

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver Street
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001

THE PROSPERITY THAT COUNTS

Genesis 46:31-47:31

By

Steven J. Cole

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Genesis Lesson 78

THE PROSPERITY THAT COUNTS Genesis 46:31-47:31

Sometimes stores offer contests where the winner has a certain amount of time to run through the store and select as many items as he or she can. After the time is up, the prices are totaled, but the person doesn't have to pay.

If you won a contest like that, before your mad dash through the store you probably would think carefully about what you wanted to get. You would go for the items that cost the most and that you needed the most. You wouldn't waste time on the cheap or frivolous. You would be focused on getting the most for your time.

In a way, life is a lot like that contest. The difference is, we don't know how much time we have to do what we want to do. But the clock is running and we all spend our time in one way or another. The question is, when the clock stops, will we have our baskets full of the things that really matter or will we have a cart full of trivial things that are worthless in light of eternity?

It's easy to say, "I want to seek first God's kingdom and righteousness." But it's also easy to be distracted by things that are not so important. You rush through the daily routine. Before you know it, you've spent your life on things that you probably wouldn't have chosen if you'd sat down and thought about it beforehand. They aren't necessarily bad things. Outwardly it may seem that we're doing well. But if we don't prosper in what God wants, we've missed the prosperity that really counts.

Whenever I come to a portion of Scripture like this, I ask the question, "Why did the author include this section in this book?" Moses could have abbreviated it or left it out altogether. But he chose to devote a fair amount of space describing Joseph's introduction of his brothers and father to Pharaoh and the account of Joseph's administration of Egypt during the famine.

As I thought about the text, two strands emerged: the prosperity of God's people, Israel; and, by way of contrast, the dire straits of the Egyptians, who were nonetheless saved through Joseph's wise administration. You see this in 47:6, where Pharaoh

tells Joseph that he can settle his brothers in the best of the land and gives them charge over his livestock. It comes through in the contrast of 47:12-13, which states that Joseph provided his family with food, but there was no food in the land because of the severe famine. Verses 14-26 describe the desperate situation in Egypt, where the people offer themselves as Pharaoh's slaves and give up their land just to survive. Verse 27 shows the contrast, that Israel acquired property, was fruitful and became very numerous.

These themes of the prosperity of God's people and the preservation of Egypt through Joseph tie in with the theme of God's covenant with Abraham (12:1-3). God had promised to bless Abraham, to make him a great nation and to bless all nations through his descendants. Here we see God beginning to bless Abraham's descendants and to use them to be a blessing to others. But God's promise didn't involve settling His people in Egypt, but Canaan. So at the end of the chapter, we see Jacob clinging to that promise by faith as he asks Joseph to bury him in Canaan. By doing that, he is saying to his posterity, "Even though you prosper in Egypt, don't forget that God's promise involves Canaan. Follow me back there!" Applying this to us the Lord is saying,

Commit yourself to make God and His purpose prosper
and He will make you truly prosper.

It's another way of saying, "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be added unto you" (Matt. 6:33). When the final buzzer sounds, what matters is God and His purpose. If we commit ourselves to Him, He will take care of the other things we need.

The question is, How do we do that in the midst of life's pressures? How do I order my life to make God and His purpose prosper? I'd like to outline three ways, one from each of the sections of the text. In 46:31-47:6, Joseph prepares his brothers for their interview with Pharaoh and there is the interview itself; it shows us the principle of *distinctness*. In 47:7-26, Jacob meets and blesses Pharaoh and Joseph administers the famine relief program over Egypt; it shows us the principle of *blessing others*. And, in 47:27-31, as Jacob nears death (17 years later), he asks Joseph to promise that he will bury him in Canaan, not Egypt; it shows us the principle of *priorities*.

