

Covenant Confidence
Genesis 45:25-46:27

In 1939, as Great Britain prepared to enter World War 2, their government prepared three slogans to encourage people to be strong during the onslaught of German attacks. Two of the three slogans were printed on posters and distributed around the country. One read, *"Your Courage, Your Cheerfulness, Your Resolution; Will Bring Us Victory."* The other said, *"Freedom is in Peril; Defend it with all Your Might."*

Posters of the third slogan were printed but never used, and the slogan was forgotten – that is, until a British book store owner came across a copy in the year 2000 and decided to hang it in his store. People loved it, so he had more printed. The slogan was, *"Keep Calm and Carry On."* Now that slogan has spread worldwide, with countless imitations produced.

What's the appeal of the slogan? It seems that people have latched on to it and repurposed it because it speaks to a desire to remain determined and undisturbed no matter what. But it's ironic that it was never used for its original purpose.

Can you imagine, German planes flying overhead, dropping bombs on London and all around Britain for over seven months in what came to be known as "the Blitz," and during that time you look over and see a poster that reads, *"Keep calm and carry on."* It's definitely better to remain calm than to panic, but remain calm based on what? Would that slogan have been effective at all in the face of such trouble?

You know, the church is in a similar position today. What we see going on in the world discourages and frightens us. Dr. Steven Nichols discusses this in a little book he calls *A Time for Confidence*. He points out the decay of virtue in our society, the normalizing of gross immorality around us, and the vast turning away from the principles of the Old and New Testaments. And yet, as he states, the church cannot run and hide. The church, in fact, has the answer. So he says, *"We need not be pulled down, distressed, or disillusioned by what we see. This is a time for confidence."*

The church's confidence is based on who Jesus Christ is and what He has done.

In John 16, Jesus says, *"In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world."* Christ brings us into covenant with the triune God. Through Him, we have access by faith into the grace in which we, the church, now stands. We can be certain of this because God's covenant of grace remains.

The things we see happening around us cannot change that. And so we can remain confident that God's redemptive plan is still on track. We can carry on, walking by faith and obeying God.

But things will still feel uncertain, and even scary, at times. So how do we maintain and develop that confidence?

This account in the life of Jacob helps us understand. Though it happened thousands of years ago, it's entirely relevant to the present day. Even Jacob faced the fear that God's plans might be sidetracked. Even him who God renamed "Israel," who was a patriarch of God's people, was prone to worry that the purpose of God would be hindered or stalled. And God made him confident.

God does this for His people today as well. Our confidence must be derived from and founded on God's covenant. Notice the outline on pages 6-7 in the WG. How do we maintain and develop this confidence? Carry on with the covenant worship of God, the covenant promises of God, and the covenant community of God. Let's take a look.

Joseph's brothers now return to Canaan to tell their father Jacob that Joseph is still alive. They also return to gather the family and possessions and move it all to Egypt because there are five more years of famine to go, and this is how the family will survive.

When Jacob is told that Joseph is alive, he doesn't believe his sons. We don't see a confession of what they did, having faked Joseph's death and sold him into slavery, but they give Jacob enough information to convince him.

Even though so many years had passed since he saw Joseph, it still hurt him deeply. Years of guilt and sadness – so it's no wonder that he doesn't believe it at first. Jacob is in the last stage of his life. He thought he would never see his son again on this side of the grave, but now he will. Look again at verse [1], *So Israel took his journey with all that he had and came to Beersheba, and offered sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac.*

Notice that Moses switches between using "Jacob" and "Israel." Both refer to the same man. Moses first wrote these things to the Israelite people. They, too, were called "Israel;" their nation was named after Jacob, their ancestor. The history of Israel – both the man and the nation – was founded on this covenant.

What is the covenant? It's an agreement between two parties, with blessings for covenant keeping and curses for covenant breaking. God revealed His covenant of grace over time in redemptive history. It goes all the way back to the garden of Eden, but it came into greater focus in God's dealings with Abraham, Jacob's grandfather. God commits to do certain things for His people, and also in them.

