

"Think not that I come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill." Matthew 5:17

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"And When he puts forth his own sheep, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him: for they know his voice"

John 10:4

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Sermons by Rabbi Frank

JOSEPH'S STONE, JUDAH'S SCEPTER

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Scripture: Genesis 49:8-10, 24

A most fascinating aspect of Divine providence is the way in which God uses flawed individuals to accomplish His purposes. In a way, we are all flawed individuals, so God really has little choice in the matter.

Since God has little choice but to use flawed individuals, the key to understanding Divine providence in light of God's choosing is that God's choices always run counter to conventional thinking! God doesn't choose according to the standards that we assign, He has His own grading system. He doesn't choose the qualified as much as He qualifies those He's chosen.

And too, I find it equally fascinating how God uses people from amazingly divergent happenstances to circuitously take them from point A to point B! Just consider some of the testimonies in this room. Consider where we all started and where we're at. If you're Jewish, did you ever see yourself believing in Jesus? If you're background is Christian or something else, did you ever see yourself celebrating Jewish festivals, being a lover of Israel or praying in Hebrew?

I've never taken a rigid, extreme view of how God fulfills His purposes in the lives of people. I can't because I simply don't know with surety. I don't see every flat tire or physical ailment as a demonic attack nor do I attribute every success to direct divine intervention and favor. Scripture teaches us to be content and thankful in all things. His love endures forever....in the good and the bad and I'm not going to approach the Sovereign of the Universe with a paganistic, superstitious mindset.

{However, I confess momentary insanity when I follow my favorite sports teams.}

This morning I want to look at two very prominent sons of Jacob; Joseph and Judah. When the patriarch Jacob is on his deathbed he proceeds to prophesy over his twelve sons. Some have referred to these as “blessings” but the text often says otherwise. Many of the boys got a sharp rebuke or an unkind prophesy, not necessarily what I’d call a blessing.

The sons receiving the highest favor are Joseph and Judah. Neither of them really understood fully the bigger picture. They didn’t understand that God was going to orchestrate bigger purposes well beyond their current circumstances.

The historical unfolding of God’s Messianic redemption hinges on these two sons! It would culminate in the eventual birth of King Messiah! Who is most favored, Joseph or Judah? In the long run, who is best remembered and why?

Let’s have a look at Gen. 49:8-10, 24

Gen 49:8 “Judah, your brothers shall praise you; your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies; your father’s sons shall bow down to you.

Gen 49:9 “Judah is a lion’s whelp; From the prey, my son, you have gone up. He couches, he lies down as a lion, And as a lion, who dares rouse him up?

Gen 49:10 “The scepter shall not depart from Judah, Nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, Until Shiloh comes, And to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.

Gen 49:24 But his bow remained firm, And his arms were agile, From the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob (From there is the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel),

In a very well known and often cited passage of the Talmud, Sanhedrin 98a outlines one of the major divides in Jewish theology regarding the coming of the Messiah. This major divide happens to involve Joseph and Judah.

Rabbi Joshua ben Levi said: “It is written in Zechariah (9:9) ‘Behold, thy king cometh unto thee, .lowly, and riding upon an ass’; while Daniel (7:13) says: ‘Behold, there came with the clouds of heaven One like unto a son of man.’ If Israel is worthy, with the clouds of heaven’; if they are not worthy, ‘lowly, and riding upon an ass.’”

Our rabbis have long attempted to reconcile and properly explain the two very important and divergent flows of Messianic prophecy. Joseph is seen as the prototypical suffering servant Messiah, the one who first must suffer for the redemption of Israel before being elevated to kingship. If Israel is deemed unworthy, then the suffering servant Messiah will make His entry on the back of a donkey.

The flip side however is this; if Israel is righteous, Messiah will make His entry on the clouds of glory, and He would be Messiah son of David. Who does David descend from? Yes, Judah! The road to the Messiah must come through these two men. But, the question to us is, who will God use to a greater degree? Who will gain greater prominence, and why?

