

Genesis 48 "The Difference Grace Makes When Death Approaches"^{**1}

Main Idea: In Genesis 48 we see the difference grace makes when death approaches. Divine grace shows up in three ways as Jacob nears death.

I. The body breaks down (1-2).

II. The blessing is given (3-20).

A. Jacob shared two things with his son, Joseph.

1. He shared about the moment God changed his life.

2. He shared the promises God had made to him.

B. Jacob blessed Joseph and his sons.

III. The benefits are anticipated (21-22).

A. There was a benefit for Joseph.

1. Jacob gave him a special piece of land.

2. Jacob gave him a valuable lesson. He had learned to live, *and to die*, in the light of God's

promises.

B. There can be benefits for us.

1. There's a heaven to gain, and a hell to avoid. (Jn 3:36)

2. There's a Savior who is coming again to rule. (Rev 22:20)

3. There's coming a day when we will all give an account of our lives.

(2 Cor 5:10; Rev 20:13)

Make It Personal: In order to die well, grace makes all the difference.

Scripture Reading: Hebrews 11:13-22

The Bible is the true account of what God has done to rescue a people who were once alienated from Him, forgive them, and then give them the promise of a life with Him that will never end. He sent His Son into the world, so that by His death and conquering of death, those who believe in Him might enjoy eternal life.

For God so loved the world...that whosoever believes...should have eternal life.

For the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

By grace are you saved.

So if you have been saved, then you know you have life beyond this life. And if you know that, it makes all the difference when death approaches.

That's what we see in Genesis 48 as Jacob nears death. It's a very personal account that has much to say to us about how to die well, for the glory of God and the good of those around us.

Several years ago I read the story of Howard Rutledge. On November 28, 1965 something happened that changed his life forever. Rutledge was the Executive Officer of Fighter Squadron 191 in the Vietnam war. On that particular day he flew his F-8 Crusader jet on a mission to destroy a strategic bridge in North Vietnam. But his aircraft was shot and seconds later exploded. He evacuated just in time, and survived. While dangling from a parachute 1000 feet above North Vietnam, Rutledge said, "Thank You, God!" In his own admission, it was the first time he had prayed in 20 years.

But his struggle was not over. Rutledge was captured by the enemy. He was taken as a POW to the notorious Hanoi Hilton. For the next 7 long years, he would live in the shadow of death. His imprisonment which consisted of unimaginable physical and mental abuse lasted from 1965 until 1972. Five of those years he spent in solitary confinement.

** Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ This message is adapted from two series at WBC in 1992 and 2002.

Rutledge shared his own account of the ordeal in his biography, *In the Presence of Mine Enemies*. When Rutledge was shot down he left behind a wife and 4 children. Sadly he admitted that since he was a child, he never had time for spiritual things. He ignored the pleas of his wife and children, and was too busy to go to church with them. He had no room for God in his life. He had his own agenda.

That all changed when he was locked in a dark, cold, filthy 6x6 cell, all alone, with nothing but rotting pumpkin or seaweed soup, and a small loaf of stale french bread to eat.

Later, after being released, Rutledge said something that's deserves our attention. He said, "During those long periods of enforced reflection it became so much easier to separate the important from the trivial, the worth-while from the waste."²

By God's gracious working, Rutledge not only looked into death's eye for seven years and survived, but he left a changed man. His body was broken, but his spirit made new. He had learned to separate the important from the trivial in life.

How does a person die with dignity? One day, should our Lord not return first, each of us will die. What can we do now to make sure we don't come to that day with regrets? Today, we're going to see the biblical example of a man who did.

Here's a key statement. The person who dies with dignity is the person who lives in such a way that when he is gone, he leaves his family with something that will live on.

That's exactly what we see happen in Genesis 48-49. For several months now we have been marveling at God's man Joseph. We began in Genesis 37 when Joseph as a mere 17 year old teenager was betrayed by his own jealous brothers, and sold into slavery. His life bottomed out when he was framed by Potiphar's seductive wife, and sent to prison for two years.

But God's hand was upon Joseph. The Lord took Joseph from a prison and made him prime minister of Egypt. He sovereignly placed Joseph at the right place at the right time to accomplish salvation for His people, initially salvation from a famine, but ultimately salvation for the world through the Messiah who came from that family.

In Genesis 48-49, Joseph moves again out of the limelight. This has never really been a story about him. This is God's story. Now his father Jacob takes center stage in God's story. In Genesis 48, the aged and dying Jacob blesses Joseph. In Genesis 49, Jacob gives his final blessing to all twelve of his sons. It's a moving account.

