

LESSON 9

Moving to Egypt

Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you into a great nation there. I will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you back.

— Genesis 46:3–4

Genesis 46 takes Israel down into Egypt on the strength of one night's promise, and that same promise is the only road that will ever bring them out.

Introduction

Jacob is leaving the land God promised him, and he's taking everybody.

He's a hundred and thirty years old (47:9). He buried the wife he loved on the road to Bethlehem. He mourned a son for twenty-two years. He has watched a famine empty his fields two years running. Then his sons rolled into camp with Egyptian wagons and told him Joseph was alive, and he didn't believe a word of it until he saw the wagons. *I will go to see him before I die* (45:28).

So he packs. Sons and grandsons, daughters and granddaughters, cattle, and whatever they've managed to hold onto in Canaan all go into the wagons and onto the road south.

It sounds like the happy ending. But Genesis has spent a long time teaching this family that Canaan is the land and Egypt is the place you don't go. Abraham went down to Egypt in a famine once and nearly lost his wife there (12:10–20). When famine came in Isaac's day, God told him flatly, *Do not go down to Egypt* (26:2). And God once told Abraham, in the dark, that his descendants would be *resident aliens for four hundred years in a land that does not belong to them and will be enslaved and oppressed* (15:13). He didn't say which land.

Jacob is about to find out.

Part Three asks what forgiveness builds. Chapter 45 put the brothers back in the same room. Chapter 46 puts all of them in the same wagons, headed toward the man they wronged, to live next door to him for the rest of their lives. That's the first thing forgiveness builds, and it raises a question nobody in Genesis 45 thought to ask. Is it right to go?

Genesis answers at night, at a well in the desert, before the wagons ever cross the border.

The Last Stop in Canaan (46:1)

Israel set out with all that he had and came to Beer-sheba, and he offered sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac.

He doesn't head straight for Egypt. He goes to Beer-sheba first.

It's about twenty-five miles from Hebron, at the southern edge of everything this family has been promised. Past Beer-sheba lies desert, and past the desert, Egypt. If Jacob's going to stop anywhere, this is the last place he can do it on his own ground.

Abraham planted a tamarisk at Beer-sheba and called on the Lord there (21:33). Isaac built an altar there the night God appeared to him (26:23–25). Jacob was living there when he left for Haran (28:10). The last time he walked out of Canaan, he walked out of Beer-sheba, running north from a brother he had cheated. Now he's leaving again, going south, toward a son his other sons sold.

Genesis doesn't tell us why he stopped. It tells us what he did. He offered sacrifices, and he offered them to *the God of his father Isaac*.

That name may be the clue. Isaac is the one patriarch God kept out of Egypt by name. *Do not go down to Egypt. Live in the land that I tell you about* (26:2). Jacob knows that story. He's standing at what may well be his father's altar, about to do the one thing his father was told not to do, and he won't do it until he has asked. Kidner reads the sacrifice exactly that way: a man owning his family's calling and quietly asking leave to move out of Canaan. Genesis records no such stop for Abraham. He just went.¹³³

Jacob, Jacob! (46:2–4)

That night God spoke to Israel in a vision: "Jacob, Jacob!" he said.

And Jacob replied, "Here I am."

The last time God spoke to Jacob, Benjamin hadn't been born. It was at Bethel, just before Rachel died on the road to Bethlehem (35:9–18). Benjamin is in this chapter with ten sons listed after his name (46:21). That's how long the silence has lasted. Twenty-two years of mourning Joseph, and Genesis records no word from heaven in any of them.

Now God calls him by name, twice. He's done that in this family once before, on Mount Moriah, with the knife already in Abraham's hand (22:11). He will do it again to Moses at a burning bush (Exodus 3:4). Both times, a life was about to turn.

And Jacob answers the way Abraham did. *Here I am, hineni*. We heard that word in Lesson 1 from Joseph at 37:13, the morning his father sent him off to find his brothers. The CSB has *I'm ready* there, but it's the same Hebrew. Joseph said it to his father and walked into twenty-two years of trouble. Now his father says it to God.¹³⁴

I am God, the God of your father. Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you into a great nation there.

Put that beside what God told Isaac, maybe at this very spot. *I am the God of your father Abraham. Do not be afraid, for I am with you* (26:24). Same opening. Same command. A father and a son, a generation apart, at the same altar, both hearing God say *Do not be afraid*. Isaac was told to stay. Jacob is told to go.

