

I'm Dying To Tell You

Genesis 47:28-48:22 March 1, 2023

We're intrigued by the last words of famous people. They say when Marie Antoinette was being led to the guillotine she accidentally stepped on the foot of the executioner and her last words were, "Pardon me, sir. I meant not to do it."¹ Buddy Rich, the legendary jazz drummer, died shortly after undergoing brain surgery. The story goes that, while being prepped, the nurse asked him, "Is there anything you can't take?" His response was the last thing he said: "Yeah, country music."²

The problem with famous last words is they are often totally unprovable. That's not the case with Jane Austen. Her sister who was at Jane's side as she passed into eternity, and she wrote an account in a letter. Most lists of famous last words include Jane's, because they're provocative. Her sister, Cassandra, wrote, "*When I asked her if there was anything she wanted, her answer was she wanted nothing but death.*" That kind of severity may get clicks on internet lists, but those weren't Jane's final words. After that she said, "*God grant me patience; pray for me, oh, pray for me.*"³

Our text tonight is the beginning of Jacob's last words. We'll find him on his death bed, proclaiming God's power, foretelling the future, and blessing the sons who will take up the torch of God's redemptive work.

Genesis 47:28 - ²⁸ Now Jacob lived in the land of Egypt 17 years, and his life span was 147 years.

The famine had been over for more than a decade. Why stay in Goshen, especially when we see how focused this family was on being in the land God had promised them? The only answer is that God led them to stay where they were and, despite the pull toward Canaan, Jacob's family obeyed.

Genesis 47:29-30a - ²⁹ When the time approached for him to die, he called his son Joseph and said to him, "If I have found favor with you, put your hand under my thigh and promise me that you will deal with me in kindness and faithfulness. Do not bury me in Egypt. ³⁰ When I rest with my ancestors, carry me away from Egypt and bury me in their burial place."

Jacob speaks as if *Joseph* is the superior. This isn't just because Joseph has become a powerful ruler. Jacob is transferring the leadership of the family to Joseph. You see, the head of the clan was the person responsible for burial arrangements.⁴ Joseph is going to get the birthright.

Jacob's request to his son - the savior of the family - was: Deal with me in kindness and faithfulness. It's that lovely word that keeps coming up, *hesed*. At the end of his life, Jacob had to rely on *hesed*, that merciful, covenant, compassionate, affectionate love that we've talked about before. He

¹ <https://crozieronstuff.com/execution-of-marie-antoinette>

² <https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/58534/64-people-and-their-famous-last-words>

³ <https://www.literaryladiesguide.com/literary-musings/jane-austens-final-days-illness-courage-and-death/>

⁴ John Walton *Genesis*

couldn't rely on strength or wealth or popularity or merit, just *hesed*. Luckily, that's *exactly* the kind of love the Savior has for you and me - a loyal love that is guaranteed by the faithfulness of God.⁵

As Jacob's life comes to a close, we see him following closely in the example of Abraham and Isaac. For all his wrestling and wandering, at the end we see that the work God began in Jacob was made complete. His words and actions are in sync with the Lord and we see spiritual priorities dominating his thoughts. "Don't bury me in Egypt. Get me to the land God set aside for us."

In 2018, Cara Nelson ran 7 marathons in 7 days on all 7 continents. Yes, even Antarctica. The thought of completing seven episodes of 26.2 miles was "daunting," but as she came to the end she said, "I heard family, friends and strangers cheering me on. All I could see was the finish line."⁶

Jacob had a long marathon of a life. He logged a lot of tough miles over his 147 years. Now, all he could see is the finish line. Paul was the same way. He wrote about running well, running to win, finishing the race of life with our eyes set on the prizes of heaven.

When Jacob dies, the Egyptians treat him like a king. I suppose Joseph could've pulled a few strings and built a pyramid for him. But Jacob wasn't interested in that. His focus was, "God wants our family in Canaan, so *I* want to be in Canaan." But he wouldn't be able to get there on his own. He asks Joseph to carry him away from Egypt so he can rest with the family in the Promised Land.

As human beings, we are helpless in death. Sometimes movies try to portray the transition from this life to the next and the characters have to navigate the passage. Think of *Coco* or *Soul* or *What Dreams May Come*. The truth is, the Lord has committed Himself to carefully and tenderly carrying us through death into everlasting life.

Isaiah 46:4 - ⁴I will be the same until your old age, and I will bear you up when you turn gray. I have made you, and I will carry you; I will bear and rescue you.