1. You make God and His purpose prosper by being distinct unto Him (46:31-47:6).

As Joseph's brothers came into the land with all their flocks and herds, Joseph needed to inform Pharaoh and gain his consent for them to live in the land of Goshen. So he coaches his brothers on what to say when they meet Pharaoh. In 46:31 & 32, Joseph tells them that he will tell Pharaoh that they are shepherds and keepers of livestock. He asks his brothers to give Pharaoh the same message, not to try to impress him that they are something they are not. He lets them know his purpose: "that you may live in the land of Goshen; for every shepherd is loathsome to the Egyptians" (vs. 34). He's warning his brothers that Pharaoh isn't going to think highly of their occupation, but that it will probably result in their getting the land of Goshen to themselves. Sure enough, that's what happened.

Why would Joseph want to keep his family in the land of Goshen? The main reason was to keep them separate from the fast lane in Egypt. Joseph probably had a hunch that Pharaoh might offer his brothers top government jobs, since he was so favorable toward Joseph. But that could easily be the downfall of these men. While Joseph could handle the high society life in Egypt and remain pure before the Lord, his brothers probably could not. For God's purpose to be fulfilled, Israel had to be a distinct nation, set apart unto Him. So Joseph's concern was that God's people, Joseph's family, maintain their distinctiveness in spite of the ridicule that may come from the Egyptians.

One of the greatest needs for God's people today is that we be distinct from the world, set apart unto God. The biblical term for that is holiness. It grieves me when I hear of Christians acting the same as the world acts. When Christians use abusive speech toward their mates or children, when they are dishonest in business, when they live for selfish pursuits, when they are morally impure, the salt has lost its savor. Biblical holiness starts with the way we think, where we stand apart from our culture and live to please God according to His Word. But that's not going to happen if we spend 20 hours a week in front of the tube and an hour or less meditating on God's Word.

One reason that holiness is so hard is that we all want to be popular with the "Egyptians." Shepherds were loathsome to the

Egyptians. They didn't consider shepherding a status job. Joseph and his family had to anticipate the scorn of the Egyptians in their commitment to live separately unto God in Goshen. And you have to recognize up front that if you're going to follow the Lord, you may not win any popularity contests. You may be respected, as Joseph was. But more often than not, the world ridicules you behind your back, if not to your face, for living a holy life.

But there are some benefits to making a commitment to be distinct from the world. Look at 47:6: Pharaoh says, "The land of Egypt is at your disposal; settle your father and your brothers in the best of the land ...; and if you know any capable men among them, then put them in charge of my livestock." God gave His people the best of the land and extra work besides!

I'll be the first to admit that it's easy to talk about being holy, but it's another thing to do it when the pressure is on. We're saints by calling, but we're still creatures of the flesh. I face the same temptations you do to bend the truth at times, to gratify the flesh, to be selfish and greedy. It's only by spending consistent time alone with God in His Word that I have the strength to "deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age" (Titus 2:12).

So the first principle of making God and His purpose prosper is to be distinct from the world. If Israel had gotten absorbed into Egyptian life, God's purpose to use them would have been thwarted.

2. You make God and His purpose prosper by being a blessing to others (47:7-26).

Next Joseph presents his aged father to Pharaoh. Jacob blesses Pharaoh. Then we see Pharaoh prospering under Joseph's administration of the famine relief. I believe that this section is here to show us an initial fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant, as God's blessing is mediated to the nations through the seed of Abraham. In type, Israel became the savior of the Gentiles through Joseph. Let's look first at Jacob's blessing Pharaoh and then at Joseph's administration of the famine.

Jacob may have blessed Pharaoh twice, once upon entering and again as he exited. Or, verse 7 may be a summary of what follows, so that Jacob blessed Pharaoh just prior to leaving.

Pharaoh asked the old patriarch his age and he responded with his self-pitying answer (47:9). I'm surprised that most commentators see this as a great witness. They point out how Jacob testified that life is a pilgrimage and that even 130 years is short in light of eternity.

But to me, that's going overboard to give Jacob the benefit of the doubt. I think that Jacob's answer reflects his lifelong pessimism. He always wavered between faith and doubt. He gives a completely different and far better summary of his life in 48:15-16, when he blesses Joseph's sons by saying, "The God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day, the angel who has redeemed me from all evil, bless the lads." That testimony reflects God's perspective on Jacob's life. His words before Pharaoh reflect life from the human perspective.