God doesn't explain the change. He names what Jacob's afraid of and answers it. The great nation he promised Abraham gets made there, in Egypt of all places. Seventy people go in. God means to bring out a nation.

Then the promise you were sent home to find. *I will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you back.*

You were told to look for God promising to take Jacob *down* and bring him *up* again. Here it is, though the CSB doesn't say *up*. It says *back*. The Hebrew verb is *ʿālâ*, to go up, the exact opposite of the *down* this family has been saying since Jacob first said it over a bloody robe (37:35). And it's doubled for emphasis, *I will bring you up, yes, surely up*. Hughes hears the *I* as emphatic too. God himself will do it. *Back* gets the meaning right and loses the shape. Down with you, up with you. God puts himself on both ends of the trip.¹³⁵

Then the last promise, and it's the tenderest. *Joseph will close your eyes when you die*.

The CSB margin gives the Hebrew more literally: *Joseph will put his hand on your eyes*. God answers an old man's most private fear, the one sitting underneath the fear of Egypt. Who'll be there at the end? Joseph will. His hand will be the last thing on your face.¹³⁶

Then God goes quiet, and he stays quiet for the rest of the book. This is the last time God speaks anywhere in Genesis. He doesn't speak again until a bush catches fire in the wilderness, centuries later.¹³⁷

Everyone Who Came (46:5–27)

The sons of Israel took their father Jacob in the wagons Pharaoh had sent to carry him, along with their dependents and their wives.

Think about who's driving. Ten men who once handed their brother to a caravan bound for Egypt are now hauling their father to Egypt in that brother's wagons. They took Joseph's father from him for twenty-two years. They're the ones bringing him back.

Then Genesis stops the story for a list. *These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt* (46:8), and twenty verses of names follow. Ziphion, Haggi, Shuni, Ezbon. You'll want to skim it. Don't. Look at who made it into the wagons.

Reuben is first, still called *Jacob's firstborn*, though he slept with his father's concubine (35:22). Simeon's son Shaul is there, *the son of a Canaanite woman* (46:10). Judah's line includes Er and Onan, though *Er and Onan died in the land of Canaan* (46:12), two dead men on a list of travelers, and right behind them Hezron and Hamul, the grandsons Tamar gave Judah after he had left her a widow in her father's house. Dinah is named (46:15). So are Manasseh and Ephraim, sons of an Egyptian priest's daughter (46:20).

And there in verse 19 is Joseph. *These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt*, and his name is on the list. It doesn't say how he came. You don't need to be told.

Genesis even counts them, and the arithmetic takes a minute. The four households add up to seventy names. Add Dinah, take out the two who died in Canaan and the three already waiting in Egypt, and you get the sixty-six who actually rode south (46:26). Put Joseph and his two sons back in, count Jacob himself, and you're at seventy (46:27). The wives aren't counted at all. Stephen, following the Greek Old Testament, says seventy-five (Acts 7:14). Either way, it's a small number.¹³⁸

Small is the point. God just promised to make this family a great nation, and you can't watch a promise grow unless somebody writes down what it started with. Exodus opens by reading this same list back (Exodus 1:1–5). Two verses later, with Joseph and that whole generation dead, the land is filled with them.¹³⁹

For a Long Time (46:28–30)

Now Jacob had sent Judah ahead of him to Joseph to prepare for his arrival at Goshen.

Judah again. Years ago he was the one who said, *Come on, let's sell him to the Ishmaelites* (37:27). Now he rides out ahead of the family to find Joseph and bring him back to them. Kidner takes it as an escort's job, more courtesy than necessity. It's still a fitting job for that particular brother.¹⁴⁰

Joseph hitched the horses to his chariot and went up to Goshen to meet his father Israel.

Then Genesis says *Joseph presented himself to him*, and that verb is the one used elsewhere for God appearing to the patriarchs. Hughes, following Wenham, thinks it was chosen to show what Jacob saw coming up the road. The boy in the long-sleeved robe is gone. What's coming toward the old man is the vizier of Egypt, in linen and gold, with a chariot and a household behind him.¹⁴¹

He threw his arms around him, and wept for a long time.

You were told to find the next time Joseph weeps and notice how long it lasts. This is the fifth time, counting from the guardroom in 42:24, and it is the first time Genesis bothers to say how long. *For a long time*. The Hebrew is a single word, 'ôd, still, again, more. He wept, and then he went on weeping.

