez became the royal line of David and Jesus Christ.

It is interesting (and should be encouraging) that though one son of Judah, Onan, was judged guilty by God and died for his sin, another son was the ancestor of the royal line that led to the Lord Jesus Christ. We all fail, and sometimes so do our children. But, all is not lost. God chose a son of Levi to be head of a magnificent family line, even though another son was condemned. Many parents have children who appear to be lost or far away spiritually. But, God's plans prevail and whether we see fruit in our lifetime, or changes occur after our time, God will bring about blessings to those He has chosen. Do not despair over children – let God take them in hand!

Added to the grandchildren we are given the names of great grandchildren, the sons of Pharez, Hezron ('surrounded by a wall') and Hamul ('spared'). Issachar's sons were Tola ('worm'); Phuvah ('splendid'); Job (Jashub: 'persecuted') and Shimron ('watch-height').

The names of Zebulun's sons are Sered ('fear'); Elon ('terebinth, mighty') and Jahleel ('God waits'). There were 33 in all, from this one line, including daughters who are not named here.

Verses 15-18

1.

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“These be the sons of Leah, which she bare unto Jacob in Padan-aram, with his daughter Dinah: all the souls of his sons and his daughters were thirty and three.

2.

And the sons of Gad; Ziphion, and Haggi, Shuni, and Ezbon, Eri, and Arodi, and Areli.

3.

And the sons of Asher; Jimnah, and Ishuah, and Isui, and Beriah, and Serah their sister: and the sons of Beriah; Heber, and Malchiel.

4.

These are the sons of Zilpah, whom Laban gave to Leah his daughter, and these she bare unto Jacob, even sixteen souls.”

The sons of Gad were Ziphion (‘lookout’); Haggi (‘festive’); Shuni (‘fortunate’); Ezbon (‘hasting to discern: I will be enlargement’); Eri (‘watchful’); Arodi (‘I shall subdue: I shall roam’); Areli (‘lion of God’).

Asher’s sons were Jimnah (‘right hand’); Ishuah (‘he will resemble’); Isui (‘he resembles me’); Beriah (‘with a friend’), and their sister Serah (Sarah, Serach: ‘the prince breathed’). Two sons of Beriah are also named: Heber (‘comrade’) and Malchiel (‘my king is God’). These were born to Zilpah; 16 in all.

Verses 19-22

1.

“The sons of Rachel Jacob's wife; Joseph, and Benjamin.

2.

And unto Joseph in the land of Egypt were born Manasseh and Ephraim, which Asenath the daughter of Poti-pherah priest of On bare unto him

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3.

And the sons of Benjamin were Belah, and Becher, and Ashbel, Gera, and Naaman, Ehi, and Rosh, Muppim, and Huppim, and Ard.

4.

These are the sons of Rachel, which were born to Jacob: all the souls were fourteen.”

We then come to the sons of Rachel, Joseph and Benjamin. The two sons of Joseph have already been named in a previous chapter. The sons of Benjamin were Belah ('destruction'); Becher ('young camel'); Ashbel ('a man in God: I will make a path' and other meanings); Gera ('a grain'); Naaman ('pleasantness'); Ehi ('my brother'); Rosh ('head'); Muppim ('serpent'); Huppim ('protected') and Ard ('I shall subdue'). 14 were born of this line.

Verses 23- 27

1.

“And the sons of Dan; Hushim.

2.

And the sons of Naphtali; Jahzeel, and Guni, and Jezer, and Shillem.

3.

These are the sons of Bilhah, which Laban gave unto Rachel his daughter, and she bare these unto Jacob: all the souls were seven.

4.

All the souls that came with Jacob into Egypt, which came out of his loins, besides Jacob's sons' wives, all the souls were threescore and six;

5.

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And the sons of Joseph, which were born him in Egypt, were two souls: all the souls of the house of Jacob, which came into Egypt, were threescore and ten.”

The sons of Dan and Naphtali, through the line of Bilhah, were seven in all: Dan had Hushim (‘who makes haste’); Naphtali had Jahzreel (‘God divides’); Guni (possibly means ‘my defender’); Jezer (‘forming’) and Shillem (‘repaid’). Note the interesting theological note hidden in the name of Jahzreel, ‘God divides’.

Many Christians believe God only unites and that His word unifies. This is not the case. There are times, many times, when God will divide, not unify. Unification is only possible where truth is adhered-to. Thus, churches and Christians cannot unify unless they all obey God in truth. Love is not enough. Indeed, love without truth is dubious as a possibility! How can Christians love each other ‘in truth’ when truth has been set aside? It is not possible. Counting Joseph’s two sons, 70 people entered Egypt.

Verses 28- 34

1.

“And he sent Judah before him unto Joseph, to direct his face unto Goshen; and they came into the land of Goshen.

2.

And Joseph made ready his chariot, and went up to meet Israel his father, to Goshen, and presented himself unto him; and he fell on his neck, and wept on his neck a good while.

3.

And Israel said unto Joseph, Now let me die, since I have seen thy face, because thou art yet alive.

4.

And Joseph said unto his brethren, and unto his father's house, I will go up, and shew Pharaoh, and say unto him, My brethren, and my father's house, which were in the land of Canaan, are come unto me;

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5.

And the men are shepherds, for their trade hath been to feed cattle; and they have brought their flocks, and their herds, and all that they have.

6.

And it shall come to pass, when Pharaoh shall call you, and shall say, What is your occupation?

7.

That ye shall say, Thy servants' trade hath been about cattle from our youth even until now, both we, and also our fathers: that ye may dwell in the land of Goshen; for every shepherd is an abomination unto the Egyptians.”

Judah was sent ahead of the main number to meet Joseph and to receive directions to their final homeland in Goshen. As Jacob and his retinue travelled to Goshen, Joseph went to meet him in his chariot. When he arrived, he “presented himself to him”. That is, to see him. This would no doubt have included Joseph bowing in reverence to Jacob. Joseph might have been the mighty ruler of Egypt, but he was still a son! Modern Christians must always remember to pay reverence to their parents, even if those parents have not been ideal.

Joseph was overcome and wept for a long time clasped to his father. Then, Jacob was satisfied and said ‘I can now die, now that I have seen you are alive’.

After the greetings, Joseph gave his plan of action – he would now return to Pharaoh and tell him his family had arrived at the place given to them as a gift. He would tell them they were shepherds, who have brought their cattle and flocks with them. Pharaoh would issue an audience with them and would ask what their jobs were. They must answer that, like their ancestors, they have been shepherds all their lives.

Why should Joseph emphasise the very occupation that Egyptians despised? Joseph’s words seem to explain, “that ye may dwell in the land of Goshen; for every shepherd is an abomination

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unto the Egyptians.”

This was high-level strategy! Goshen was good agricultural land, and this was why even Pharaoh used it to feed his own flocks and cattle. By declaring that they were shepherds with flocks and cattle, the family were assured sole possession, as no Egyptian would want to live in an area occupied by shepherds. In this way the family would grow into the nation of Hebrews, gathering goods and valuables before they were enslaved.

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