

# BONES OF PROMISE

SERIES: THE STORY OF JOSEPH



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Genesis 50:22-26  
Final Message  
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Genesis 50:22-26

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the great Russian writer, was a latter-day Joseph. Like Joseph, he was the victim of cruel and unjust treatment. Like Joseph, he was imprisoned—in his case by the Soviet regime. But he emerged, like Joseph, with a remarkable perspective:

*It was granted to me to carry away from my prison years on my bent back, which nearly broke beneath its load, this essential experience: how a human being becomes evil and how good. In the intoxication of youthful successes I had felt myself to be infallible, and I was therefore cruel. In the surfeit of power I was a murderer and an oppressor. In my most evil moments I was convinced that I was doing good, and I was well supplied with systematic arguments.*

*It was only when I lay there on rotting prison straw that I sensed within myself the first stirrings of good. Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either—but right through every human heart—and through all human hearts . . . .*

*That is why I turn back to the years of my imprisonment and say, sometimes to the astonishment of those about me: “Bless you, prison!” . . . . Bless you, prison, for having been in my life!”<sup>1</sup>*

Those who imprisoned Solzhenitsyn meant it for evil, but he eventually saw that God meant it for good. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn blessed the world.

What are we to make of the Joseph story?

## A full life

Genesis 50:22-23:

**So Joseph remained in Egypt, he and his father's house. Joseph lived 110 years. 23 And Joseph saw Ephraim's children of the third generation. The children also of Machir the son of Manasseh were counted as Joseph's own.**

Joseph didn't choose to live in Egypt; Egypt was chosen for him. In the end, Joseph concluded that Egypt had been chosen for him by God. Joseph said that God “sent” him to Egypt (Genesis 49:7). It is not reported that Joseph felt “called” to Egypt. Who “feels” called to be thrown in a pit, sold into slavery, and taken far away from home? Nevertheless, Joseph bloomed where he was planted, as they say.

Joseph was 17 years old when we met him. Now, as he's about to die, he's 110. He didn't live to be as old as Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob, but 110 was considered an ideal age for death by Egyptians. From an Egyptian perspective, Joseph lived a full life. Indeed, Egypt was the place where the Lord worked in and through Joseph. As readers who have lived with him in the pages of Genesis, we'd have to agree. What a life!

The narrator adds his words of commendation by writing about Joseph's descendants through his two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. Joseph's descendants occupy a prominent place at the end of the book of Genesis because their lives speak of the future of the people of God.

If the Lord should bless you with children and grandchildren, that's a sign to you and to anyone who looks upon your progeny that the Lord hasn't given up on humanity. Indeed, a new world is coming.

## Bloom where you're planted

A full life, the kind that Joseph lived, is not dependent on where you reside or on favorable circumstances; it's dependent on the Lord and one's trust in the Lord. It is not beyond him to send you in a very uncomfortable way to a very uncomfortable place to form you and use you for his purposes.

In the beloved movie *It's a Wonderful Life*, George Bailey desperately wants to leave the suffocating confines of Bedford Falls. He vows, “I'm shaking the dust of this crummy little town off my feet and I'm gonna see the world!” Every time he's about to leave, however, his commitments pull him back.

So, he stays—and, without knowing it until an angel shows him what the world would be like without him, he blesses the town and saves it from the evil Potter. Joseph blessed his family and saved it from a famine.

Never underestimate what God can do with you wherever you are no matter how unfavorable the circumstances.

Before he dies, Joseph has some final words for his relatives.

## Final wishes

### Genesis 50:24-26:

**And Joseph said to his brothers, “I am about to die, but God will visit you and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.” 25 Then Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, “God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones from here.” 26 So Joseph died, being 110 years old. They embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt.**

Joseph realizes that death is upon him, so he conveys to his “brothers”—that his, his relatives—his final wishes. Last words, as they say, are lasting words, so it’s worth listening in. Also, upon listening to Joseph’s final words to his loved ones, we might want to think about the final words we would have for our loved ones.

First, Joseph says that God will “visit” them, culminating in the time when he will bring them from the land of Egypt to the land of Canaan, which he promised to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We know from the books of Exodus and Joshua that God did exactly what Joseph said he would do, although it took him more than 400 years to do so.

