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SHOULD I MOVE, SHOULD I STAY?

Genesis 46:1-30

By

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Genesis Lesson 77

Should I Move, Should I Stay? Genesis 46:1-30

What is the longest you have ever lived in one house? If it's more than five years, you're above the national average. One out of five Americans moves every year. We are a transient nation. My father had an uncle who lived and died without ever traveling more than 50 miles from the place where he was born. In that day and before, generations often would stay in the same small community. Our frequent moving has fragmented the extended family. A few years ago a survey of American undergraduate students revealed that three-fourths of them could not give the first and last names of all four of their grandparents.

Sometimes I've been surprised at how quickly American Christians will move their families from one location to another without much thought or prayer. There are always reasons--they got a better job offer, they like the area, they want to get away from the crowded city and the crime, they want a better place to raise kids, etc. Some of those factors are worth considering, of course. But at times it seems that Christians hardly consider the Lord and His purpose. The local church and our ministry in a particular church ought to be important factors when considering any move. Of course there are times when God wants us to move. The question is, "How can I know whether God wants me to move or stay?"

In Genesis 46:1-30, Jacob moves his whole extended family down to Egypt. It was not an easy thing for a 130-year-old man to do! There was a famine in Canaan and his son Joseph had promised them the best of Egypt. Jacob desperately wanted to see Joseph, whom for 22 years, he had thought was dead. But Jacob knew that his grandfather, Abraham, had gotten into trouble in Egypt. God had forbidden his father, Isaac, to go there during another famine (26:2). Jacob knew that God's promise involved Canaan, not Egypt. So he stopped in Beersheba to seek the Lord and did not move on to Egypt until the Lord gave him a green light.

One of the main reasons Moses included this section was to show how this move out of the Promised Land fit in with the covenant plan of God. This story gives us some factors to consider when we are faced with a move:

When considering a move, seek the Lord
and His perspective above all else.

Our text falls into three sections: (1) The move to Egypt (46:1-7); (2) The people who moved (46:8-27); and, (3) The reunion of Jacob and Joseph. I'm going to glean one principle from each section in relation to the matter of God's guidance when facing a potential move.

1. Put a brake on your emotions and seek the Lord.

When Jacob finally believed his sons' report that Joseph was alive and ruler of all Egypt, going to see Joseph became the consuming passion of his remaining life. Joseph had invited Jacob and the whole family to move to Egypt, where he would provide for them through the famine. So Jacob had his sons load the wagons and the whole extended family set off for Egypt.

The first night they arrived at Beersheba, at the southern end of Canaan. Beersheba stirred up many memories for Jacob. More than 40 years before Jacob's birth his grandfather, Abraham, had made a covenant with Abimelech, king of the Philistines, there. He had planted a tamarisk tree and called on the name of the Lord (21:31-33). It was at Beersheba that Jacob's father, Isaac, had seen the Lord, who had reconfirmed His promises to bless him and multiply his descendants (26:23-25). Isaac had dug a well there. It was at Beersheba that Jacob had tricked his father by stealing the blessing from his brother, Esau, and fled north to escape from his brother's anger (27:30-28:10).

So now, as the old man sat under his grandfather's tamarisk tree and drank water from his father's well, he was flooded with the memories of a lifetime. As he reminisced about these things, Jacob probably grew a bit uneasy about his move to Egypt. He desperately wanted to see his beloved Joseph. But in light of God's past dealings with him, his father, and grandfather, did God want him to make this move?

Egypt was quite different than Canaan. Both were thoroughly pagan, but Egypt was sophisticated, noted for its prosperity and technology. It was the most civilized and developed nation on earth at that time. Jacob and his sons had spent their lives in the country, taking care of livestock. What kind of effect would Egypt have on his family, who had been so easily lured by the evil ways of Canaan? Then there was the trouble his grandfather had gotten into in Egypt and God's warning to his father not to go there. After all, God's promises had never mentioned Egypt, but only Canaan. Was Jacob making a fatal mistake to take his family to Egypt?