God is making His people into something. All of it fits into His redemptive plan. But God's redemptive plan doesn't always look like we think it might look. For example, in Genesis 15, when God makes the covenant with Abraham, God says to him, *"Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions."*

We don't know the degree to which Jacob understood what God was doing, but as the head of the covenant family, he responds with covenant worship. This is our first lesson for how to develop and maintain our confidence. Though the path forward is uncertain, and it may make us uneasy, God's people must carry on with the covenant worship of God.

Jacob went to Beersheba. This is where Abraham had offered covenant worship, and so had Isaac, Jacob's father. Now it's where Jacob goes to worship. What is Jacob doing? He's humbling himself again before the gracious God who has made a covenant with him. He's bowing his heart before the One who has committed to never leave or forsaken him.

Throughout the Scriptures, we learn what covenant worship must consist of. In other words, God tells us what it should look like. It must be thoroughly God-centered, always putting us in our rightful place, and always exalting Jesus Christ to His rightful place, because He should have the highest place in our hearts and minds.

Of course, Jacob didn't have the name of Jesus in His worship. Christ and the gospel would be made clear until later on. But Jacob – Israel – knew the sovereignty and grace of the one and only true God. Therefore, he knew how to glorify the One who had shown him unmerited favor. He knew how to honor the One who did not let him utterly destroy himself. Jacob draws near to God in praise because God has first drawn near to him in love.

In much of what is called the Christian church today, there is a tremendous lack of confidence in God and His Word. It can be attributed, at least in part, to the lack of covenant worship. One temptation is to take our cues from the culture, and this too is rooted (partly at least) in the abandonment of covenant worship.

God has told us how to worship Him. We were created to give Him worship. All that we do from the words that first call us to worship to the words that pronounce God's blessing as we leave worship are vital for us to maintain covenant confidence. As we carry on with covenant worship, our assurance in God's plan is made stronger.

Now after Jacob's time of worship, before they begin the journey to Egypt, God speaks to him. Moses uses both names in verse [2], *"And God spoke to Israel in visions of the night and said, 'Jacob, Jacob.' And he said, 'Here I am.'"* The ancient Israelites would recognize that this assurance was for them also as they journeyed to the promised land.

After all, the one true God assures His covenant people of His great promises in every age. Look at verse [3] *he said, "I am God, the God of your father. (That's covenant language.) Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for there I will make you into a great nation. (That is one covenant promise made to Abraham). [4] I myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you up again, and Joseph's hand shall close your eyes."* God would later bring Israel out of Egypt: not the man, but the nation.

Many centuries later, the Israelites' exit from Egypt would be one of grand proportions, with the miraculous parting of the Red Sea. This entrance into Egypt is much more "low key," isn't it? Think about that: God not only brought them out of Egypt, but He took them into Egypt! Bible scholar John Currid asks a good question here. He says, "*Why would God by His own decretive will set Israel in such hard circumstances and then deliver them out of the situation? But is that not how God often works?*"

By "decretive will" we mean the things that God decrees to happen. Anything that actually happens has been ordained by God, and He will use it to bring His plans to pass for His people. He works all things together for good for His people. But again, this includes the hard things. It includes the kinds of things that would rob us of our confidence.

The apostle Paul talks about this in the NT book of Romans, and what Paul describes in more detail are God's covenant promises to His people. Paul says we're guaranteed trouble and suffering in life, but also, God guarantees that He will use these things for our growth.

Those who are born again can be assured that we are justified before God and we have peace with God through Jesus. This is based on God's covenant of grace. So, we have this peace with God, and also, through Christ, we have reasons to rejoice. For one, we rejoice "*in the hope of the glory of God.*" What does that mean?

It means that we can be confident in this life (have hope) that God has overcome the world through Jesus and one day that will be evident to all people. God's glory will be on full display. You won't need faith on that day – sight will do. And we can be glad in the hope of that. That's a promise of God.

But we have another reason to rejoice even as we suffer and face troubles. That first reason has to do with what will take place in the future, but this second reason has to do with life now, in the present. God promises that as we endure suffering, He will produce hope in us. Paul says, "*suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.*" In other words, it produces confidence.

You see, your suffering is never, ever, ever in vain. It is producing something of tremendous worth. It might not be worth much according to the economy of this world, but it has extraordinary value in God's economy.