Genesis 47:30b-31 - Joseph answered, "I will do what you have asked."³¹ And Jacob said, "Swear to me." So Joseph swore to him. Then Israel bowed in thanks at the head of his bed.

This issue was absolutely essential. Jacob not only asks his son this favor, he requires him to make a formal, sworn promise.⁷ This oath was binding - even Pharaoh thought so later in chapter 50.

Genesis 48:1-2 - Some time after this, Joseph was told, "Your father is weaker." So he set out with his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. ²When Jacob was told, "Your son Joseph has come to you," Israel summoned his strength and sat up in bed.

⁵ Bruce Waltke *Genesis: A Commentary*

⁶ <https://scene.geneseo.edu/2018/12/seven-marathons-seven-continents-seven-days/>

⁷ John Goldingay *Genesis*

This would be the last day of Jacob's life. R. Kent Hughes points out that this is the first reference to illness in the Bible.⁸ There has been death and injury, of course, and we've seen how sin brings physical deterioration in old age. Sarah was no longer able to have children, Isaac lost his eyesight. But this is the first sickness written about. Isn't it interesting that it didn't effect a pagan unbeliever, but the Patriarch himself, the standard-bearer of faith?

Jacob's life had many memorable moments. Which was the most remarkable? We remember his passionate love for Rachel, which began with his chivalrous rolling of the stone off the well. Of course, we can't forget the dream he had of the ladder with the angels ascending and descending at Bethel. Derek Kidner writes, "*Out of Jacob's long career Hebrews selects this as his outstanding act of faith.*"⁹ This moment, where Jacob is so sick that he can't get out of bed. He's so old he can't make out the face of his grandsons. But even though he was physically weak, he had *never* been so spiritually strong. Because *real* strength comes from the Lord. Jacob was never more of a blessing, never more of a conduit of God's truth or grace as in *this* moment on his deathbed.

What a testimony to us of a life finished well. Jacob's last day was a *spiritual* day. According to Hebrews 11, Jacob was *actively* dying in this text. But with his final breaths he praised God, he spoke the Word, and he drew others toward the Lord.

Joseph knows the end is coming for his dad, so he takes these two sons to see him. It shows us his faith. Joseph had *every* worldly benefit at his disposal. He was, in many ways, the most powerful man in the world at the time. His family had ever advantage you could have. His boys had the best education, all the connections, an absolutely secure future from man's perspective. And what did Joseph do? He cleared their schedule so that he could go get the *Hebrew* family blessing, because *that's* what mattered to him.

Genesis 48:3-4 - ³ Jacob said to Joseph, "God Almighty appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan and blessed me. ⁴ He said to me, 'I will make you fruitful and numerous; I will make many nations come from you, and I will give this land as a permanent possession to your future descendants.'

There is very little time to lose. A less spiritual person would say, "Yeah, yeah, Dad. I know all that. Let's get to the blessing!" But that's not what Jacob and Joseph do. In those final moments, Jacob instead says, "First, let's get into the Word of God. What has God said? What has God promised? Because *that* is what this family is all about. That's the most important message of the day."

Jacob's talk of God's appearance reminds us that Joseph experienced no such Theophanies. He had no face-to-face talks with the Lord. Yet, he was full of faith. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who have *not* seen and yet believe."

⁸ R. Kent Hughes *Genesis: Beginning And Blessing*

⁹ Derek Kidner *Genesis*

Genesis 48:5-6 - ⁵Your two sons born to you in the land of Egypt before I came to you in Egypt are now mine. Ephraim and Manasseh belong to me just as Reuben and Simeon do. ⁶Children born to you after them will be yours and will be recorded under the names of their brothers with regard to their inheritance.

What's going on here? Jacob is establishing Joseph's line as if he were the firstborn. Now, we know that Jacob loved Rachel and did *not* love his other wives and so, in many ways, he considered Joseph to be the firstborn. But among this growing family, challenges and problems might arise. There were at least 52 grandsons in the family at the time of this passage.¹⁰ *These* two would have a place of prominence and leadership. But, can't you imagine some cousin starting to whisper, "Ephraim and Manasseh, they're not *bonafide* you know. They're like Great Uncle Ishmael. Their mom is an *Egyptian*." So Jacob formally *adopts* them and, more than that, he is actually putting them in the place of his first two sons. The Hebrew literally reads: "Like Reuben and Simeon they will be to me."¹¹ 1 Chronicles 5 explains that this was a legal transfer of birthright.