So Jacob did a great thing: He stopped in Beersheba "and offered sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac" (46:1). He put a brake on his emotions, which were moving him toward Joseph, and he sought the Lord. I believe that Jacob was primarily looking for guidance, but he did it through this act of consecration and worship. It's important to understand that we can never know the will of God unless we are growing to know God Himself and we have yielded ourselves totally to Him. That's what Paul says in Romans 12:1-2, that by presenting our bodies to God as a living and holy sacrifice we will prove what the will of God is.

The godly George Muller warned against rushing forward in self-will, thinking that you are following God's will. He said, "Seek to have no will of your own, ... so that you can honestly say, you are willing to do the will of God, ..." (*George Muller of Bristol*, by A. T. Pierson [Revell], p. 450).

The Lord spoke to Jacob in "visions of the night" saying, "I am God, the God of your father; do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you a great nation there. I will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also surely bring you up again; and Joseph will close your eyes [in death]" (46:2-4). God wouldn't have said, "Don't be afraid" unless Jacob had been afraid. So God calmed his fears and reconfirmed His promises to him. Jacob was able to go on to Egypt, sure that God was with him in this move. What a comforting assurance from God!

What Jacob did here was not easy because his emotions were running so high over the prospect of being with Joseph. What if when Jacob sought the Lord, He had said, "Don't go"? That was a risk, wasn't it? But Jacob realized that if God wasn't in it, he

wouldn't be happy in going, even if it meant not seeing Joseph. So he put the brakes on his emotions and sought the Lord.

It's easy to get excited about a move. Maybe life has been a bit boring and a move is an adventure. That's U-Haul's motto, "Adventure in Moving." If you've ever driven a U-Haul, you know what that means! Maybe you're tired of your problems in a job or locale and you're ready to trade them in for a new situation. Maybe the move means more money, a greater challenge at work, a bigger home, a more desirable place to live. But if God isn't in it, don't do it! Put the brakes on your excitement long enough to yield yourself fully to Him, to seek Him, and to pray.

What you need, above all else, is to be sensitive to and to hear from the living God. By "hearing from God," I do not mean an audible voice. God does that so rarely that you should not expect it. I'm bothered by people who go around saying, "The Lord told me." You also need to be cautious about subjective impressions. It's easy to be mistaken. But if you are walking closely with the Lord, if you seek godly counsel, and if you apply the wisdom from God's Word in prayerful dependence on His Spirit, He will often give you a strong inner sense of whether a move is from Him or not. I have also found fasting to be helpful as I consider a major decision. I admit that the process is a bit subjective. But knowing the will of God is always connected with knowing God. So I must seek not only God's will, but God Himself. Put a brake on your emotions and seek the Lord Himself.

2. Put thought into God's purposes and obey His leading.

The second section of our text (46:8-27) consists of a long list of names of people we know nothing about. It's not even useful if you're looking for names for your baby, unless you want something like Muppim, Huppim or Ard. But God saw fit to include it in Scripture and we need to think about the reason why.

We need to remember that to the first readers of this book, these names meant something. This is a list of every tribe (and every major family group within that tribe) that later formed the nation Israel. Every Hebrew knew his family ancestry. The division of labor, the organization of the army, and the parceling of the land

all were based on the tribes. Even the coming of the Messiah was through the particular tribe of Judah.

God's way of working is to call individuals to Himself, just as He called Abraham. Through those individuals, He calls families, and through those families, nations are called to obedience to the Savior. God's plan is to bless all nations through the seed of Abraham. That's why, in verse 1, the text says that Jacob offered sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac, and in verse 3, God identifies Himself to Jacob as "the God of your father." Why not Jacob's God? Because this is covenant history, the story of God's dealings with His people. There is a corporate flavor, a sense of continuity between the generations, of God's moving from the individual to the family to the nation in His working.

One of our major blind spots as American Christians is our individualistic approach to the Christian life. I'm not suggesting that we do not need an individual relationship with God. Of course we do! But we have made Christianity so personal that we have lost the sense of belonging to the church as God's covenant people, His extended family, just as Israel was His people. Because we don't know church history, we don't have a sense of continuity with those who have gone before us. We join and leave a church according to our personal likes and dislikes. So many people attend a church for years, yet hardly know the others who attend. This lack of belonging makes us vulnerable to the enemy.