For those in covenant with God, suffering and troubles have been flipped on their head. Rather than making us weaker, God promises that through them He makes His people stronger! Paul is not delusional in 2 Corinthians 12 when he says, "*For the sake of Christ, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*"

God gives us many blessings and things to use and enjoy that we should be thankful for. But those who are in covenant with God should not derive our confidence from those things.

Everything in this world is temporary, but the promises of God are everlasting. They are secure. They cannot be undone or broken.

You will lose sight of His promises from time to time, and I'm sure you have at some point forgotten His promises almost altogether. But when you find your way to them again, which is always by His grace and guidance, you will discover that His promises never changed. They never went anywhere. God's people must carry on with His covenant promises.

Now, this final section is mostly names. The tendency is for our eyes to sort of glaze over. This is Jacob and all his household; his entire clan. It's a small number compared to what they will be one day when they leave Egypt. But this was the full number of them at that time according to the plans of God.

And this is actually very important. The sense here is that there is a completeness to the group. Their number is no more and no less than what God had ordained. What we miss here is that we as a congregation have a special connection to this group. Why?

Because they were God's covenant community at that time. Jacob was their covenant head. God dealt with the community through him. In this way, Jacob's life points to Jesus Christ and foreshadows the work of Jesus. And the covenant family here is actually the church in seed form.

What do I mean by "seed form?" Throughout Genesis we have seen many wonderful principles of the Christian faith in what you might call an "embryonic" stage. Genesis is all about the beginnings. We see the beginning of our universe and our planet. We learn about the beginning of life on earth, the beginning of mankind, the beginning of our unique relationship with God as beings created in His image.

Right after the fall of the first man and woman into sin, we even see the gospel in seed form. In very basic terms, God shows Adam and Eve grace and gives them future hope. In Genesis we see the beginnings of the covenant of grace and a foundation is being laid for who the Savior will be and what He will do.

But isn't the church a NT thing?

It is, but it is a continuation and expansion of the covenant community that began in Genesis. Look again at this list. You see all these people with their hard-to-pronounce names – aren't they the people of God? Aren't they the recipients of His grace?

In the NT, Jesus refers to the recipients of grace as His "ecclesia" – a Greek word that simply referred to a public assembly or congregation. We commonly translate it as "church." The nation of Israel was the assembly of God's people.

In fact – this is interesting – when the Greek translation of the OT was produced during the 3rd century B.C, those translators chose to refer to the OT covenant community as the “ecclesia” of Israel. These 70 people in Genesis 46 are the ecclesia of God. They are the covenant community – the assembly established by God in the world.

What they see in seed form in Genesis 46, we see full grown today. Today there is one global church, made up of many, many local churches around the world. Not only is the covenant community here in seed form, but so is the worship and the promises. These things come more into focus as redemptive history proceeds.

To maintain the confidence that we need in the face of so much adversity, we need the worship of God, the promises of God, and also, we need the people of God. To have covenant confidence, we must carry on with the covenant community of God.

God established the covenant community on the earth for your joy and benefit. We were established not just to know and worship God privately, but also to participate publicly. We were created not just to reflect the covenant promises of God by ourselves, but also, together with our brothers and sisters in the Lord.

We need to be present among those whom He has gathered together for His purpose. We need each other like Jacob and his whole clan needed one another. This is where we remind one another of what is true and where we encourage one another. We were not redeemed by God to carry on alone; we were redeemed for life-giving community. In the congregation we learn to forgive and bear with each other and serve one another.

We have here something that God has been building for a very, very, very, very long time.

At the Lord’s table here before us, all of these things meet. The worship, the promises, and the community – Jesus pulls them all together. He is our covenant head who perfectly glorified God in covenant worship, who perfectly lived according to God’s covenant promises, and who died and rose again to secure the salvation of the covenant community. And so you can see how through the actions of Jacob we learn about the true and better Jacob: Jesus Christ.

Are you among the number of those who are secure in covenant with God? Have you entered that relationship by faith in Jesus Christ? He is the source of our covenant confidence. He doesn’t just give us confidence; He is our confidence.

Trust Him! Let’s bow in prayer.