By the way, Ephraim and Manasseh aren't little boys. They're in their early or mid twenties.¹² Like Joseph, they didn't live with the rest of the family. They lived life in the court of Pharaoh.

Jacob referenced other children born to Joseph. The Septuagint records that Joseph had 7 other sons in addition to these two oldest.¹³

Genesis 48:7 - ⁷When I was returning from Paddan, to my sorrow Rachel died along the way, some distance from Ephrath in the land of Canaan. I buried her there along the way to Ephrath" (that is, Bethlehem).

It's hard to know why Jacob brings this up here. It certainly drives home his undying devotion to the one love of his life. But also, he may be suggesting that Rachel *would* have had more sons and so Ephraim and Manasseh are taking the place of the boys he would've had if she had lived.¹⁴

Genesis 48:8-9 - ⁸When Israel saw Joseph's sons, he said, "Who are these?" ⁹And Joseph said to his father, "They are my sons God has given me here." So Israel said, "Bring them to me and I will bless them."

Jacob's eyesight was very bad, but this wasn't just a case of not being able to see or senility. This is a worship service - a ritual blessing ceremony. His asking "who are these" is like when the pastor says, "Who gives this woman to be married to this man?"¹⁵

¹⁰ Waltke

¹¹ Walton

¹² Andrew Steinmann *Genesis*

¹³ Genesis 46:27 LXX

¹⁴ See Alter, Waltke

¹⁵ Goldingay

Joseph says, “these boys are gifts God has given me.” And Jacob says, “Let me bless them.” In your Christian life, God wants to bless you with His gifts. What kind of gifts? Of course, there are the gifts of the Spirit. But, in the Scripture, we find other gifts that aren’t always the kind we would put on a registry for ourselves. In Philippians 1, Paul tells us that suffering is a gift that God gives us. Jesus has a whole list of ways He intends to bless us. He blesses us with humility, with persecution, with insults, with mourning, with a hunger and thirst for righteousness.

Like Jacob called Ephraim and Manasseh, the Lord says, “Come and let Me embrace you, that I may bless you.” Our part is to believe that God’s gifts and the blessings He sees fit to give us are exactly what we need and, more than that, are *best* for us. *When* He blesses us with suffering, it’s not because He takes pleasure in our struggle. It’s for all the reasons explained and demonstrated in His Word. Be glad and rejoice in the blessings of God, because your reward is great in heaven.

Genesis 48:10-12 - ¹⁰Now his eyesight was poor because of old age; he could hardly see. Joseph brought them to him, and he kissed and embraced them. ¹¹Israel said to Joseph, “I never expected to see your face again, but now God has even let me see your offspring.” ¹²Then Joseph took them from his father’s knees and bowed with his face to the ground.

Jacob’s faith is a great encouragement. Here he is, excited about the fact that God has let him “see” Joseph’s boys, even though physically he can barely see at all. It reveals the peace and purity ruling his heart. Right now, we see dimly, only as a reflection in a mirror. One day we’ll see our Savior face-to-face. Now we know in part, then we’ll know fully. I might not see or understand everything that the Lord is allowing in my life right now, but one day it will all be revealed to be part of the perfect work He is bringing to completion in my life.

Genesis 48:13-16 - ¹³Then Joseph took them both—with his right hand Ephraim toward Israel’s left, and with his left hand Manasseh toward Israel’s right—and brought them to Israel. ¹⁴But Israel stretched out his right hand and put it on the head of Ephraim, the younger, and crossing his hands, put his left on Manasseh’s head, although Manasseh was the firstborn. ¹⁵Then he blessed Joseph and said: The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day, ¹⁶the angel who has redeemed me from all harm—may he bless these boys. And may they be called by my name and the names of my fathers Abraham and Isaac, and may they grow to be numerous within the land.

The blessing comes out as a hymn of praise¹⁶ to this God Who is a Shepherd Redeemer. Jacob looked back on his life and remembered, “God fed me, God led me, God redeemed me.”¹⁷ The reference to the Angel is particularly poignant. Jacob said the Angel “redeemed me from all harm.” Quite notably, the Angel *permanently crippled* Jacob after their wrestling match in Genesis 32. But here at the end, Jacob understood that he had been a wayward sheep. He had been obstinate. But

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ Kidner

the Shepherd kept watch. The Shepherd kept leading. The Shepherd kept providing all the little lamb needed so that his life could be saved.