The CSB smooths one more thing. Where it says *threw his arms around him*, the Hebrew says Joseph *fell on his neck*. It's what he did with Benjamin at 45:14. And it is what Esau did when he ran to meet Jacob after twenty years apart (33:4). Jacob has been held like this once before in his life, by the brother he cheated. Now it's his son, and his son is weeping on his neck.¹⁴²

Jacob doesn't say a word until it's over. Then he says this:

I'm ready to die now because I have seen your face and you are still alive!

He's still talking about dying. He's been talking about dying since the day the robe came home (37:35; 42:38; 45:28). Kidner points out that almost every word Jacob speaks in this story is about death. What's changed is that he isn't dreading it anymore. For twenty-two years, dying meant going down to his son in mourning (37:35). Now he can go having seen his face.¹⁴³

Detestable to Egyptians (46:31–34)

Joseph doesn't let the moment run on for long. He's practical, and there's a king to deal with.

I will go up and inform Pharaoh. He will tell Pharaoh his family has come, and that *the men are shepherds; they also raise livestock*. And when Pharaoh asks them what they do, they are to say the same thing. *Your servants, both we and our ancestors, have raised livestock from our youth until now.*

Then the reason. *Then you will be allowed to settle in the land of Goshen, since all shepherds are detestable to Egyptians.*

Joseph is the second most powerful man in the country. He could have put his brothers anywhere. He could have found them a place at court and a house in the capital. Instead he tells them to lead with the one thing about them Egyptians can't stand. It's the same word, tô 'ēbâ, that Genesis used when the Egyptians wouldn't sit at the same table as Hebrews (43:32).

Why? It's the plain truth about them, for one thing. These men have been herdsmen all their lives, and nobody's being deceived. But Joseph knows what that truth will do. It will keep them out of the capital and out of Egyptian society, in good pasture on the edge of the country, close enough to him to be fed and far enough from Pharaoh's court to stay who they are. Kidner thinks Joseph was guarding them from

being drawn into a way of life that wasn't theirs. Smith says the same thing in plainer words: Joseph wanted his family insulated.¹⁴⁴

So that's where Genesis 46 leaves them. Seventy people go to sleep that night in Goshen. They're fed. They're together. They're in the best pasture in Egypt, and every Egyptian around them looks down on the work they do.

That is the first half of 15:13. Abraham's offspring are *resident aliens* now, *in a land that does not belong to them*. The second half of that verse hasn't happened yet. It will.

All they have against it is what God said at Beer-sheba.

Looking to Christ

Two threads run from this chapter into the New Testament. The first is drawn by Matthew himself. The second isn't, and we'll hold it more loosely.

Matthew tells about another Joseph who took his family down to Egypt in the night. An angel came to him in a dream: *Get up! Take the child and his mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I tell you* (Matthew 2:13). So he went, and he stayed until Herod died, *so that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet might be fulfilled: Out of Egypt I called my Son* (Matthew 2:15).

Hosea wrote that line about Israel (Hosea 11:1), the nation that began as the seventy names in Genesis 46. Matthew takes the line about the nation and hangs it on the child. Jesus goes down into Egypt and is called up out of it, because Israel did. He walks the road this chapter starts.

The second thread is quieter. In Luke 2 an old man named Simeon takes the baby Jesus in his arms in the temple and says, *Now, Master, you can dismiss your servant in peace, as you promised. For my eyes have seen your salvation* (Luke 2:29–30). Kidner calls Jacob's words at 46:30 an Old Testament *Nunc Dimittis*, borrowing the old Latin name for Simeon's song. Luke never mentions Jacob, so don't press it. But the shape is hard to miss. An old man who has waited most of his life sees a face, and he's ready to go.¹⁴⁵

Applying the Text

Stop at Beer-sheba. Jacob had every reason to hurry: a son alive, a famine on, a king's wagons parked in the yard. He stopped anyway, at the last altar before the border, and asked. Big moves deserve that, the good ones most of all, because those are the ones you're surest you don't need to pray about. Before you cross a line that's hard to come back over, go to the altar first.

God goes where you're afraid to go. *I will go down with you.* Jacob's fear wasn't foolish. Egypt was the place God had kept his father out of, and God took the fear seriously enough to answer it with his own presence. Whatever your Egypt is (a diagnosis, a new city, a long recovery, a room in a nursing home), you won't be the only one who goes down into it.