So what difference does grace make as death approaches? In Genesis 48 we see the answer. God's sufficient grace shows up in three ways as Jacob nears death.

I. The body breaks down (1-2).

Verse 1, "Some time later Joseph was told, 'Your father is ill.' So he took his two sons Manasseh and Ephraim along with him."

When Jacob was 130 years old, he moved to Egypt and settled in Goshen. He would live there 17 years (by the way, it's interesting that Jacob enjoyed the first 17 years of his son Joseph's life, before losing him, and then enjoyed another 17 years in Egypt). The text says that aged Jacob grew ill. In fact, he was about to die. He sent word to the executor of his estate, Joseph. Joseph took his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, and went to see the patriarch.

How old are these grandsons? They're not little kids, probably in their twenties.

² Howard Rutledge, p 39.

Verse 2, “When Jacob was told, ‘Your son Joseph has come to you,’ Israel rallied his strength and sat up on the bed.”

So here's the setting. Jacob knows he's on his final leg of life. He rallies one last time when his delightful son Joseph comes. This could be the last moments they'll enjoy together.

The text makes it clear that Jacob is “ill” [KJV, "sick"]. The Hebrew word can mean "to be weak." It was used of "lame" animals and can mean "wounded," or even "diseased." In 2 Chronicles 21:18, a related word describes King Jehoram who had an "incurable disease."

So Jacob's body is breaking down. Verse 2 indicates that he is bedfast, and according to verse 10 he's nearly blind.

Now compare we're seeing in Genesis 48 to what we're seeing today. In our country five states have Death with Dignity statutes: California (2016), Colorado (2016), Oregon (1994/1997), Vermont (2013), Washington (2008). That means if your quality of life isn't what you think it should be—like being bedfast and blind—you can end it.

With dignity, they say.

And it's happening. In Oregon, as of January 27, 2016, 991 patients have died from ingesting the drugs that were legally prescribed to them under the law.

In Washington, since 2009, there have been 712 reported deaths.

In Vermont, between May 2013 and May 2016, physician reporting forms have been completed for 24 people, according to the Department of Health.³

This raises some vital questions. Is there any reason for a person who is terminally ill to go on living? Does a person who is bedfast and blind have a sufficient reason to continue living?

The message we're hearing increasingly in our enlightened society is "No." So if a person can't contribute meaningfully, or if the person has little prospect for a quality of life as defined in utilitarian terms, there's no reason for the person to continue living. So forty years ago we made it legal to terminate the unborn. Today we're adding to it the elderly or so-called terminally ill.

But notice carefully. Jacob was for all intents and purposes *terminally ill*. He was bedfast. He would eventually die. He could contribute nothing to society.

Or could he? What good was there for Jacob to go on living? We're going to see in the following scene that even a dying, bedfast patriarch like Jacob has something to offer, something God intends to accomplish in and through him.

Dear friends, God's grace is sufficient when our bodies break down. He accomplished something so very significant in Jacob's life and through Jacob's life. In fact, we're reaping the benefits today if we know his descendant, Jesus, as our Savior and Lord.

So there's the first way God's sufficient grace shows up, when the body breaks down. God gives us exactly what we need, to accomplish exactly what He intends to be accomplished, until He calls us home.

Here's a great promise from God to meditate on. Isaiah 46:4, “Even to your old age and gray hairs I am he, I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you.”

³ <http://www.cnn.com/2014/11/26/us/physician-assisted-suicide-fast-facts/>

II. The blessing is given (3-20).

It's interesting what people talk about when they know they're going to die. In this scene, we're told what Jacob had to say. If you know much about Jacob, the topic he chose may surprise you.

You may think of Jacob as a conniver, and he was as a young man when he lied to his own father and stole his brother's blessing. Or maybe you think of him as a man who had a not very commendable family life, fathering children by four women, showing favoritism to number eleven, setting his own kids at odds with each other.

And that's all true. That was Jacob in his earlier years. But he's not the same man now. He's not lying and stealing and conniving now. It's not self-reformation. It's grace.

He's talking about *God* now, and specifically about the person of God and the promises of God. That's where he takes the conversation when a visitor comes to see him on his deathbed.

Look at verse 3, "Jacob said to Joseph, '*God...*'" He begins to talk to his son about the most important subject any father could ever discuss with his son, or daughter, or grandchild, or anyone else.