Our Shepherd Redeemer does the same. His intentions are the same. There at the end, when Jacob talks about the boys becoming a numerous multitude, linguists explain that he used words that mean something like, "May they multiply like fish."¹⁸ What is one of God's intentions for us? That we would be fishers of men, multiplying by the power of the Gospel, which makes it possible for strangers to be adopted into the family of God.

Genesis 48:17-18 - ¹⁷When Joseph saw that his father had placed his right hand on Ephraim's head, he thought it was a mistake and took his father's hand to move it from Ephraim's head to Manasseh's. ¹⁸Joseph said to his father, "Not that way, my father! This one is the firstborn. Put your right hand on his head."

This is, admittedly, a sad moment in this tender scene. Jacob is in his dying moments. The relationship between he and Joseph is a very special, very close one. But Joseph becomes frustrated. The language used implies powerful anger,¹⁹ and that Joseph used a firm grip on his dad.²⁰ Now, Joseph was used to being in charge. He was used to being the man with the plan. He was used to being the one in the know. And then, as this blessing plays out, it's like he thinks, "Are you *seeing* this?!? You're doing it wrong!"

Now, the blessing was the same for both sons. But the symbolism of the right hand would indicate a sort of magnitude of blessing. And even though, on one level, Joseph should've known better and trusted how the Lord was accomplishing all of this, he thought, "No, I know the way." Sometimes God is going to do a work in our lives or in our communities that we think, "Wait, Lord, not *that* way. Not *those* people. You've gotten things out of order. I know the way and the who You *should* be blessing." But the Father does what He wills according to His perfect knowledge. We don't want to resist what God is doing because we think a different order is better.

Genesis 48:19-20 - ¹⁹But his father refused and said, "I know, my son, I know! He too will become a tribe, and he too will be great; nevertheless, his younger brother will be greater than he, and his offspring will become a populous nation." ²⁰So he blessed them that day, putting Ephraim before Manasseh when he said, "The nation Israel will invoke blessings by you, saying, 'May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh.' "

Ultimately, Manasseh would have the largest geographical territory in the Promised Land, but Ephraim would be the most central and become the most prominent among the two.²¹

Jacob refused. He had to summon a *little more* strength to resist the manhandling of his son.

¹⁸ Gordon Wenham *Word Biblical Commentary Volume 2: Genesis 16-50*

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ Hughes

²¹ Goldingay

Now, there's a wonderful irony here. Jacob had exploited his father's poor vision to trick him into giving the birthright to the younger brother. Now, Jacob is the blind one, and Joseph is trying to *keep* him from giving the birthright to the younger.

What's the lesson? Well, one lesson is that God will do what He wills to do. Isaac didn't want to cooperate when God said Jacob would rule over Esau. Jacob and Rebekah weren't willing to trust God to work it out. But, despite all those bad plans, God had His way. Now, Joseph is the one trying to stop God from doing what He wills, but God still has His way. This is a great, century-long object lesson that Genesis has preserved for us. God will do what needs doing, even if it seems like He "can't" do it. He doesn't need our schemes. He doesn't need our shortcuts. He doesn't need us to suspend holiness or morality in order to accomplish His goals. Instead of striving, we should work to submit ourselves and trust the Lord and be a part of what He's willing to do.

Genesis 48:21-22 - ²¹ Israel said to Joseph, "Look, I am about to die, but God will be with you and will bring you back to the land of your fathers. ²² Over and above what I am giving your brothers, I am giving you the one mountain slope that I took from the Amorites with my sword and bow."

Most commentators believe this mountain slope is, in fact, Shechem. That makes sense because Jacob is stripping away inheritance from Reuben and Simeon and transferring it to Joseph. In Joshua we find that Joseph was buried in Shechem. Whether this reference to the sword and bow is pointing back to the slaughter of Shechem by Simeon and Levi or a different battle, we're not sure.

For now, Joseph has clan leadership. Ultimate, the Lord's plan was to elevate Judah to the place of authority over Israel.

This text shows us the incredible testimony of a man finishing well. And, let's not forget, he was a man who we wouldn't even expect to finish at all, let alone in great spiritual strength. In the Christian life, the end of the race matters. The way we finish well is by not standing in the way of what God wants to do in our lives and by focusing our attention on the goal ahead. Because, much more than our last words, what matters to us are those first words of the next life: "Well done, good and faithful servant."