Your name is on the list with everybody else's. A Canaanite woman's son. Two men who didn't make it. Tamar's grandsons. Reuben, still called firstborn. Genesis doesn't tidy up the family for the trip, and God doesn't either. If you've decided your history disqualifies you from the people of God, read 46:8–27 again and count who made it into the wagons.

Let it take a long time. Joseph wept on his father's neck *for a long time*, and Genesis lets him. When you finally mend a broken relationship, don't rush the reunion to get on to the next thing.

Keep your difference. Joseph could have made his brothers courtiers. He made them shepherds in Goshen, on purpose. A family that melts into Egypt stops being Israel. Hebrews says the patriarchs *confessed that they were foreigners and temporary residents on the earth* (Hebrews 11:13), and that's still what you are. The world is going to find something about you hard to stomach. Make sure it's the right thing.

For Discussion

1. Read 26:1–5 and 26:23–25 beside 46:1–4. What does God tell Isaac in chapter 26, and what does he tell Jacob? Why might the same God say *stay* to one man and *go* to his son?
2. The CSB's *bring you back* in 46:4 is *bring you up* in Hebrew. Trace *down* and *up* from 37:35 through 46:29. What story do those two words tell?
3. Genesis records no word from God to Jacob between Bethel (35:9–15) and Beer-sheba (46:2). What do you think those years were like for him? What does it tell you that God's first words after them are *Do not be afraid*?
4. Why do you think Joseph had his brothers lead with the one occupation Egyptians despised (46:33–34)? What might the family have lost if he'd found them places at court?
5. Jacob stopped to worship before a move he very much wanted to make. Think about the last big decision you made. Did you pray about it before you'd decided, or after?

6. Jacob was ready to die once he'd seen Joseph's face. Is there someone whose face you need to see again while there's still time? What's keeping you from going?

Looking Ahead

Lesson 10: Joseph's Kindness to His Brothers (Genesis 47)

The shepherds stand before Pharaoh. Jacob meets the king of Egypt, and it's the old man who does the blessing. Then the famine tightens, and Egyptians start trading away everything they own for bread while one family in Goshen is fed.

Before you come: read Genesis 47. Count how many times Jacob blesses Pharaoh, and underline how he describes his life when Pharaoh asks his age (47:9). Then watch what he makes Joseph promise at the end of the chapter.

¹³³ Hughes, *Genesis*. On 46:1 he places Jacob in Hebron when the news came and Beer-sheba about twenty-five miles away, at the edge of the desert that runs to Egypt. Grigoni et al., *Joseph*. On 46:1 they call Beer-sheba the southernmost portion of Palestine, take Isaac's altar (26:25) to be presumably the one Jacob used, and note that the text never explains the stop; Jacob may have recalled that God forbade Isaac to go down to Egypt (26:2). Kidner, *Genesis*. On 46:1 he reads Jacob's worship there, addressed to the God of his father, as acknowledging the family calling and implicitly seeking leave to move out of Canaan, an attitude very different from Abram's in 12:10–20.

¹³⁴ Smith, *Pentateuch*. On 46:1–4 he notes that this is the last time God appeared to Jacob. The previous appearance is at Bethel (35:9–15), immediately before Benjamin's birth and Rachel's death (35:16–18). Joseph's answer at 37:13, rendered *I'm ready* in the CSB, is the same *hinne* Jacob gives at 46:2 and Abraham at 22:1, 11. The doubled name is at 22:11 and Exodus 3:4. These links are observations on the Hebrew and are not drawn by the commentators.

¹³⁵ The Hebrew of 46:4 reads *'ānōkî 'a 'alēkā gam- 'ālôh*, the infinitive absolute strengthening the verb *'ālâ*, "go up." The CSB renders it *bring you back*. Hughes, *Genesis*. On 46:2–4 he observes that the personal pronoun and the grammar make the promise very emphatic, *It is I that shall surely bring you up*, and connects it with the promise of 15:13–14. Kidner, *Genesis*. On 46:3–4 he notes that God's answer added a new detail to the promise made at Bethel, that the growth to nationhood would take place in Egypt, while the promise of Canaan remained, Egypt being in the long run a step toward it (cf. 15:13–16).

¹³⁶ The CSB margin on 46:4 gives the literal sense as *will put his hand on your eyes*. Kidner, *Genesis*. On 46:4 he takes the phrase to refer to Joseph's closing of Jacob's eyes at death, in contrast to the troubled end Jacob had predicted for himself (37:35). Cf. 50:1.