God. "God Almighty appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan, and there he blessed me." Notice how...

A. Jacob shared two things with his son, Joseph, two things about God.

1. He shared with Joseph about the moment God changed his life. He says in verse 3, "God Almighty appeared to me at Luz."

Some significant happened to Jacob at Luz (or Bethel). God Almighty appeared to him and He brought about a spiritual transformation. It was there that God got a hold of Jacob's life. Genesis 28 tells us how He did it, in verses 10-19.

"Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Harran. ¹¹ When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep. ¹² He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. ¹³ There above it stood the Lord, and he said:

'I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. ¹⁴ Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. ¹⁵ I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.'

¹⁶ When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, 'Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it.' ¹⁷ He was afraid and said, 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven.'

¹⁸ Early the next morning Jacob took the stone he had placed under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on top of it. ¹⁹ He called that place Bethel, though the city used to be called Luz."

That was the most important thing that ever happened in my life, says this dying father to his son. True, he'd blown it many times in his life since that day. But when he

came to the end, all that mattered was God. The sovereign God came into his life, and never let go. That was Jacob's testimony.

Is it yours? It can be. John 1:12 says, "Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God." We can approach death knowing we belong to God.

But there's more. Jacob had something else he wanted to say.

2. *He shared with Joseph the promises God had made to him.* Verse 4, "And said to me, 'I am going to make you fruitful and will increase your numbers. I will make you a community of peoples, and I will give this land as an everlasting possession to your descendants after you.'"

Jacob's body was deteriorating, but his soul was rejoicing with hope. Why? He says it's because of the promises God made to him. He blessed me—that's verse 3. And He gave me promises—that's verse 4.

That's our story too, if we're in Christ.

Ephesians 1:3 "Praise be to the God and Father of our LORD Jesus Christ, *who has blessed us* in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ."

2 Peter 1:4 "Through these *he has given us his very great and precious promises*, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires."

He blessed me, and He gave me promises. That's what Jacob told Joseph.

So what Jacob did next ought not surprise us. What does any loving father who has been blessed by God do? He wants to pass that blessing on to his offspring. That's what Jacob did. Beginning in verse 5, down to verse 20, he blesses Joseph and his sons.

B. Jacob blessed Joseph and his sons.

Actually, he called on *the LORD* to do the blessing for only He can give one. The blessing continues into chapter 49 for the other eleven sons.

The concept of "blessing" may be foreign to most of us, but it's something we see throughout the Bible. It begins in Genesis 1:22 with God blessing his creation. Next we see God blessing Abram. In Genesis 12:1-3, "Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'"

Numbers 6:23-27 (ESV) "Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the people of Israel: you shall say to them, The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace. So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them."

We see blessing in the New Testament as well. Jesus did in Mark 10:16, "And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them."

Paul tells believers to do so in Romans 12:14, "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them."

Peter says something similar in 1 Peter 3:9, "Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing."

To bless another is to express one's desire for their good by asking the Lord to give it, for He is the source of every good and perfect gift (James 1:17).

Now, notice how Jacob begins to bless Joseph and his sons in verses 5-6. "Now then, your two sons born to you in Egypt before I came to you here will be reckoned as mine; Ephraim and Manasseh will be mine, just as Reuben and Simeon are mine. ⁶ Any children born to you after them will be yours; in the territory they inherit they will be reckoned under the names of their brothers."

Jacob informs Joseph that his two sons will henceforth be treated as his own. In essence, he adopts Joseph's boys. They were placed "on his knees," according to verse 12, an action apparently symbolizing adoption.

This is significant. When Jacob's descendants (that is, Israel) reach the promised land, and when the land is divided up, this will mean that Joseph's tribe will receive a double portion of land. Jacob is giving a huge honor to his son, which he gives to no other, a double inheritance.

Then Jacob continues to reminisce in verse 7, "As I was returning from Paddan, to my sorrow Rachel died in the land of Canaan while we were still on the way, a little distance from Ephrath. So I buried her there beside the road to Ephrath" (that is, Bethlehem)."

That was a tough time for Jacob, losing his beloved Rachel, who was of course Joseph's mother.

Something interesting happens at this point in the narrative. In verses 8-9 Moses explains, "When Israel saw the sons of Joseph, he asked, 'Who are these?' ⁹ 'They are the sons God has given me here,' Joseph said to his father. Then Israel said, 'Bring them to me so I may bless them.'"