These lists of boring names meant something to Moses's readers because this was family. Their identity was tied up in being of a certain family, of a certain tribe, of the nation descended from Israel. They saw themselves as a distinct people, set apart unto God. That's why verse 10 singles out a son of Simeon whose mother was a Canaanite woman. That was both unusual and wrong. God's people were not to intermarry with the pagans. They were to be distinct.

The way this applies to us in considering a move is that we never ought to make a move without considering our relationships with the family of God. If our identity is really bound up with this family of God in this locale, then to sever that connection by moving somewhere else ought to be done only after the most careful, prayerful consideration. Why does God want me to move from

this expression of His family to another? Is there a solid Christian church in the new community where my family and I can grow and serve? If not, is God calling me to help establish such? If not, why am I going there? If it's just for a better job or lifestyle, am I really seeking first God's kingdom and righteousness? God's purpose through His church ought to be at the heart of any decision to move, whether you're in "full time" ministry or not.

This list of names would have reminded Moses's readers of their identity as God's people in fulfilling His purposes. Also, it would have reminded them that the outworking of God's purposes takes time, but it is absolutely certain. When Abraham was 75, God told him that He would make of him a great nation. Abraham was 100 before Isaac was born. Isaac was 60 before Jacob and Esau were born. Now Jacob was 130, and the "great nation," after 215 years, consisted of these 70 descendants of Abraham. That's not a quick start. But in the 400 or so years from Jacob to Moses, the number had mushroomed from 70 to over two million!

What God promises and purposes to do, He does, even though from our perspective it takes a long time. Our lifetimes are too short to measure God's purpose. Our task is to understand God's missionary purpose for the world (to bless all nations through Abraham's seed) and to devote our lives to seeing that purpose brought about, even if it seems as if God is slow about His promises (see 2 Pet. 3:3-13).

David Livingstone, the great pioneer missionary to central Africa, was criticized in his day for being more of an explorer than a missionary. But Livingstone understood what many of his contemporaries did not, that Africa could only be opened to the gospel as trade routes were opened to the interior and as the slave trade was stamped out. He said that he would never live to see the fruit of his labors for Christ, but that in 100 years, the difference would be seen. He was right. Africa today has a strong Christian witness, thanks in large part to Livingstone's foresight. He saw God's purpose for Africa and he obeyed God's leading for his life.

Not many of us are Livingstones. But we do need to consider God's purpose for the nations when we think about a move. Maybe He wants you to work in a foreign country that is closed to traditional missionaries. There are many Christian "tentmakers" in

our day who are deliberately moving to “closed” countries to work and witness as Christians. If God wants you to stay in the U.S., He still wants you to think in missionary terms. Which people does He want you to reach? So many Christians want to move to get away from people. Why do that when God’s purpose is to use us to reach them with the gospel?

Before I go on to the third point relating to a decision to move, I need to mention that there are several problems with this list. Some of the names here vary from other parallel lists (in Numbers 26 and 1 Chronicles 2-8). Some of these can be explained as variant spellings or as different names of the same person (a common practice). There is no reason to think that there are errors.

Another problem is that Benjamin is listed here as having ten sons, although he was only in his early twenties. In Numbers 26:40, some of these sons are said to be his grandsons (the Hebrews didn’t distinguish as carefully between the two terms as we do). When Moses writes that these 70 went down to Egypt, we need to understand the statement from the Hebrew perspective. He is writing covenant history, aimed at showing the roots of the Hebrew nation. His purpose here is to list the men who eventually became the heads of the twelve tribes and the sons and grandsons who became the founders of the major clans in Israel. What he means is that shortly after Israel and his sons came to Egypt, perhaps during Joseph’s lifetime, these 70 fathers, from whom the various clans of Israel descended, were born. Not all 70 had to be in the caravan from Canaan to Egypt to fit into Moses’s way of thinking and purpose. The fact that they were “in their father’s loins” means that they could be counted (see Heb. 7:9-10).