So let’s consider this, given what we know of Joseph, and all things being equal, if you had to make a choice between Joseph or Judah to faithfully fulfill all your designs and purposes, who would you choose? If God had left the choice to you, who would it be? Would your decision be based exclusively on what is written or would you look at some overlooked intangibles? Which one is most flawed? If you were G-d, who would you choose between these two men?

Based exclusively on the written record, it’s a virtual no-brainer isn’t it? Joseph is described as “a successful man,” he kept his way pure, he ran from temptation and wrong doing, was a good steward, faithful in all he did, possessed the Spirit of God and was gifted in dreams and the interpretation of dreams! He’s the perfect man for any occasion! Who can be more qualified?

Why choose Judah? He was part of the plot to sell Joseph into slavery. He married a Canaanite woman, had two sons slain because they were evil, and he slept with his son’s wife. He then had the “chutzpah” to falsely accuse her of harlotry when in fact he was unfaithful to his promise! Who in their right mind would choose a character like Judah?

Is it safe to say that the greater majority of us would have chosen Joseph? Again, I remind you of God’s penchant for using flawed individuals. He takes flawed, mistake prone “klutz’s” and “schlemiels” from amazingly divergent backgrounds and happenstances to accomplish His Kingdom purposes.

Not that He doesn't use those who demonstrate great love and loyalty and lead exemplary lives, but let's just not be so quick to rule out others that God has forgiven and is working with! Remember, God does not see as a man sees, God looks at the heart!

Our text serves as yet one more glowing example from Scripture of this great truth. Both of these men are given tremendous blessings. The blessing pronounced on Joseph is impressive, eloquent and quite lengthy. It is a well deserved blessing that assures him of prosperity and fruitfulness that is unparalleled! His blessing reads loftier than that given to Abraham. More than anything what can be more impressive than Joseph's "Stone?" Verse 24 includes this amongst the blessings of Joseph:

"But his bow remained firm, and his arms were agile, from the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob (From there is the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel)"

The sons of Joseph were equipped to take on all comers! And why not? The passage stresses the activity of God in saving and redeeming his people! From Joseph is the model of the "Shepherd," this intimate royal metaphor for God! Joseph would shadow the One who is the Shepherd of Israel! Moreover, this Shepherd of Israel is also the "stone" or the "Rock of Israel!" These images are glorious expressions of strength, permanence, and protection! These are two of the lofty names attributed to the Almighty! They are titles directly pointed to Yeshua—titles, names, that bear out His Divinity! He is the "Good Shepherd," He is Joseph's "stone that the builders rejected," He is that Rock that followed Israel through her wilderness wanderings, that Rock that spewed an abundance of water in a dry and barren place! All of this glory and greatness emanates from Joseph's prophecy! Can anyone possibly beat Joseph's "stone?" Well....Judah is given a scepter!

Gen 49:8 "Judah, your brothers shall praise you; your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies; your father's sons shall bow down to you.

Gen 49:10 "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, Until Shiloh comes, and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.

The patriarch Jacob loves Joseph more and always has. The heart of this father tried to give his favorite son the best and biggest blessing, but the Spirit of God who spoke through him made sure the greater blessing would go to the one whom He intended it for!

There is no denying the role which Joseph played in providing the family refuge, for incubating this fledgling family to be a mighty nation! He is the first member of the family to obtain a recognized princely role that equates him as a type of Messiah. However, even though Joseph is the one before whom all his brothers bow; he is not the one who is the designated receiver of the greater generational purposes of God! That role is reserved for Judah! In the final analysis "Your father's sons shall bow down to you!" The long term, more enduring blessing would come to Judah!

"The scepter shall not depart from Judah, Until Shiloh comes, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, And to him shall be the obedience of the peoples."

This is an amazing prophecy regarding Judah! The Abrahamic covenant stipulates that through Abraham's seed all the nations would be blessed. The people of Israel would be a source of blessing to all nations....but...there is a little caveat here for us to see. The blessing to the nations would largely come through one tribe, Judah, who is described prophetically as both the Lawgiver and the keeper of the Royal Scepter until Messiah comes!