I take it that poor-sighted Jacob didn't recognize Joseph's sons, so Joseph had to let grandpa know who the young men were. After which grandfather Jacob announced his desire to "bless" the sons.

But Moses doesn't call him Jacob this time, but *Israel*, the name God had given him. This is no ordinary grandpa giving this blessing. This is the man God chose⁴ to be the patriarch of the family through which He would work to form a chosen nation called Israel.

An ironic reversal followed. What a touching scene, in verses 10-14, "Now Israel's eyes were failing because of old age, and he could hardly see. So Joseph brought his sons close to him, and his father kissed them and embraced them. ¹¹ Israel said to Joseph, 'I never expected to see your face again, and now God has allowed me to see your children too.' ¹² Then Joseph removed them from Israel's knees and bowed down with his face to the ground. ¹³ And Joseph took both of them, Ephraim on his right toward Israel's left hand and Manasseh on his left toward Israel's right hand, and brought them close to him. ¹⁴ But Israel reached out his right hand and put it on Ephraim's head, though he was the younger, and crossing his arms, he put his left hand on Manasseh's head, even though Manasseh was the firstborn."

Stop there. Here's the picture. Manasseh is the firstborn. Joseph positions him in front of Jacob's right hand. Ephraim was secondborn, and is placed before his grandfather's left hand. As firstborn, Manasseh is entitled to the greatest blessing.

⁴ "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated," Romans 9:13, quoting Malachi 1:2-3.

But Jacob pulled a switch. He crossed his arms. Listen to the blessing in verses 15-16, “Then he blessed Joseph and said, ‘May the God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day,¹⁶ the Angel who has delivered me from all harm —may he bless these boys. May they be called by my name and the names of my fathers Abraham and Isaac, and may they increase greatly upon the earth.’”

In the blessing, Jacob reflects and reiterates events in his life in which he saw God at work. He’s the same God my father and grandfather served. He has been my shepherd all my life. He’s the Angel (the Angel of the Lord) who has delivered me from every danger to this point.

Then he comes to the climax in verse 16 when he asks God to bless the boys. But just then Joseph lifted his bowed head and saw what appeared to him to be a glaring mistake. His dad’s arms were crossed!

Watch what he did in verses 17-18, “When Joseph saw his father placing his right hand on Ephraim’s head he was displeased; so he took hold of his father’s hand to move it from Ephraim’s head to Manasseh’s head.¹⁸ Joseph said to him, ‘No, my father, this one is the firstborn; put your right hand on his head.’”

Joseph thinks his dad is confused and made a blunder in the blessing. Not so according to Jacob’s reply in verses 19-20. “But his father refused and said, ‘I know, my son, I know. He too will become a people, and he too will become great. Nevertheless, his younger brother will be greater than he, and his descendants will become a group of nations.’²⁰ He blessed them that day and said, ‘In your name will Israel pronounce this blessing: ‘May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh.’ So he put Ephraim ahead of Manasseh.”

You say, “What’s going on here? Why did Jacob reverse the blessing?”

We’re not told, but this is not the first time a blessing was reversed in the Bible. Can you think of others? For starters, Jacob himself was the younger twin, yet God Himself said “the older will serve the younger” in Genesis 25:23. Joseph himself was son #11, yet the Lord made it clear through a dream that his older brothers would bow down to him.

Centuries later David would bypass his brothers in the blessing. 1 Samuel 16 says that God told Samuel to anoint David as king. Why? It wasn’t because he was the oldest (as culturally accepted), in fact, he was the youngest of 8 boys. Nor was it because he had the most natural charm or ability. Why did God chose David?

1 Samuel 16:7 tells us, “The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.”

Why did Jacob reverse the blessing on Joseph’s sons? According to Hebrews 11:21, it was an act of faith. “By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph’s sons, and worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff.”

So Jacob was not confused or mistaken. By prophetic inspiration he knew that God would bless the younger son in the greater way.

The historical record verified that. After the kingdom was divided, the tribe of Ephraim became the leading force in the northern kingdom of ten tribes. In fact, many times God refers to the northern kingdom simply as *Ephraim* (2 Chr 25:7; Is 7:5).

The point of all this? By grace, Jacob is now doing what God wants him to do with his life. He may be bedfast, but in his final days he does something which is a demonstration of faith. He blesses his son and grandsons and later the rest of his sons.