Another problem concerns the fact that Moses lists 70 persons, whereas Stephen, in his sermon before the Jewish council, says 75 (Acts 7:14). Stephen was quoting from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, which includes some people the Hebrew text omits. So it is a matter of whom you count. Stephen quoted from that version because it was the popular text of his day. For Moses, 70 was a significant number. Seven is the number of the divine covenant, ten the number of completeness. So these 70 names represent the completeness of God’s covenant

promises to the fathers (so Keil, Leupold). This list is a confirmation that God's promised blessing was intact.

To return to our theme, we have seen that seeking the Lord and His perspective above all else is the key to God's will concerning a move. Put a brake on your emotions and seek the Lord; and, put thought into God's purposes and obey His leading. Finally,

3. Put a premium on family relationships and enjoy God's blessings.

I derive this point from the emotional reunion of Jacob and Joseph (46:28-30). Words could never describe the emotion of this scene. Thus it is told in the briefest manner: The old father and his son whom he thought dead, who hadn't seen each other for these 22 years, fall on each other's neck and weep for a long time. Jacob says, "Now let me die, since I have seen your face, that you are still alive." He means, "In seeing you, I have experienced everything I want in life."

Real joy in life comes through relationships, not through where you live or what you own. God has given us the family as the primary place to nurture those relationships. You can climb to the top of your career, even a "Christian career," and have all the goodies that go along with success. But if you neglect your family to get there, you'll come up empty.

I like reading biographies of great Christians. Other than Calvin's *Institutes*, I have learned more through such books than through any other book, except the Bible. But one of the sad things I've learned is that some of the great men of God neglected their families in order to pursue their ministries. Of course, they didn't have jets to take them across oceans in a matter of hours. They believed that they were obeying Christ's words about not loving family members above Him. I'm not questioning their motives or love for Christ. But the bottom line is, they would be gone from their families for months, in some cases years, at a time. In many cases, their families suffered because of it.

That bothers me. If God has called me to have a family, then He wants my family life to be a priority. That's a qualification for being a church leader. If He has also called me to be an itinerant

missionary, then I'd better take my family with me as much as possible. Children often think that an absent father has rejected them, no matter how much he may love them. There is no way you can make up for not being there those few short years your kids are growing up. I don't view being gone from your family for great periods of time as a sacrifice for the Lord. I view it as a neglect of a man's primary responsibility of modeling his faith in his home.

So before you make a move, ask yourself, "How will this effect my family relationships?" Will it give me more time to be with my family, to teach them the Lord's ways, to model before them what it means to walk with God? Will it give us as a family a better platform to serve the Lord together? Or will it simply foster my career at the expense of my family relationships?

Conclusion

The late Senator Paul Tsongas, then 43, shocked the political world when he announced in 1984 that he would not seek reelection because he was suffering from cancer and he wanted to spend more time with his family. His cancer was treatable, and he could have pursued his career. But he said, "One night my children went to sleep with my arms around them and I realized that for seven years this might rarely happen again. I used to walk my kids to school and think about reelection. Now I walk my kids to school and think about them. My life is richer." He adds, "Someone wrote me, 'No one on his deathbed ever says he wished he had spent more time on his business.'" (*Reader's Digest* [9/84, pp. 163-164].)

To my knowledge, Mr. Tsongas was not a believer. So while he got his family values right, he still didn't have his overall priorities straight. What I've been saying to you is, "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added unto you" (Matt. 6:33). When considering a move, put God and His purposes first. That will bring everything else--your family, your ministry, your career--into proper focus.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you agree that American Christians are too individualistic? What are some signs of this?
2. When we're seeking God's will how can we know whether an inner sense of peace is from Him or not?
3. Should every Christian be focused on fulfilling the Great Commission? If not, what does Matthew 6:33 mean? If so, what are the implications?
4. Do you agree that fathers should not be absent often from their kids? Should a man change his job if it requires this?