In our service to the Lord we really know how to dream big! We want to be God's catalyst to bring many to faith, to lay on hands on the sick and see them healed, to have prophetic insight for counsel and direction.....we want it all!

And with those big dreams we hold up others who we think have arrived! But rather than resorting to any number of stray thoughts and instincts, see yourself in the position of Judah.....in other words, you may not fully realize the totality of your dreams and visions, but in the long term your labors will impact future generations! It's all so practical too. It happens when you invest yourself into the life of another person! Now, the term drives me crazy with its sheer idiocy, but it fits: If you're going to leave a "carbon footprint, (being a flawed person)...then offset that by investing in others! Leave a lasting impression and legacy that will result in future blessing.

Let us be careful not to blur the line between our being used to accomplish the purposes of God and us trying to use "God to accomplish our purposes. Joseph was the younger, but he was over Judah. Judah submitted to his younger brother, he deferred to him, he was a humbled servant. He doesn't try to exert influence or "pull rank," "I'm the older brother!" "I was given a scepter of power!" For the time he remained a servant to his younger brother but in the long run, he would be a source of blessing to every succeeding generation!

If the Holy One of Israel can speak through a donkey and prophesy through the agencies of pagan potentates, then even if my reward is that of Jeremiah's (thrown in a muddy pit) then let His purposes prevail!

"Joseph's Stone" is beautiful, however for most of his life one could say he bore a millstone! An imperfect flawed fellow flaunting fatherly favor only to incur a band of brothers seeking his demise. When all was said and done Joseph toiled in misery for 20 years! The blessing was long term but over the duration of those arduous, "tsoris" ridden years he sincerely clung to the visions God had given him knowing that the purposes of the Most High cannot be thwarted! Joseph didn't understand any of the wherefores and the why's but he did cling to the vision!

No matter how many 'slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,' the flesh, the world, and the adversary can inundate us with, we can trust Him with our present and our future! Remember, Joseph went from bad to worse in ways that would impress even "Murphy" and later when the pauper became a prince to save Israel, in the end he did not get the princely, messianic blessing; Judah did.

In the final analysis we need to be convinced that God's purposes will be accomplished through the flawed, fractious vessels He has chosen. We also need to cling to the dreams and visions which God has planted in our hearts and trust that they will be realized in our lives.....maybe not as soon as we would like, or in ways that we would like, but as certainly as His word endures after the grass of our lives has withered, His word, spoken and prophetically given, endures "d'or l'dor, l'olam va'ed (generation to generation, forever).

When I consider "Joseph's Stone, Judah's Scepter," I'm reminded of two great men that shared a commonality that extended beyond their brotherhood. This common bond happens to be the real source of their greatness. What was it that made them so great in God's eyes? Why did God through Jacob elevate these two men to such a lofty status?

Certainly, in the eyes of the world, they can't readily see or even appreciate their greatness. Joseph can't even get acceptance from his own clan! He spent nearly two decades stewing over his personal mistreatment (based on the names he gives his two sons Ephraim and Manasseh, "God has made me forget," "God has made me fruitful." As for Judah, let's face it, at times his actions were downright reprehensible! But of all the brothers, these two men were set apart for God's purposes because they understood humility and repentance! Through humility and repentance they brought order, stability and unity in a very dysfunctional family! These two flawed men were able to find tremendous joy unspeakable because the God of Israel pardons and forgives the frailties and foibles of feeble and flawed men!

God is not looking for perfection. If He was, planet earth would not be the place to look! What He is looking for....what He most wants to see.....what most moves His heart....are people called by His Name who ever remain sensitive to His heart through humility and contrition!

When you come before Joseph's "stone," the "Rock of Israel," and you confess your flaws and failures, this "Shepherd, the "Good Shepherd," will extend to you His royal scepter and grant you entry into His glorious Kingdom!

Messiah Yeshua is the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the root and offspring of David....He is the Jewish Messiah! He even saves non-Jewish people! He's come to bring redemption and blessing through Judah for the entire world!

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