There's something here for us to learn. Obviously, we can't predict the future, and we're not entitled to prophetic inspiration, as was the patriarch Jacob. And obviously, there are cultural factors involved in the act of blessing we've examined (eg-- bowing to the ground; placing hands on heads, elevating the firstborn son). But we can learn something from Jacob's act of blessing.

Surely it teaches us to look beyond ourselves, to do things that will live on and make a difference after we're gone. Life is bigger than *me*. I must live that way. And face death that way.

Parents and grandparents, let's ponder some questions. Is it a priority for you to pass on a spiritual heritage to your children? Do you pray specifically for your children?

I'm not just talking about asking God to give them good jobs, and good health. Do you ask God to make your children godly? To give them godly friends? To provide them with mates that love Jesus Christ? To give them a love for the church? That God will use them in significant ways to advance the kingdom of His Son, however and wherever He sees fit?

The grace of God, by which we are saved, enables us to live well and die well. And when a person dies well, he does all he can to leave his family with that which matters most after he is gone. The blessing of God.

We're seeing divine grace show up in three ways as Jacob nears death. We see it, one, as the body breaks down. Two, as the blessing is given.

III. The benefits are anticipated (21-22).

Jacob knew God formed a special covenant with him and his descendants. He also knew that the promise would not be fulfilled in Egypt, but that there was coming a day, long after his own death, when God would redeem His people from Egypt, and take them to the promised land of Canaan. Jacob's faith was strong. He challenged Joseph, and here's what he told him.

Verse 21, "Then Israel said to Joseph, 'I am about to die, but God will be with you and take you back to the land of your fathers.'"

How did Jacob know that? He knew it by faith. He simply believed God. In fact, Jacob was so sure of God's promise he passed on a special benefit to Joseph.

A. There was a benefit for Joseph. Verse 22, "And to you, as one who is over your brothers, I give the ridge of land I took from the Amorites with my sword and my bow." Here's the benefit.

1. Jacob gave him a special piece of land. Jacob read his will to Joseph and revealed that he was giving him a special inheritance, a special strip of land.

Did Joseph ever enjoy this property? No, not personally. But over 400 years later, according to Joshua 24:32, his bones were carried up out of Egypt, and buried on this plot of ground in Shechem.

What's the point? Why did God tell us this? Jacob lived 147 years. That's a long time. There were some memorable moments in his life, and God saw fit to devote more than twenty chapters to tell Jacob's story, from Genesis 25 to Genesis 50.

But what was his finest moment? What was his most memorable deed in life? According to Hebrews 11:21, it's what we've just seen. Listen again to Hebrews 11:21, "By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph's sons, and worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff."

Why was this act of giving God's blessing Jacob's greatest moment? Because after 147 of life, he had learned something important, a vital lesson, which he passed on to Joseph and the rest.

2. *Jacob gave him a valuable lesson. He had learned to live, and to die, in the light of God's promises.* It's like he's singing the song...

When we walk with the Lord, in the light of His Word,

what a glory He sheds on our way.

While we do His good will, He abides with us still,

and with all who will trust and obey.

Trust and obey, for there's no other way,

to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.

Let's be honest with ourselves. There's more to life than making a good living, and having a nice house, and good health. Take it from a bedfast, almost blind man on his deathbed. What matters most is what's coming after we leave this world.

Anticipated benefits. We've seen what this meant for Jacob and Joseph.

B. There can be benefits for us. Like what? Consider three certainties.

1. *There's a heaven to gain, and a hell to avoid.*

2. *There's a Savior who is coming again to rule. (Rev 22:20)*

3. *There's coming a day when we will all give an account of our lives.*

(2 Cor 5:10; Rev 20:13)

My friend, heaven is real. So is hell. How can we know for sure that we possess the amazing benefit of heaven? John 3:36 says, "He that believes on the Son has everlasting life; and he that believes not the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him."

Here's the question all of us will have to answer before God. What did you do with my promise? Did you believe and receive eternal life, or did you not?

Jacob finished the last leg of his life with his eyes firmly fixed by faith on God's eternal promises. So he went to his grave knowing that all was well between him and his Maker. And he died leaving a great spiritual heritage to his children and grandchildren.

What about you? Are you ready to meet the Lord? Do you have the assurance that your sins are forgiven, that your eternal destiny is secure?

You say, "You don't know me. I've blown it too many times. God can't help me, can He?" O friend, I remind you that Jacob was no saint in his younger life, and later he struggled with doubts. But by God's grace, he learned to take God at His Word.

Make It Personal: In order to die well, grace makes all the difference.