¹³⁷ No divine speech is recorded in Genesis 47–50; the next in the biblical narrative is at Exodus 3:4. This is an observation on the text. Smith, *Pentateuch*. On 46:1–4 he lists the four promises God made to Jacob: to make him a great nation in Egypt, to go down with him, to bring him back, and to have Joseph close his eyes in death.

¹³⁸ Kidner, *Genesis*. On 46:8–27 he sets out the arithmetic: the subtotals of 46:15, 18, 22, and 25 (thirty-three, sixteen, fourteen, seven) give seventy; adding Dinah and subtracting Er, Onan, Joseph, Manasseh, and Ephraim gives the sixty-six who traveled (46:26); and 46:27 adds Joseph's two sons and, by implication, Joseph and Jacob, for seventy. The daughters-in-law are excluded because the totals count only Jacob's descendants. On 46:21 he observes that some of Benjamin's ten appear elsewhere as grandsons (Numbers 26:38–40; 1 Chronicles 8:1–5) and were presumably included by anticipation. Smith, *Pentateuch*. On 46:8–27 he notes that Reuben has four sons here against the two implied at 42:37, and suggests Benjamin's sons were probably born in Egypt. Hughes, *Genesis*. On 46:8–27 he quotes Sarna's judgment that seventy is a typological number expressing totality. The CSB margin on 46:27 notes that the Septuagint reads seventy-five, the figure in Acts 7:14; Exodus 1:5 and Deuteronomy 10:22 give seventy.

¹³⁹ Grigoni et al., *Joseph*. On 47:27 they note that the language describing Joseph's family there is used again of the Israelites in Exodus 1:7, tying the family's settlement to the growth that led to the exodus.

¹⁴⁰ The CSB margin on 46:28 gives the literal sense as *to give directions before him*. Kidner, *Genesis*. On 46:28 he understands Judah's mission most simply as escorting Joseph to the family in Goshen, an act of courtesy rather than necessity unless a rendezvous had been agreed. Hughes, *Genesis*. On 46:28–30 he has Judah riding scout to guide the family to Goshen.

¹⁴¹ Hughes, *Genesis*. On 46:29 he notes that *presented himself* is used elsewhere in the patriarchal narratives of God appearing to man, and quotes Wenham's view that it draws attention to the overwhelming impression made on Jacob by Joseph's power, grandeur, and graciousness.

¹⁴² The Hebrew of 46:29 reads *wayyip̄l 'al-šawwārāw wayyēbk 'al-šawwārāw 'ôd*, "he fell on his neck and wept on his neck still." The same expression appears at 45:14 and 33:4; the CSB renders all three *threw his arms around*. Hughes, *Genesis*. On 42:23–24 he lists the weepings that follow at 43:30, 45:2, and 46:29. Counting 42:24, 43:30, 45:2, and 45:14–15, this is the fifth.

¹⁴³ Kidner, *Genesis*. On 46:30 he calls Jacob's words an Old Testament *Nunc Dimittis*, and observes that almost all of Jacob's recorded words since 37:35 are of death, though after the turning point of 45:28 the bitterness is largely replaced by fulfillment and hope.

¹⁴⁴ Kidner, *Genesis*. On 46:34 he rejects the older explanation that the Egyptians' abhorrence of shepherds stemmed from memories of the Hyksos, preferring Vergote's view that it reflects the perennial antipathy of the town dweller for the nomad, and he credits Joseph with ensuring that Pharaoh's goodwill would not draw the family into an alien way of life at the capital. Smith, *Pentateuch*. On 46:31–33 he notes that the answer was no deception, since shepherding was the brothers' trade, and that Joseph wanted his family insulated from Egyptian culture. Grigoni et al., *Joseph*. On 46:34 they observe that Egyptian literature offers little direct evidence for the statement, apart from the absence of shepherds in Egyptian art, and suggest it reflects a general distrust of nomadic foreigners. The same Hebrew word, *tô 'ēbā*, appears at 43:32.

¹⁴⁵ Kidner, *Genesis*. On 46:30, as in note 143. Hughes, *Genesis*. On 46:30 he links Jacob's words to Simeon's in Luke 2:29, and in his closing remarks on chapter 46 cites Matthew 2:15. Matthew's use of Hosea 11:1 is the New Testament's own connection; the parallel with Simeon is not drawn by Luke.