But, in spite of that, Jacob did bless Pharaoh. The exact words are not recorded, but probably it was a prayer that God would prosper Pharaoh and be gracious to him. It is significant that this old shepherd, whose occupation was despised by the Egyptians, could walk in before their leader, with all his pomp and splendor, and not be intimidated. Instead Jacob knew that he had something to offer Pharaoh, namely, a blessing from the living God.

Each of us has that same blessing to offer every person we meet. It may be a wealthy and famous person, like Pharaoh. Perhaps it's your boss or someone who is sophisticated and cultured compared to you. It doesn't matter. We can offer that person the good news of Jesus Christ. We've got what that person needs and we shouldn't be intimidated by all the outward stuff that doesn't matter to God.

On one occasion a man named Peter Cartwright was about to preach when his deacons informed him that President Andrew Jackson had unexpectedly showed up. They asked him to be careful what he said. He stood up to preach and began, "I understand that Andrew Jackson is with us today, and I have been asked to be guarded in my remarks. Andrew Jackson will go to hell as quickly as any other man if he does not repent!" The congregation was shocked, wondering how the President would react. At the close of the meeting, President Jackson shook Cartwright's hand and said, "Sir, if I had a regiment of men like you, I could whip the world." Perhaps Cartwright was a bit rough, but to his credit he knew that

President Jackson was a sinner who needed the same as everyone else.

Jacob thought he was going to die soon (45:28; 46:30; 47:9), but he lived for 17 more years. Some people think they're at death's door, but God will give them many more years. Others think they have many more years, but they're unknowingly at death's door. Since none of us knows how long we're going to live, we need to live each day in light of eternity, redeeming the time by blessing others with the good news of Christ.

Jacob's blessing in word was fulfilled in deed by Joseph's wise administration on Pharaoh's behalf. Notice the contrast between verse 12, which states that Joseph provided his family with food, and verse 13 which says that there was no food in the land because of the famine. God's people prospered while the Egyptians used up their money, then their cattle, then offered themselves and their land to become Pharaoh's slaves so that they could survive this famine.

Many have criticized Joseph, accusing him of being harsh and of degrading these people through slavery. But that is to read this story through the lens of our culture. The people's evaluation of Joseph was, "You have saved our lives! Let us find favor in the sight of my lord" (47:25). If they were happy with him, who are we to criticize him? This was a life and death situation. Their concern wasn't democracy; it was survival. Joseph could have done what many in his position have done, namely, to use his power to feather his own pocket and that of his cronies. He could have rationalized it by saying, "Pharaoh is already rich, and besides, he's a tyrant." But he didn't do that. He wasn't making a personal profit at the expense of starving people. He sought the best interests of Pharaoh and of the people, and everyone sensed that.

True, this wasn't democracy. But neither was it a terrible situation. Democracy was virtually unknown at this stage of world history. The slavery which Joseph instituted was not the degrading kind that was often practiced in our country. Probably Joseph moved the people to the cities for more efficient distribution of the grain (47:21), but we would be reading into the text to assume that he split up families and carried people off in chains as the African slave traders did. He instituted a 20 percent flat tax, which really isn't bad. When you take into account federal and state income tax,

sales tax, property tax, gas tax, inheritance tax, business taxes (passed on to the consumer in hidden form), and social security tax, not to mention various “user fees,” most Americans pay far more than 20 percent.

But it was no small feat for a politician to please the one over him while at the same time having his constituents thank him while he sells them into slavery and institutes a 20 percent tax hike! But Joseph did what few have done: he was a skillful politician and administrator while at the same time he was a man who put first the kingdom of God and His righteousness. He was truly a blessing to others.

That’s what God wants you to be in your world, whether at work, in the neighborhood, or at school. He wants you to seek the best interests of your employer and fellow employees at work. He wants you to be His channel for blessing those around your neighborhood or your fellow students and your teachers. You can only do that if you maintain your integrity through a close walk with God. You do it both through your words (as Jacob did) and your deeds (as Joseph did).