In a literal sense, then, God didn’t do what Joseph promised: God didn’t bring those to whom he was speaking to the promised land; he brought their descendants to the promised land. But he visited Joseph’s immediate relatives and succeeding generations to sustain them, as his people, until the time was right for the exodus.<sup>2</sup>

## Making them swear

God “swore,” promising the land of Canaan to the people of Israel. Now, in response, Joseph compels

people of Israel also to “swear,” making a promise in response to God’s promise.

Joseph reiterates his assertion that God will visit them. As readers, we now expect him to also say that God will bring them up out of Egypt to the land of Canaan. However, that’s not what Joseph says. Instead, he says they will “carry up” his bones from Egypt. The word translated “bring” and “carry” is one and the same. Joseph is saying that God will bring, or carry, them up, and that they will carry, or bring, the bones of Joseph up.

Joseph compels them to swear, making a promise, but instead of commanding them to do so, he tells them that that they “will” do so. The Lord himself used identical language when giving the descendants of Israel the Ten Commandments: “You shall have no other gods before me,” etc. (Exodus 20:3). Such is the urgency of Joseph’s request that he all but gives them no choice in the matter.

So, what does Joseph want them to swear to do? He wants them to swear to bring his bones with them when God visits them and brings them from the land of Egypt to the land of Canaan.

Of course, those to whom he is speaking will be able to do nothing of the sort, for they will have been dead for hundreds of years before God fulfills his promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. How does Joseph expect them to promise to do something that will be impossible for them to do?

Obviously, again, he’s speaking just as much to future generations as he is to the present generation. But in order for future generations to hear him, the present generation, and all ensuing generations, must pass down his words. What Joseph is urging upon them will have no effect unless every generation passes down his words until God visits a certain generation more than 400 years in the future. Each generation, then will be a link in a chain—a 400-plus-year chain. One break in the chain, and Joseph’s bones will remain in Egypt.

## Bones of promise

Joseph learned from his father Jacob, who made Joseph and his brothers promise to bury him not in Egypt but in Canaan (Genesis 47:29-30, 49:29-33). That’s exactly what they did (Genesis 50:7-11). However, Joseph’s wishes are different from those of his father. Jacob wanted his body to be taken to Canaan as soon as he died. Joseph doesn’t want what’s left of his body to

be taken to Canaan until God brings his people to the land of Canaan. Also, in contrast to Jacob, Joseph leaves no instructions regarding his burial.

What's Joseph doing? He is affirming, in no uncertain but poetically beautiful terms, that Egypt is not home for the people of Israel. Turns out they will live in Egypt for more than 400 years, but Joseph doesn't want them to get too comfortable. And in case they get too comfortable, he leaves his bones behind as a reminder that the Lord promised his people Canaan, not Egypt. Because he won't be around to remind them, he leaves his bones behind—and instructions concerning what to do with them.

Joseph is urging faith in God and his promises upon his generation and the ensuing generations of Israel, and he's doing so with both his words and his bones so that even when he's not around to speak anymore, his bones will speak for him, so to speak.

### **In a coffin**

Joseph's relatives respond to his words by putting his body in a coffin. Don't you bury people once you put them in a coffin? Of course you do. But it is not reported that Joseph's relatives buried him. In contrast, we are given a detailed description of Jacob's burial. We are left to assume that Joseph's bones remained inside a coffin above ground.

Joseph's coffin, then, would serve as a tangible reminder to them and to the ensuing generations regarding the promises of God. And if their children, or children decades or centuries from now, would ever ask about that above-ground coffin, as they no doubt would, they could tell them the story of Joseph and his final words. They could tell them, "This place is not our home. One day, God is going to visit us and take us to the land he promised us."

One day, of course, God did visit them, redeeming them from Egypt. The "people of Israel went up out of the land of Egypt . . ." (Exodus 13:18). And what happened when they did? "Moses took the bones of Joseph with him, for Joseph had made the sons of Israel solemnly swear, saying, "God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones with you from here" (Exodus 13:19).