Your job reveals a lot about your character. It shows whether you are lazy, greedy, given to deception under pressure, whether you can get along with people, if you gossip, if you compromise your standards when it’s expedient. Or, it shows that you are punctual, industrious, generous, truthful, harmonious, trustworthy, loyal, a person of principle.

Christians often presume on their Christian employer for favors. “After all, we’re brothers in the Lord. He’ll understand if I take time on the job to witness or if I use business supplies for myself.” But unless your employer has given you permission, you’re out of line. Joseph didn’t presume upon Pharaoh. He didn’t pull rank and remind Pharaoh of how he had saved his throne. He was open and up front with him about his family. Pharaoh is the one who told them to take the land of Goshen (45:18-19, 47:6, 11).

So wherever God has you, purpose to be distinct as a Christian and to be a blessing to those around you through your godly behavior and verbal witness.

3. You make God and His purpose prosper by keeping your priorities right when God prospers you (47:27-31).

Jacob's final 17 years were probably the best years of his life. He had his children restored to him. His extended family prospered. It would have been easy for him to think, "Egypt isn't such a bad place. We've had a good life here. God has taken care of us. Let's just settle in for the long haul." But instead, as he came near to death, he called Joseph and made him swear that he would bury him in Canaan, not in Egypt. He wanted his posterity to remember that God's promise involved Canaan. He didn't want them to settle indefinitely in Egypt.

That took some faith on Jacob's part. It had been over 200 years since God had promised Canaan to Abraham. Here his grandson, Jacob, is, dying in Egypt with no tangible indication that God's promise about Canaan would be fulfilled. It would have been so easy for him, especially in light of the hard times he had experienced in Canaan and the good times he had enjoyed in Egypt, to have set God's promise for Canaan on the shelf. But in spite of his prosperity in Egypt, Jacob kept his priorities straight.

When Joseph agreed to Jacob's request, the old patriarch bowed in worship. The best Hebrew reading is probably, "on the top of his staff" (see Heb. 11:21). The author of Hebrews quotes this incident to make the point that Jacob did it by faith. He was believing that God would fulfill His promises concerning Canaan even though it would not belong to Jacob's posterity for over 400 more years. That faith led him to worship God.

The good life in Egypt can never compare to the blessings of the Promised Land. But we all face the danger of becoming enamored with the goodies of Egypt and forgetting that we are looking for that heavenly city to come. God has graciously prospered us in this world. We must remember that our purpose for being here is not to accumulate the things Egypt has to offer. We're here to further God's purpose, to communicate the good news of Christ to every tribe and tongue and nation. The person who by faith lays up treasure in heaven is truly prosperous, as Jesus pointed out. He has something that the world cannot give or take away.

CONCLUSION

Let's come back to that contest. Each of us has used up some of the time on the clock. We've all got some things in our shopping cart. I want you to look at those things in light of eternity. Are they the things that will really matter when the time is up? If not, you've still got some time left. Use that time to make God and His purpose prosper. Use your time and treasure in light of eternity. If you'll do that, God will make sure that you truly prosper.

If you've never met Christ as your Savior, you may be very successful by this world's standards, but you've missed the prosperity that really counts. Someday soon you will die and then who will own all that you have worked to accumulate? Jesus advises us to be rich toward God. That process begins when by faith you receive God's offer to forgive your sins and give you eternal life as His free gift.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Does being distinct as a Christian mean being weird? If not, what is at the heart of being holy unto the Lord?
2. How separate from our culture must we be? Should we avoid watching popular movies and TV shows? Don't we have to be in the world to relate to worldly people?
3. Do some professions make it impossible for Christians to maintain integrity? Can a Christian be a good criminal attorney, a good politician, a successful corporate executive, etc. and still be totally upright?
4. To what degree may Christians enjoy worldly prosperity? Must we give away everything above a subsistence level to be seeking first God's kingdom?

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