### **Bones in motion**

Indeed, the people of Israel carried the bones of Joseph with them as they left the land of Egypt. But they

didn't immediately enter the land of Canaan. Instead, they wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. What did they do with Joseph's bones? We don't hear anything about the bones of Joseph in the rest of Exodus, in Leviticus, in Numbers, or in Deuteronomy.

Then, at the end of the book of Joshua, after the people of God have fought many battles to secure the promised land, we hear this: "As for the bones of Joseph, which the people of Israel brought up from Egypt, they buried them at Shechem, in the piece of land that Jacob bought from the sons of Hamor the father of Shechem for a hundred pieces of money" (Joshua 24:32).

They carried that blasted coffin around with them in the wilderness for forty years and as they battled the pagans in Canaan!

The word translated "coffin" is the same word that is translated "ark" in the book of Exodus in reference to the ark of the covenant, which contained the two stone tablets on which the Ten Commandments had been inscribed by the finger of God. The people of Israel carried around two boxes with them in the wilderness and in Canaan: one containing the word of God and the other containing the bones of Joseph.

Finally, some 500 years after Joseph prevailed upon his relatives, their descendants buried him in the promised land. Joseph's faith inspired the people of Israel's faith for five centuries!

That's the last we hear of Joseph's bones, right? Well, no. The writer of Hebrews, in the New Testament, says this: "By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his bones" (Hebrews 11:22). Of all the parts the writer of Hebrews could have chosen to mention from the amazing story of Joseph, he picks out this part. The bones of Joseph have a lot to say!

### **Tomb without bones**

Joseph's relatives placed him in a coffin. Later, God visited his people. He brought them out of the land of Egypt to the land of Canaan, just as Joseph said he would.

On the verge of the birth of Christ, Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, is filled with the Holy Spirit and says, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, / for he has visited and redeemed his people" (Luke 1:68). Indeed, God "visited" his people in the coming of Christ.

Ah, but the people of Israel rejected him and handed him over to be crucified. A man—whose name was Joseph, by the way—placed him not in a coffin but in a tomb (Mark 15:46). What happened to him there? “God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it” (Acts 2:24). God visited the tomb and carried up the bones of Jesus, and also his body, from the tomb.

For almost 500 years, the symbol of the promises of God for the people of God was a box of bones. For the last 2,000 years, and for who knows how much longer, the symbol of the promises of God for the people of God has been and will be a tomb without bones. With his bones, Joseph anticipates the resurrection of Christ.

One day, unless Jesus comes back first, someone will place your bones and your body, or what’s left of your bones and your body, somewhere—in a box, in a jar, or on the wind. One day, God will again visit his people; Peter calls it “the day of visitation” (1 Peter 2:12).

If you believe in Jesus, God will carry your bones, and the rest of your body, up from wherever they have been placed or scattered. You will be resurrected from the dead, just as Jesus was resurrected from the dead, and you will enter not the land of Canaan but the new promised land—that is, the new creation.

God will surely visit you.

## **Don’t get too comfortable**

Until then, don’t get too comfortable. Don’t seek to get too comfortable. Do not live for “the passing pleasures of sin” (Hebrews 11:25). Instead, live for the eternal pleasures of God (Psalm 16:11). In order to sustain you, God will visit you at different times, in different places, and in different ways.

If we need a reminder not to get too comfortable here, various illnesses, aches and pains, and the decline of your body will do the trick. Your body is telling you, as the bones of Joseph told the Israelites: don’t get too comfortable.

Jack LaLanne, the fitness expert, once said, “I can’t afford to die. It would ruin my reputation.” Well, he lived to the age of 96—not bad. But he still died. His body, fit as it was, was telling him not to get too comfortable.

I was captivated by Phil Mickelson’s victory, at the age of 50, at the PGA Championship. He became the oldest

golfer to win a major championship. When his final put went in the cup at the 18th hole, broadcaster Jim Nance proclaimed, “Phil defeats Father Time.” It was a nice line, with a touch of alliteration. But no one defeats Father Time. The best you can do is hold him off for a bit.

How did Mickelson do it? He said he discovered that as he aged, he had to work harder and eat better than he did when he was younger in order to stay competitive. Work harder. Eat better. His body is telling him not to get too comfortable.

## **Leave some bones behind**

While you have breath, pass on the promises of God, the most important of which is the promise of eternal life. Each generation is a link in a chain. Precious truths have been entrusted to us so that we may entrust them to others. Leave some bones behind, so to speak.

Listen to the apostle Paul’s words to Timothy, his son in the faith: “You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also” (2 Timothy 2:1-2).

I had the opportunity a few weeks back to teach the Santa Clara University college fellowship, and I will have the opportunity this summer to teach the PBC Young Adult Fellowship. I relish the opportunity to teach the Scriptures to any group. Each group presents distinct opportunities. One of the things I relish about teaching the Scriptures to young people is the opportunity to help forge another link in the chain.

## **Communicate your wishes**

At some point, you should communicate your wishes to your loved ones concerning what you want done with your body. This is a way to pass on the promises of God.

Here’s what I want. I know that the burial of a body in a cemetery is more expensive, but that’s what I want. Get the cheapest casket you can find and the cheapest plot of land you can find in the cheapest cemetery you can find. Then take the bones, put the bones in the box, and put the box in the ground.

Can these bones live? Oh, my! One day, I believe my bones will hear the word of the Lord. “Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon

you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the Lord” (Ezekiel 37:5-6).

This sin-sick version of earth is not our home. “But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells” (2 Peter 3:13). “For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed” (1 Corinthians 15:52). That’s what I want on my grave marker: 1 Corinthians 15:52.

I want my bones to say something like this, for anyone who visits the grave or happens upon it: God will surely visit this place, and he shall carry up these bones from here.” In other words, “We’re busting out of here!”

## The Joseph story

In the end, what are we to make of the Joseph story?

God was with Joseph. To what end? Joseph answers the question when addressing his brothers:

—“And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors” (Genesis 45:7)

—“As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today” (Genesis 50:20).

God was with Joseph to preserve for his brothers a remnant and also to keep many people alive beyond his family. Abraham’s family blesses the world, just the way it’s supposed to. God even used the evil that Joseph’s brothers did to him—throwing him into a pit, selling him into slavery—in order to advance his purposes for both Abraham’s family and the world.

Turn the page, and in the next book in the Hebrew Scriptures, Exodus, God uses the evil of Pharaoh, the king of Egypt. And so it goes in page after page of the Hebrew Scriptures until the page turns to the New Testament, and the remnant gives birth to one named Jesus.

The world meant evil against Jesus. In fact, as he hung on the cross, the only innocent man who ever

lived absorbed the evil of every person who ever lived. But God was with him, as he was with Joseph. God sent him to that God-forsaken place, just as he sent Joseph to Egypt. Indeed, the world meant evil against Jesus, but God meant it for good, that many people should not perish but have eternal life.

With his bones, Joseph anticipates the resurrection of Christ. With his words (“you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good”), he anticipates the death of Christ.

According to the New Testament, we who believe in Jesus, both Jews and Gentiles, are the remnant of Abraham’s family. God is with us. God is with us not least to use evil for good so that we might bless the world, just the way we’re supposed to.

The most astounding claim in the entirety of the Scriptures emerges from the Joseph story: God uses evil for good. Joseph refused to see himself as a victim. Instead, he saw how God used the evil done to him to advance his purposes.

Therapists, helpfully, will encourage you to examine traumas to see how you’ve been negatively affected by them. Many of them, however, will not encourage you to do what Joseph did: examine how God has used the trauma for good. The Joseph story encourages us to look for how God has used evil in our lives for good.

If you can believe that God uses evil in your life for good, then you can be freed from the gall of bitterness, not to mention the potentially endless and debilitating analysis of the traumas you’ve experienced.

You might even be able to echo the words of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and say something like: “Bless you, prison! Bless you, prison, for having been in my life!”

## Endnotes

1. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago: 1918-1956, Volume 2* (Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2007), 615-617.
2. We have already seen Jacob’s address to his sons to mean the tribes that came from Jacob’s sons (Genesis 49:28).